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The Relationship Between Doomscrolling and Psychological Distress Among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of digital technology and the growing use of social media have led to the phenomenon of doomscrolling, defined as excessive exposure to negative news on digital platforms. This behavior is suspected to increase psychological distress, such as anxiety, stress, and helplessness, especially among Generation Z, who are highly exposed to online media. This study aimed to examine the relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City using a quantitative correlational method. A total of 400 respondents were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using the Doomscrolling Scale (DS) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) and analyzed with Pearson Product–Moment correlation. The results showed a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.554$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), indicating that higher doomscrolling levels are associated with higher psychological distress among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City.

ABSTRAK

Perkembangan teknologi digital dan penggunaan media sosial yang semakin luas telah menyebabkan fenomena doomscrolling, yang didefinisikan sebagai paparan berlebihan terhadap berita negatif di platform digital. Perilaku ini diduga dapat meningkatkan gangguan psikologis, seperti kecemasan, stres, dan rasa putus asa, terutama di kalangan Generasi Z yang sangat terpapar media online. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis hubungan antara doomscrolling dan gangguan psikologis di kalangan Generasi Z di Kota Pekanbaru menggunakan metode korelasi kuantitatif. Sebanyak 400 responden dipilih melalui sampling purposif. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan Skala Doomscrolling (DS) dan Skala Depresi, Kecemasan, dan Stres (DASS), dan dianalisis dengan korelasi Pearson Product–Moment. Hasil menunjukkan hubungan positif yang signifikan ($r = 0.554$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), menunjukkan bahwa tingkat doomscrolling yang lebih tinggi terkait dengan gangguan psikologis yang lebih tinggi di kalangan Generasi Z di Kota Pekanbaru.

Introduction

The development of digital technology in the 21st century has brought about significant changes to human life, particularly in the realms of communication and information access. While technological advancements provide many benefits, they also present new challenges in psychological aspects (Vannucci et al., 2017). One phenomenon that has emerged alongside the increasing intensity of social media use is *doomscrolling*, defined as the tendency to excessively and continuously browse negative news or information (Sharma et al., 2022). This behavior has become increasingly common among younger generations, particularly Generation Z, who have the highest exposure to digital media (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2023). Although technology offers convenience, excessive exposure to negative information can lead to emotional strain and negatively impact mental well-being (Rozado et al., 2022). Therefore, this phenomenon is important to examine within the context of modern mental health.

In psychological literature, *psychological distress* is understood as emotional suffering resulting from an individual's inability to cope with psychological stressors (Kessler et al., 2002). This condition includes symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression that may affect social and cognitive functioning. According to Mirowsky and Ross (2003), distress is not only a symptom of clinical disorders but also a natural response to prolonged life stressors. In the digital context, repeated exposure to negative content constitutes a significant stressor (Rodrigues, 2022). Previous studies have shown that doomscrolling contributes to increased psychological distress, reduced self-regulation, and deteriorated mood (Elhai et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022), highlighting a strong relationship between digital behavior and mental health.

Several studies indicate that doomscrolling behavior tends to be compulsive and difficult to control. Brek and Sapoh (2024) explain that the urge to continuously consume negative news is driven by excessive curiosity and a desire to understand ongoing crises. This phenomenon can be explained by *negativity bias*, the human tendency to focus more on negative information than positive information (Shabahang et al., 2023). This pattern reinforces anxiety cycles as the brain continually processes emotionally threatening information. Kartol et al. (2023) found that doomscrolling increases pessimistic perceptions of the future and triggers mental fatigue. Thus, doomscrolling should be understood not merely as a digital habit but as a psychological phenomenon that may disrupt emotional balance.

In the Indonesian context, particularly in Pekanbaru City, this phenomenon is increasingly relevant due to the high level of social media usage among young people. According to data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2023), approximately 85% of youth in Pekanbaru actively use social media daily. Generation Z, living in a digital environment with an intense flow of information, faces a higher risk of doomscrolling and its psychological consequences. However, empirical studies examining the relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress in Pekanbaru remain

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limited. Previous studies in Indonesia (e.g., Hansya, 2024; Kresna Pandya et al., 2024) have shown that doomscrolling is associated with increased stress, anxiety, and sleep disturbances among Generation Z. Nevertheless, no study has specifically examined this phenomenon within the social and cultural context of Pekanbaru.

This study addresses the gap in understanding the extent to which doomscrolling is related to psychological distress within a local context. Limited awareness among young people regarding the psychological impact of excessive digital behavior and the lack of comprehensive research in Pekanbaru underscore the importance of this study. To address this issue, the research employed a quantitative correlational approach to empirically measure the relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress among Generation Z.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Cognitive Appraisal Theory, which explains that stress arises when individuals perceive situations as threatening and beyond their coping capacity. Continuous exposure to negative news via social media may generate repeated threat perceptions, triggering psychological stress and helplessness. This study also builds on previous findings demonstrating a positive relationship between doomscrolling and symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress (Satici et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2024).

Based on the theoretical framework and previous research, this study aimed to analyze the relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City. Practically, the findings are expected to contribute to digital literacy education strategies and mental health prevention efforts related to excessive social media use. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on media psychology and mental health in Indonesia by providing empirical evidence from a local context.

Accordingly, the main research question is: *Is there a significant relationship between doomscrolling behavior and psychological distress among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City?*

The hypotheses proposed are:

H_1: There is a significant positive relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City.

H_0: There is no significant relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City.

Method

This study employed a quantitative approach with a correlational research design, as it aimed to examine the association between two variables without administering any treatment or intervention to the participants (Sugiyono, 2017). A correlational design was selected to allow the researcher to determine the magnitude of the relationship between doomscrolling behavior as the independent variable and psychological distress as the dependent variable among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City. Through this design, the findings were expected to

provide empirical evidence regarding the linkage between the intensity of doomscrolling and individuals' levels of psychological strain.

The study investigated two variables: doomscrolling and psychological distress. Doomscrolling served as the independent variable, defined as an individual's tendency to compulsively and repeatedly browse negative news or information on social media platforms (Sharma et al., 2022). Psychological distress functioned as the dependent variable and referred to a state of emotional tension characterized by symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (Kessler et al., 2002). These variables were selected based on theoretical perspectives and prior empirical findings indicating that excessive consumption of negative information is associated with heightened psychological strain.

The population of this study comprised Generation Z individuals in Pekanbaru City who actively use social media. Based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics of Pekanbaru City (2023), the Generation Z population in Pekanbaru is approximately 374,708 individuals. The sample was determined using purposive sampling, a technique that selects participants based on predefined criteria relevant to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2017). Inclusion criteria were: (1) belonging to Generation Z, defined as individuals aged 12–27 years; (2) residing in Pekanbaru City; and (3) actively using social media. Using Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error (e = 0.05), the required sample size was 400 respondents, which was considered sufficient to represent the Generation Z population in Pekanbaru.

Two validated and reliable psychological instruments were used: the Doomscrolling Scale (DS) and the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-42). The Doomscrolling Scale, developed by Sharma et al. (2022), was used to measure individuals' tendencies toward doomscrolling and adapted into Indonesian for the purposes of this study. The scale consists of 15 items rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (7). Reliability analysis indicated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.821, exceeding the acceptable threshold ($\alpha > 0.70$), suggesting good internal consistency. According to Ghozali (2018), Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80 indicate high reliability.

The DASS-42 was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond and adapted into Indonesian by Damanik (2006). This instrument assesses psychological distress across three primary dimensions: depression, anxiety, and stress. It comprises 42 items with four response options (0 = Never to 3 = Very Often). The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.948.

Data were collected online using a Google Forms-based questionnaire distributed through social media platforms, including WhatsApp and Instagram. This method was chosen because it aligns with the characteristics of Generation Z, who are highly familiar with digital technology and actively engage in online media use (Vannucci et al., 2017). Online data collection also facilitated efficient distribution and broadened the reach of respondents. Prior to completing the questionnaire, respondents were provided with

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information regarding the study's objectives and assured of data confidentiality. Participation was voluntary (Creswell, 2014).

Before hypothesis testing, the collected data were examined through assumption testing, including tests for normality. Normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to ensure that the data were normally distributed. After meeting the required assumptions, Pearson Product–Moment correlation analysis was conducted to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress. Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0. The decision rule was that if the significance value (p) was below 0.05, the alternative hypothesis (H_1) would be accepted, indicating a significant relationship between the two variables (Sugiyono, 2017).

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study were derived from data collected from 400 Generation Z respondents in Pekanbaru City. The respondents consisted of 163 males (40.8%) and 237 females (59.3%), with an age range of 17 to 25 years. The majority of respondents reported using social media for more than five hours per day, indicating a high level of digital media exposure among young people in this region. In addition, the most frequently used social media platform among respondents was TikTok, reported by 200 participants (50%).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variable	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
Gender		
Male	163	40.8
Female	237	59.3
Age		
13–15 years	22	5.5
16–18 years	58	14.5
19–22 years	144	36.0
23–25 years	119	29.8
26–28 years	57	14.2
Domicile		
Pekanbaru City	400	100.0
Educational/Occupational Status		
Junior High School Student	22	5.5

Descriptive analysis indicated that the empirical scores of the doomscrolling variable (range = 59–91; M = 75.60; SD = 6.83) were above the hypothetical mean, reflecting a relatively high level of doomscrolling among the respondents. A similar pattern was observed for psychological distress, with empirical scores ranging from 69 to 101 (M = 85.54; SD = 6.77), which also exceeded the hypothetical mean. Overall, these findings suggest that the respondents exhibited higher levels of both doomscrolling behavior and psychological distress compared to their theoretical estimates

Table 2. Descriptive Data

Variable	Hypothetical Score				Empirical Score			
	Xmin	Xmax	Mean	SD	Xmin	Xmax	Mean	SD
Doomscrolling	15	105	60	15	59	91	75,60	6,83
Psychological Distress	0	123	61,5	20,5	69	101	85,54	6,77

Based on the categorization results, the majority of respondents fell into the moderate level of doomscrolling (39.8%), followed by the low category (22.8%), high category (18.8%), very high category (10.8%), and very low category (8.0%)

Table 3. Categorization of the Doomscrolling Scale

Category	Score Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very High	$X \geq 85.84$	43	10.8
High	$79.01 \leq X < 85.84$	75	18.8
Moderate	$72.19 \leq X < 79.01$	159	39.8
Low	$65.36 \leq X < 72.19$	91	22.8
Very Low	$X < 65.36$	32	8.0
Total	—	400	100.0

Based on the categorization results, respondents' levels of psychological distress were predominantly in the moderate category (37.5%), followed by the low category (23.0%), high category (21.5%), very high category (10.0%), and very low category (8.0%).

Table 4. Categorization of the Psychological Distress Scale

Category	Score Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very High	$X \geq 95.70$	40	10.0
High	$88.93 \leq X < 95.70$	86	21.5
Moderate	$82.15 \leq X < 88.93$	150	37.5
Low	$75.38 \leq X < 82.15$	92	23.0
Very Low	$X < 75.38$	32	8.0
Total	—		

Prior to hypothesis testing, the data were examined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test. The results indicated significance values of 0.051 for the doomscrolling variable and 0.053 for psychological distress, suggesting that both variables were normally distributed ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, it can be concluded that the assumption of normality was met for both variables.

Table 5. Results of the Normality Test

Variable	Significance (p)	Interpretation
Doomscrolling	0.051	Normal distribution
Psychological Distress	0.053	Normal distribution

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The relationship between the variables was analyzed using the Pearson Product–Moment correlation. The results revealed a correlation coefficient (*r*) of 0.554 with a significance value (*p*) of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). According to Sugiyono's (2017) interpretation, this correlation indicates a moderate and positive relationship, suggesting that higher levels of doomscrolling are associated with higher levels of psychological distress. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was accepted, and the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected.

Table 6. Results of the Correlation Analysis between Doomscrolling and Psychological Distress

Variables	*r*	Significance (*p*)	Interpretation
Doomscrolling – Psychological Distress	0.554	0.000	Significant positive correlation

These findings indicate that doomscrolling behavior contributes substantially to the emergence of psychological distress among Generation Z. This result is consistent with the study by Elhai et al. (2022), which demonstrated that excessive exposure to negative content on social media can increase levels of anxiety, stress, and feelings of helplessness. Similar findings were reported by Hansya (2024), who identified a significant effect of doomscrolling habits on increased stress levels among users of social media platform X. Likewise, Kresna Pandya et al. (2024) found that doomscrolling triggers emotional disturbances and sleep problems as a consequence of anxiety related to negative news exposure.

From a theoretical perspective, these results can be explained through the Cognitive Appraisal Theory proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This theory posits that stress arises when individuals appraise a situation as threatening to their well-being. In this context, doomscrolling exposes individuals continuously to news and information framed as threatening, thereby eliciting psychological stress responses. Constant exposure to negative information makes it difficult for individuals to process information adaptively and may increase anxiety toward events that do not necessarily have a direct impact on their personal lives (Price et al., 2022).

The present findings also support the study by Shabahang et al. (2023), which highlighted that the human brain's heightened sensitivity to negative information—known as *negativity bias*—can reinforce doomscrolling behavior. When individuals repeatedly consume negative news, they may unconsciously continue this behavior in an attempt to seek certainty or understanding, even though it ultimately exacerbates their emotional distress. This pattern suggests that doomscrolling is not merely a media consumption habit but represents a maladaptive form of emotional coping that can disrupt psychological balance (Liang et al., 2020).

From a local contextual perspective, the results indicate that Generation Z in Pekanbaru is particularly vulnerable to the negative psychological effects of social media due to the high intensity of daily usage. A strongly embedded digital culture makes it challenging for individuals to regulate information consumption, especially during periods characterized by collective anxiety, such as disasters, political instability, or social crises

(Shabahang et al., 2024). This condition underscores the importance of digital literacy and psychological education in helping individuals manage information exposure in a healthier manner. The findings further emphasize the urgency of raising awareness about doomscrolling behavior to prevent it from developing into chronic stress or more severe psychological disorders.

Overall, this study supports the hypothesis that there is a significant positive relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City. The more frequently individuals engage in doomscrolling behavior, the greater their risk of experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression. Therefore, more comprehensive efforts are required from multiple stakeholders—including academics, government institutions, and the broader community—to develop digital literacy programs, mental health education, and self-regulation strategies that enable young people to use social media in a more mindful and adaptive manner.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate a significant positive relationship between doomscrolling behavior and psychological distress among Generation Z in Pekanbaru City. These findings confirm that higher levels of doomscrolling are associated with higher levels of psychological strain. This significant relationship indicates that excessive consumption of negative news through social media may trigger stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, ultimately affecting the mental well-being of young people. Accordingly, this study successfully addressed its primary objective of examining and understanding the relationship between doomscrolling and psychological distress within the context of a digitally immersed generation in Pekanbaru.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support Cognitive Appraisal Theory, which posits that stress emerges when individuals perceive situations as threatening to their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Continuous exposure to negative news on social media may generate repeated perceptions of emotional threat, thereby intensifying psychological distress. This study also reinforces previous findings by Elhai et al. (2022) and Sharma et al. (2022), which demonstrated that doomscrolling behavior contributes to increased symptoms of stress and anxiety as a result of persistent exposure to negative information.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer important implications for various stakeholders. For the general public, this study serves as a basis for increasing awareness of the psychological consequences of excessive social media use, particularly when confronted with a constant flow of negative information. As the primary users of social media, Generation Z is encouraged to cultivate healthier digital habits, such as limiting screen time and selecting credible information sources. For academics, this research enriches the empirical literature on digital behavior and mental health in Indonesia, particularly within the local context of Pekanbaru City. For psychological practitioners, the findings may inform

the development of intervention programs and digital literacy education aimed at helping individuals manage negative information exposure more adaptively. Meanwhile, for policymakers and educational institutions, the results may serve as a foundation for designing youth-oriented digital literacy and mental health policies.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of a holistic approach to understanding the impact of social media on psychological well-being. Doomscrolling should not be viewed merely as a digital habit but rather as a reflection of how individuals cope with uncertainty and social anxiety. Therefore, efforts to raise public awareness of healthy social media use should be accompanied by social support, mental health–oriented public policies, and educational programs that promote digital moderation. Through such efforts, Generation Z is expected to develop greater emotional resilience and engage more wisely in their digital lives.

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