

## The Impact of Doom scrolling on Emotional Desensitization in Generation Z

### Abstract

**Background:** The rise of digital technology has transformed how young people interact with media, leading to increased exposure to online content. Among Generation Z, doomscrolling, compulsive engagement with negative news or distressing social media content has become prevalent, raising concerns about potential psychological consequences, particularly emotional desensitization.

**Aims:** This study aims to examine whether the frequency of doomscrolling is a significant predictor of emotional desensitization in Generation Z. The research seeks to clarify whether doomscrolling independently affects emotional responsiveness, or if other factors may play a mediating role.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional, quantitative survey design was employed. Ninety-four participants, aged 13–28 and active on at least two social media platforms, were purposively recruited. Respondents completed the Doomscrolling Scale to measure negative content consumption habits and the Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale–Short Form to assess positive and negative emotional reactivity. Data were analysed using correlational and regression analyses to evaluate the predictive relationship, with ethical standards upheld via informed consent and data anonymisation.

**Results:** Participants reported moderate levels of doomscrolling and emotional responsiveness. Statistical analyses revealed weak, non-significant associations between doomscrolling frequency and both positive and negative emotional reactivity. Regression analysis showed that doomscrolling explained minimal variance in emotional responsiveness, indicating no substantial predictive effect.

**Conclusions:** Doomscrolling was not found to be a significant predictor of emotional desensitization among Generation Z in this sample. The findings suggest emotional numbing is likely influenced by multiple factors beyond doomscrolling alone. Further research should investigate potential mediators and

### Research Article

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explore longitudinal patterns to better understand the psychological effects of digital media consumption.

### Keywords

Doomscrolling, emotional desensitization, Generation Z, regression analysis, digital media.

### Introduction

The digital landscape has profoundly shaped human interaction, with Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, emerging as the first cohort to be fully immersed in online environments [1]. Their daily routines, education, socialization, and leisure are mediated by smartphones, algorithm-driven platforms, and 24/7 connectivity. While such immersion offers opportunities for learning and social connection, it also entails unprecedented exposure to crises, including climate change, political instability, mass violence, and economic uncertainty.

One behaviour that exemplifies this shift is doomscrolling, defined as the compulsive consumption of negative news and online content. Doomscrolling surged into public awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic and has since persisted as a cultural phenomenon. For Gen Z, whose average daily screen time exceeds 4.5 hours on social

media platforms [2], doomscrolling represents more than a fleeting habit, it is a patterned way of engaging with global events.

Prior research has linked doomscrolling to stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and “digital fatigue” [3]. Beyond immediate distress, however, scholars have raised concerns that repeated exposure to negative content fosters emotional desensitization—a dampening of emotional responsiveness to distressing stimuli. While desensitization has been examined in contexts such as violent video games and trauma exposure [4], its role in digital news consumption remains underexplored.

Theoretically, doomscrolling’s effects can be understood through multiple frameworks. Cultivation theory suggests that sustained media exposure shapes perceptions of reality, often leading to apathy or cynicism [5]. Negativity bias explains the human tendency to prioritize negative information [6], a tendency amplified by algorithms that reward emotionally charged content. Habituation theory posits that repeated exposure reduces responsiveness over time [7]. These frameworks together suggest that doomscrolling may foster emotional detachment, yet empirical evidence remains scarce.

This study addresses that gap by quantitatively examining whether doomscrolling predicts emotional desensitization among Gen Z. Using validated instruments and regression analysis, it investigates whether compulsive digital engagement with negative news correlates with diminished positive or negative reactivity. Findings contribute to a growing body of work on the psychological implications of digital immersion and provide insights into safeguarding emotional well-being in a hyperconnected era.

## Review of Literature

Scholars have approached doomscrolling from emotional, cognitive, and behavioural perspectives. [8] conceptualized it as an adaptive but problematic response to digital distress, where initial strong emotions give way to numbness and detachment. Similarly, [9] emphasized doomscrolling during crises as driven by an illusion of control, ultimately leading to emotional paralysis rather than preparedness.

Cognitive factors play a central role. [10] identified fear of missing out (FOMO) and negativity bias as primary drivers among Gen Z. Participants compulsively checked feeds to

stay updated, while algorithms amplified negative content, reinforcing cycles of overexposure and emotional fatigue. [11] found that Indian students transitioned from compassion to humor and emotional dullness when faced with recurring digital suffering, using memes to create psychological distance.

Empirical studies further support links between doomscrolling and emotional blunting. [3,12] described how constant pandemic-related exposure led to emotional withdrawal and “pandemic fatigue,” reducing empathy and compliance with health measures. [13] highlighted algorithmic structures that trap users in cycles of emotionally charged content, while [14] distinguished between active and passive media use: passive scrollers experienced greater empathy decline.

Coping mechanisms also shape responses. Humor and irony, as noted by [11,15] provided relief but risked reinforcing detachment. Physiological evidence supports psychological findings: [16] reported that frequent doomscrollers exhibited reduced autonomic responses to distressing stimuli, suggesting embodied desensitization. [15] found that humor helps buffer emotional distress. Doomscrolling is significantly linked to psychological distress, negative affect, and emotional fatigue [16].

Personality differences moderate these outcomes. [17] demonstrated that individuals high in neuroticism or impulsivity were more prone to detachment after digital trauma, while research on compassion fatigue suggests that emotionally sensitive individuals may initially show heightened empathy but later experience emotional exhaustion and burnout following repeated exposure to distressing content [18]. [19,20] further link excessive engagement with negative online material to cynicism and compassion fatigue, particularly within online activism.

Critically, recent scholars have emphasized the importance of quantitatively examining the emotional consequences of excessive negative content consumption, advocating regression-based approaches linking digital engagement to psychological distress and emotional responsiveness [16,21]. This methodological emphasis informs the present study, which directly tests whether doomscrolling frequency predicts emotional reactivity using validated scales.

Collectively, the literature suggests that doomscrolling contributes to emotional strain and detachment but highlights the importance of quantifying these effects. The present research builds on this foundation by employing a regres-

sion model to assess the predictive relationship between doomscrolling and emotional desensitization in Gen Z.

## Methodology

### Research problem

While the effects of doomscrolling on mental health impacts such as anxiety and depression have been documented [3], its direct relationship with emotional desensitization, particularly assessed through a regression analysis in Gen Z populations - remains underexplored.

### Framework

A quantitative, correlational design was employed, utilizing simple linear regression to test whether doomscrolling frequency predicts emotional desensitization. The study was informed by Desensitization Theory [22] and Uses and Gratification Theory [23].

### Research design

#### Quantitative Studies: Correlational

This study will employ a quantitative, correlational research design, to examine the relationship between Doomscrolling frequency and Emotional Desensitization. Specifically, simple linear regression analysis was used to determine the predictive relationship of doomscrolling on emotional desensitization. This design is appropriate for identifying the strength and direction of the continuous independent variable which predicts the outcome of the continuous dependent variable.

## Research aim and objectives

**Aim:** To examine the relationship between doomscrolling frequency and emotional desensitization among Gen Z individuals.

#### Objectives:

- To measure the doomscrolling frequency and behavior in Gen Z participants.
- To assess the levels of emotional desensitization in Gen Z individuals.
- To analyze the relationship between doomscrolling frequency and emotional desensitization through regression analysis.

### Research questions:

1. Does the frequency of doomscrolling significantly predict emotional desensitization in Generation Z?
2. Are there differences in emotional desensitization levels between high and low doomscrollers in Gen Z?
3. Does the frequency of doomscrolling correlate with reduced emotional reactivity in Gen Z?

## Variables and operational definitions

### Independent variable

Doomscrolling- the compulsive consumption of negative content online [24]. (frequency, duration or intensity of Doomscrolling)

### Dependent variable

Emotional Desensitization- reduced emotional responsiveness to negative stimuli after repeated exposure as a form of habituation [25]. (emotional reactivity or intensity).

### Hypotheses

H01: The doomscrolling frequency does not significantly predict the impact of emotional desensitization in Gen Z.

H02: There is no significant difference in emotional desensitization levels between high and low doomscrollers in Gen Z.

H03: There is no correlation between the frequency of doomscrolling and reduced emotional reactivity in Gen Z.

### Population and Sampling

Demographic Profile: Participants aged 13-28 years (1997-2012) Gen Z [1], active on at least two social media platforms.

Sample Size: 101 participants

Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling through online recruitment on platforms such as Instagram and Reddit/Twitter/Facebook.

## Data collection methods

Measures & Materials

### Doomscrolling Scale (DSS):

This scale was developed by [10]. It comprises of 15 items (e.g., "I lose track of time when I read bad news on social

media”) rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 7 indicating “strongly agree. “High scores imply high doomscrolling frequency. Researchers supported the validity and reliability of the scale with different parameters.

The Doomscrolling Scale by [10] shows excellent reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.938 to 0.944. Its construct validity was confirmed through CFA (CFI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.046), and it demonstrated strong item discrimination (IRT values between 1.69 and 3.31). The scale also showed convergent validity through significant correlations with depression, anxiety, and smartphone addiction.

**Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale (PERS-S):**

The Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale-Short Form (PERS-S) is an 18-item short form of the 30-item PERS. The PERS-S is designed to measure trait levels of emotional reactivity. It measures the typical ease of activation, intensity, and duration of one’s emotional responses, and do so for negative and positive emotions separately.

The PERS-S [26] shows good reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha ranging from .76 to .89, and composite alphas of .83 (positive) and .90 (negative reactivity). Test–retest reliability ranges from .79 to .89. CFA confirms a valid factor structure, and the scale shows concurrent validity through strong correlations with emotion regulation, affect, and distress measures.

**Inclusion and Exclusion criteria:**

**Inclusion Criteria:** Individuals aged 13-28, active social media users, fluent in English.

**Exclusion Criteria:** Individuals with self-reported clinical diagnoses that impair emotional regulation (e.g., major depressive disorder).

**Delimitations**

The study will be geographically limited to urban populations and will utilize self-report measures only. Only Gen Z individuals with regular social media use will be included. Gen Z individuals who are active at least on two social media platforms.

**Procedure and Ethics**

Participants completed online questionnaires after providing informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were

maintained in line with APA ethical standards. No manipulation was involved, and withdrawal was permitted at any stage.

**Results**

A total of 94 participants were eligible for the study, with a mean age of 23. The sample consisted of 56.5 % females (N = 56) and 43.5 % males (N = 43).

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
DSS	34.9	15.5	15.0	71.0
PERS-S (positive)	33.8	6.23	18.0	45.0
PERS-S (negative)	31.1	6.89	15.0	45.0

Note. DSS= Doomscrolling scale, PERS-S= Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale-Short, SD= Standard Deviation

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics for DSS and PERS-S (positive and negative reactivity)

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the Doomscrolling Scale (DSS) and the Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale- Short (PERS-S), covering both positive and negative emotional reactivity. The mean score on the DSS was 34.9 with a standard deviation of 15.5, indicating a moderate level of doomscrolling behavior among participants, with variability scores ranged from 15.0 to 71.0. For emotional reactivity, the mean score for positive reactivity was 33.8 (SD = 6.23), while negative reactivity had a mean of 31.1 (SD = 6.89). The score ranges for both subscales were between 15.0 to 45.0, showing moderate levels of emotional response with relatively lower variability compared to doomscrolling. Overall, the findings suggest that while participants reported moderate engagement in doomscrolling, they also exhibited moderate to high emotional reactivity, with slightly greater intensity in positive reactivity. The broader spread in DSS scores indicates individual differences in online media consumption behavior within the sample.

Variable	Range	IQR	Skewness	Kurtosis
DSS	56.0	25.3	0.604	-0.703
PERS-S (positive)	27.0	8.00	-0.404	-0.0529
PERS-S (negative)	30.0	9.00	0.0738	0.428

Note. IQR= Interquartile Range

**Table 2:** Range, Interquartile Range, Skewness, and Kurtosis of scores obtained on DSS and PERS-S (positive and negative reactivity)

Table 2 shows scores on the Doomscrolling Scale (DSS) and the Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale- Short (PERS-S) for both positive and negative reactivity. The DSS scores showed the highest range (56.0) and interquartile range (25.3), indicating greater variability in doomscrolling behavior among participants. The skewness value of 0.604 suggests a moderate positive skew, meaning that a larger number of participants reported lower levels of doomscrolling, with fewer scoring high. The negative kurtosis value (-0.703) indicates a relatively flat distribution compared to a normal curve. In contrast, the PERS-S positive reactivity scores had a lower range (27.0) and IQR (8.00), with a skewness of -0.404 indicating a slight negative skew, meaning more participants scored higher on positive reactivity. Its kurtosis value (-0.0529) is close to zero, reflecting a near-normal distribution. The PERS-S negative reactivity scores showed a range of 30.0 and IQR of 9.00, with minimal skewness (0.0738), indicating a near-symmetrical distribution. The kurtosis of -0.428 suggests a slightly flatter distribution than normal. Overall, doomscrolling scores showed greater variability and a more uneven distribution, while emotional reactivity scores, both positive and negative, were more consistent and approximately normally distributed.

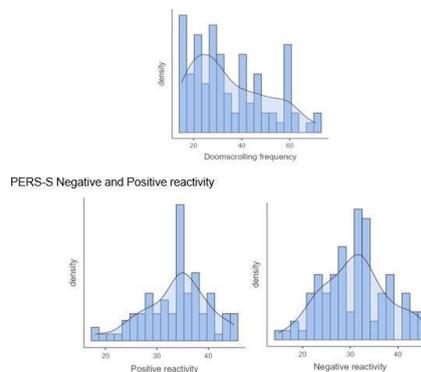
Variable	Statistics	p
DSS	0.925	.001*
PERS-S (positive)	0.975	0.067
PERS-S (negative)	0.986	0.402

Note. \*p<0.05

**Table 3:** Normality tests (Kolmogorov- Smirnov) of Doomscrolling Scale and Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale

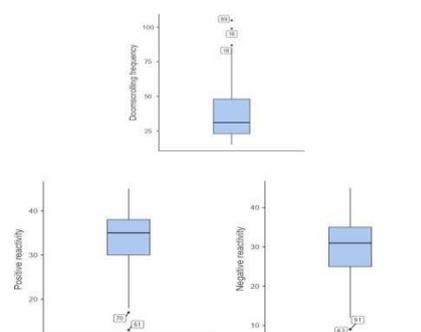
Table 3 shows the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test used to assess the normality of the data for the Doomscrolling Scale (DSS) and the Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale- Short (PERS-S), including both positive and negative emotional reactivity. The result for the DSS shows a statistically significant p-value (< .001), indicating that the data for doomscrolling does not follow a normal distribution. In contrast, the PERS-S positive reactivity scores have a p- value of 0.067, which is greater than the 0.05, suggesting that the data is approximately normally distributed. Similarly, the PERS-S negative reactivity scores have a p-value of 0.402, also indicating a normal distribution. Therefore, while the emotional reactivity variables meet the assumption of normality, the doomscrolling variable does not. This suggests that non- parametric statisti-

cal tests like Spearman’s correlation may be more appropriate for analyzing relationships involving the DSS.



**Figure 1:** Histogram showing frequency distributions of Doomscrolling Scale and Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale-Short positive and negative reactivity

The histograms represent the distribution of scores for the Doomscrolling Scale (DSS) and the Perth Emotional Reactivity Scale-Short (PERS-S), including both positive and negative reactivity. The histogram for doomscrolling frequency shows a positively skewed distribution, with a greater concentration of participants scoring lower on doomscrolling and fewer individuals scoring at the higher end. The Kolmogorov- Smirnov data shows a significant deviation from normality for the DSS. In contrast, the histograms for both positive and negative emotional reactivity appear more symmetrical and bell-shaped, suggesting that these variables are approximately normally distributed. The distribution for positive reactivity shows a slight left skew, while the negative reactivity appears slightly more balanced. These results from the earlier normality test findings, where both PERS-S subscales showed non-significant p-values, confirming normality. Overall, the histograms reinforce the conclusion that doomscrolling scores are not normal, whereas emotional reactivity scores tend to follow a normal distribution.



**Figure 2:** Box plots showing the distribution of DSS and PERS-S of positive and negative reactivity

The box plots show the distribution and variability of scores for doomscrolling frequency, as well as positive and negative emotional reactivity. The box plot for doomscrolling frequency shows a positively skewed distribution, with the median closer to the lower end of the box and several outliers on the higher end. This indicates that while most participants reported moderate to low levels of doomscrolling, a few individuals exhibited significantly higher engagement, which skews the distribution. In contrast, the box plots for both positive and negative reactivity appear more symmetrical, with the medians centrally located within the interquartile range (IQR), suggesting relatively balanced emotional responses among participants. Both positive and negative reactivity also show fewer and more moderate outliers compared to doomscrolling, reflecting less variability and more consistency in emotional reactivity scores. These observations are consistent with earlier statistical and graphical findings, where doomscrolling showed greater deviation from normality and higher variability, while emotional reactivity appeared more stable and normally distributed.

Variable	1	2	3
DSS	-	-0.153	0.107
PERS-S (positive)	-0.153	-	0.106
PERS-S (negative)	0.107	0.106	-

Note. \*p<0.05

**Table 4:** Correlation Matrix between DSS and PERS-S positive and negative reactivity (N= 94)

Table 4 shows the Spearman rank-order correlation to examine the relationship between doomscrolling frequency (measured by the Doomscrolling Scale- DSS) and emotional reactivity (measured by the PERS-S scale) among 94 participants. The Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis revealed that doomscrolling frequency had a weak negative correlation with positive reactivity ( $\rho = -0.153, p = 0.140$ ), which was not statistically significant. This suggests that higher levels of doomscrolling were slightly associated with lower positive reactivity, but this relationship could be due to chance. Similarly, doomscrolling frequency demonstrated a weak positive correlation with negative reactivity ( $\rho = 0.107, p = 0.306$ ), which was also not statistically significant, indicating no reliable association between the two variables. Additionally, positive reactivity showed a very weak positive correlation with

negative reactivity ( $\rho = 0.106, p = 0.310$ ), and this relationship was likewise not statistically significant. Overall, the results indicate that doomscrolling frequency does not have a statistically meaningful relationship with either positive or negative emotional reactivity in the present sample.

Model	R	R2	Adjusted R2	F	(df)	p
1	0.114	0.0130	0.00227	1.21	1	0.274

Note. \*p<0.05; Models estimated using a sample size of N=94; Predictor: Doomscrolling Scale (DSS)

**Table 5:** Model (1) Summary for Regression predicting positive reactivity of PERS-S from DSS

Table 5 presents the regression model summary for predicting emotional reactivity, as measured by the PERS-S scale, based on participants doomscrolling frequency (DSS). The results indicate that the model is not statistically significant,  $F(1, 92) = 1.21, p = 0.274$ . The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) is 0.013, which means that doomscrolling accounts for only 1.3% of the variance in emotional reactivity. The adjusted  $R^2$  value is even lower at 0.00227, indicating that after adjusting for the number of predictors, the power of the model is negligible. The correlation coefficient  $r$  is 0.114, reflecting a very weak positive linear relationship between doomscrolling and emotional reactivity. However, given the high p-value, this relationship is not statistically significant. These findings suggest that doomscrolling does not significantly predict changes in emotional reactivity among the participants in this study. Thus, while doomscrolling is often theorized to influence emotional responses, the present model fails to provide empirical support for such a predictive relationship in this sample.

Model					95% Confidence Interval	
Variable	Std. Error	$\beta$	T	P	Lower	Upper
DSS	0.0417	-0.0459	-1.10	-0.129	0.274	0.0369

Note. \*p<0.05; DSS= Doomscrolling Scale

**Table 6:** Model (2) Summary for Regression Coefficient- Positive Reactivity predicting PERS-S from DSS

Table 6 presents the positive reactivity regression coefficient summary for the model predicting emotional reactivity (PERS-S scores) from doomscrolling behavior (DSS). The regression coefficient ( $\beta$ ) for DSS was found to be 0.0417, indicating a very slight positive relationship between doomscrolling and emotional reactivity. However, this effect was not statistically significant,  $t(92) = -1.10$ ,

$p = 0.274$ . The 95% confidence interval for the regression coefficient ranges from  $-0.129$  to  $0.0369$ , crossing zero, which further confirms the non-significance of the predictor. The standard error of the regression coefficient was  $0.0417$ , suggesting some variability around the estimate. These results imply that doomscrolling is not a significant predictor of emotional reactivity in this sample. The confidence interval and  $p$ -value both suggest that any observed association could likely be due to chance. Therefore, the data do not support a meaningful or reliable relationship between the frequency of doomscrolling and changes in emotional reactivity.

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	df1	df2	p
1	0.101	0.0102	-5.41e-4	0.950	1	92	0.332
Note. * $p < 0.05$ ; Models estimated using a sample size of $N = 94$ ; Predictor: Doomscrolling Scale (DSS)							

**Table 7:** Model (3) Summary for Regression predicting negative reactivity of PERS-S from DSS

Table 7 presents the regression analysis results predicting negative reactivity (PERS-S) from the Doomscrolling Scale (DSS). The model yielded a very low correlation ( $R = 0.101$ ) and explained only about 1.02% of the variance in negative reactivity ( $R^2 = 0.0102$ ), with an adjusted  $R^2$  value close to zero ( $-0.000541$ ), indicating negligible explanatory power. The F-test value ( $F = 0.950$ ,  $df1 = 1$ ,  $df2 = 92$ ) was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.332$ ), suggesting that doomscrolling did not significantly predict negative reactivity in the sample ( $N = 94$ ). These results imply that within this study, doomscrolling behavior was not a meaningful predictor of negative emotional reactivity as measured by PERS-S.

Model	95% Confidence Interval					
Variable	Std. Error	$\beta$	t	p	Lower	Upper
DSS	0.0462	0.0450	0.975	-0.0467	0.332	0.137
Note. * $p < 0.05$ ; DSS= Doomscrolling Scale						

**Table 8:** Model (4) Summary for Regression Coefficient- Negative Reactivity predicting PERS-S from DSS

The regression analysis examined whether doomscrolling, as measured by the DSS, significantly predicted negative reactivity scores on the PERS-S. The results indicated that the DSS had a positive but very small regression coefficient ( $\beta = 0.045$ ,  $SE = 0.0462$ ), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from  $-0.0467$  to  $0.137$ . The t-value was  $0.975$ , and the corresponding p-value was  $0.332$ , which is

well above the  $0.05$  threshold for statistical significance. This suggests that doomscrolling did not significantly predict negative reactivity in this model. The confidence interval further shows that the true effect could be slightly negative or positive, reinforcing the lack of a definitive relationship between the variables in this sample.

## Discussion

Participants reported moderate doomscrolling ( $M = 34.9$ ,  $SD = 15.5$ ) and moderate emotional responsiveness (positive reactivity:  $M = 33.8$ ,  $SD = 6.23$ ; negative reactivity:  $M = 31.1$ ,  $SD = 6.89$ ). Doomscrolling scores were positively skewed, while emotional reactivity scores approximated normal distribution [27].

Correlational analyses indicated weak, non-significant trends: doomscrolling was slightly negatively correlated with positive reactivity ( $\rho = -.153$ ,  $p = .140$ ) and slightly positively correlated with negative reactivity ( $\rho = .107$ ,  $p = .306$ ). Regression analyses confirmed these findings, with doomscrolling explaining only 1.3% of variance in positive reactivity and 1% in negative reactivity.

These results suggest that doomscrolling does not independently predict emotional desensitization, at least in the short term. While prior studies linked doomscrolling with stress and disengagement [3,11], the present findings imply that desensitization is mediated by additional variables such as coping strategies, humor, or personality traits. For instance, neurotic individuals may disengage more quickly [17], while humor may buffer emotional exhaustion but reinforce.

Importantly, these null results complicate simplistic narratives that doomscrolling uniformly erodes empathy. Rather, desensitization may emerge over longer periods, or through interactions with algorithmic exposure and social dynamics [28]. The findings underscore the necessity of longitudinal research and multimodal assessment, including physiological measures such as heart rate variability.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the relationship between doomscrolling and emotional desensitization in Gen Z using validated scales and regression analysis. Findings indicated that doomscrolling did not significantly predict emotional reactivity, suggesting that desensitization arises from complex

interactions rather than doomscrolling alone.

The implications are twofold. First, interventions should move beyond targeting doomscrolling per se to addressing broader digital habits, coping mechanisms, and platform design. Digital literacy, balanced media consumption, and emotional regulation strategies remain essential for mental health. Second, future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-method designs to capture the nuanced, cumulative nature of emotional desensitization.

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