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Doomscrolling and mental well-being among university students: A qualitative study of late-night digital behavior

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ABSTRACT

Doomscrolling has evolved beyond a mere habit into a significant maladaptive behavior that systematically erodes the mental well-being of university students. This study explores the nexus between late-night compulsive content consumption and the degradation of psychological health. Employing a qualitative approach, the research focuses on seven purposively selected informants exhibiting extreme device usage (>5 hours/day). This sample size was intentionally curated to achieve phenomenological depth and data saturation, ensuring a rich, granular understanding of the digital experience that large-scale surveys often overlook. Data were gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews, subsequently analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring behavioral patterns. The findings reveal that informants spend 3 to 5 hours nightly in a "doomscrolling loop," driven by information anxiety and social pressure (oversharing). Rather than providing a digital escape, this activity consistently delays sleep, triggering emotional exhaustion and a sharp decline in morning cognitive focus. Critically, this study proves that doomscrolling serves as a failed coping mechanism that disrupts time management and psychological stability. These findings contribute to the global discourse on digital mental health by highlighting the urgent need for mindfulness-based digital literacy interventions to help students navigate the demands of a hyper-connected academic environment.

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1. Introduction

Global digital transformation has created a paradox in information consumption. While social media offers unprecedented access to information, it has also become a significant source of cognitive load through the phenomenon of "doomscrolling." This behavior—defined as the compulsive tendency to continuously scroll through negative news or distressing content—has emerged as a pressing international mental health concern [1,2]. Theoretically, constant exposure to narratives of crisis and social pressure in digital spaces triggers psychological distress, which systematically mediates a decline in life satisfaction and mental well-being [3,4]. Rather than serving as a medium for entertainment, social media often transforms into a trigger for emotional anxiety that users find increasingly difficult to terminate [3,5].

The impact of doomscrolling extends beyond psychological effects to serious physiological disruptions, particularly the impairment of circadian rhythms. Intense digital activity late at night delays sleep onset and causes excessive brain activity at the exact moment the body requires relaxation [6,7]. This creates a maladaptive cycle where digital-induced anxiety leads to insomnia, which in turn prolongs nighttime screen exposure [7,8]. Globally, this reciprocal relationship between nocturnal digital behavior and sleep deprivation has been shown to increase the risk of chronic fatigue and cognitive degradation [7,9].

University students represent the demographic most vulnerable to these dynamics due to high academic demands and irregular lifestyle transitions [10,11]. For these students, social media often serves as both an escape from academic stress and a platform for seeking social validation through oversharing [12,13]. The need for social recognition frequently compels them to

remain active in digital spaces late into the night, ignoring signs of physical exhaustion. Consequently, they experience a sharp decline in academic concentration during the day, rooted in poor sleep quality resulting from uncontrolled digital behavior [10,14].

While literature regarding the psychological impact of social media has expanded rapidly, most studies remain quantitative and focused on the general population. A significant research gap exists in understanding the subjective dimensions of late-night doomscrolling, particularly within academic environments with specific values. The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative approach to dissecting the motives behind students' failure in self-control when faced with negative information flows, as well as how nighttime digital behavior interacts with their psychophysiological balance.

This study aims to explore the deep-seated connections between doomscrolling, late-night habits, and mental well-being among university students. The scientific significance of this research lies in its effort to map the digital coping mechanisms of students within a faith-based university context. The focus is directed toward students at IAIN Kerinci, where the interaction between spiritual discipline and modern technological challenges offers a fresh perspective on how local and religious values either mitigate or complicate the negative impacts of nocturnal digital behavior.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to explore the phenomena of doomscrolling and nocturnal digital behavior. Although the sample size is focused (n=7), this design was selected for its capacity to facilitate an in-depth exploration of subjective student experiences that cannot be quantified statistically. This approach allows for a comprehensive dissection of the emotional motives and psychological dynamics underlying the failure of digital self-control.

2.1 Participants and Informant Selection

Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) active students of the Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Kerinci aged 18–25 (Generation Z) identified as having a high risk of digital-related sleep disorders [15]; (2) device usage duration exceeding 3 hours per day; and (3) a history of chronic late-night habits resulting from social media activity. The number of informants was determined by the principle of data saturation, where data collection ceased once no new themes or patterns emerged from the participant narratives [16]. A summary of the informant profiles is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants Informant Profile

Informant Code	Gender	Age	Study Program	Social Media Duration	Late-Night Frequency
1-01	F	19	Islamic Guidance and Counseling	6 hours/day	Frequent
1-02	M	21	English Education	4 hours/day	Occasional
1-03	F	20	Islamic Education Management	5 hours/day	Frequent
1-04	M	22	Syari'ah Economics	4 hours/day	Frequent
1-05	F	21	Islamic Religious Education	3 hours/day	Occasional
1-06	M	19	Arabic Language Education	6 hours/day	Frequent
1-07	F	24	Da'wah Management	4 hours/day	Frequent

2.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation of the informants' digital activities. The research instrument was developed based on theoretical frameworks of doomscrolling behavior, sleep hygiene, and mental well-being. The interview guide covers indicators of usage motives (compulsive information seeking), duration of exposure to negative content, and its subsequent impact on sleep rhythms and emotional stability.

2.4 Research Procedure

The procedure commenced with the development of an interview protocol, followed by the recording of verbal data with participant consent. Each interview session was transcribed verbatim and verified through member checking to ensure data accuracy prior to the codification process.

2.5 Ethical Approval

This study complied with the ethical protocols of the Institute for Research and Community Service at IAIN Kerinci under registration number In.31/L1/PP.00.9/10/2025. The researchers guaranteed total anonymity through the use of initial codes and the storage of data in encrypted folders. Written informed consent was obtained, and participants were granted the full right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

2.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using Descriptive Thematic Analysis. The analytical process followed a systematic sequence: (1) data immersion through repetitive transcript reading; (2) initial coding based on behavioral motives and impacts; (3) categorization of codes into primary themes, such as "Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms" and "Digital Circadian Disruption"; and (4) abstraction of findings into a scholarly narrative linking digital behavior to psychological well-being.

2.7 Data Trustworthiness

To ensure research quality, the trustworthiness criteria established by Lincoln & Guba [17] and Nowell et al., [18] were applied as follows: (1) *Credibility,* established through member checking (verifying transcripts with informants) and source triangulation (comparing interviews with field observations). (2) *Dependability*, maintained by developing an audit trail that transparently documents every step of the research process. (3) *Confirmability*, Achieved through peer debriefing with colleagues to mitigate researcher bias, and (4) *Transferability*, addressed by providing a thick description of the social context

and informant behavior, allowing the findings to be understood within similar academic contexts at faith-based higher education institutions.

3. Results

The findings of this study reveal that nocturnal doomscrolling among IAIN Kerinci students is not merely a leisure activity, but rather a compulsive digital ritual. To provide a systematic overview, the findings are categorized into two primary themes: motivational patterns and multidimensional impacts.

3.1 Patterns and Motives of Night-Time Doomscrolling

Based on thematic coding analysis, the primary triggers for doomscrolling were identified as a combination of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and a perceived need for emotional escape.

Table 2. Patterns and Motives of Late-Night Social Media Usage

Primary Theme	Motive Code	Behavioral Description
Information Needs	*News Updates/Viral Content*	Repetitive consumption of negative news, politics, and crime (Twitter/X and TikTok).
Algorithmic Compulsion	*Auto-scrolling*	Becoming trapped in short-video recommendations without a clear objective.
Maladaptive Coping	*Stress Relief*	Using gossip or others' personal venting (*oversharing*) to distract from academic stress.
Social Pressure	*Peer-Connection*	Remaining active because the social environment (friends/dormmates) is still awake and online.

Most informants reported that night-time doomscrolling often begins with the intention of "taking a short break" after completing academic tasks, yet results in sleep delays of 2 to 4 hours. This phenomenon is exacerbated by social media algorithms that exploit user curiosity..

> *"Initially, I just wanted to watch for a moment to relieve assignment stress, but the TikTok algorithm made it impossible for me to stop until morning."* (Informant 6)

> *"There is a fear of missing out on viral news or criminal issues. If I haven't read it to the end, it feels like something is nagging at me, making me keep scrolling."* (Informant 2)

These findings align with international studies (e.g., Sharma & Sharma, 2021), which suggest that dormitory or boarding house environments often create a "wakefulness culture" that validates doomscrolling as a group social norm.

3.2 Physical, Cognitive, and Psychosocial Impacts

The continuous consumption of negative content at night creates a domino effect that impairs students' daily functioning.

Table 3. Multidimensional Impacts of Doomscrolling

Impact Dimension	Clinical & Behavioral Manifestations	Academic Impact
Physical	Circadian rhythm disruption, heavy-headedness, chronic fatigue	Oversleeping and class absenteeism.
Cognitive	Reduced concentration, difficulty grasping lecture material.	Sharp decline in academic performance.
Psychosocial	Increased anxiety, mood instability, emotional exhaustion.	Withdrawal or becoming reactive on social media.

In-depth analysis reveals a unique pattern among IAIN Kerinci students. Exposure to emotional oversharing on Instagram and TikTok triggers emotional contagion. Rather than feeling entertained, informants reported feeling more distressed after viewing the life struggles of others.

> *"After seeing sad vents or crime news, my mind feels cluttered. Instead of feeling calm, I feel anxious and find it difficult to close my eyes."* (Informant 3)

> *"The impact is very noticeable in the morning; my head feels heavy and I cannot focus on the lecturer's explanation due to lack of sleep."* (Informant 5)

The data indicates that extreme doomscrolling duration is directly proportional to the decline in cognitive ability the following morning. This confirms that nocturnal doomscrolling is a potent predictor of failures in student time management.

3.3 Reflection Phase and Mitigation Efforts

Despite being trapped in a destructive cycle, a phase of "self-awareness" emerged where informants began to recognize their productivity degradation. Mitigation efforts tend to be technical, such as using app timers or disabling notifications. However, the greatest challenge remains self-control amidst a barrage of content designed to be addictive.

> *"I realize this habit is damaging, but the urge to scroll is stronger. Now I try to use a timer, even though I often ignore it anyway."* (Informant 1)

A synthesis of these findings suggests that doomscrolling among students is not merely a technological issue, but a self-regulation problem requiring a more systematic psychological intervention.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that nocturnal doomscrolling among IAIN Kerinci students is not a random activity but a behavior structured by both algorithmic design and psychological needs. The primary motives identified—curiosity, academic escapism, and the need for connection—align with Uses and Gratifications Theory [19]. Students utilize social media as a short-term coping mechanism to reduce academic stress [20–22]. However, the negative and urgent nature of the content (such as crime news or social conflict) triggers high cognitive load [23]. Globally, this phenomenon is recognized as online vigilance, where individuals feel a constant need to remain alert to the latest information, which in turn reinforces compulsive behavior [24,25].

Continuous exposure to negative content triggers unstable emotional responses. Informants reported experiencing emotional contagion after consuming overshared content [26,27]. Neuropsychologically, doomscrolling activates the amygdala, triggering anxiety and keeping the body in a state of "high alert" even when sleep is overdue [28,29]. This condition creates significant cognitive barriers; the decreased concentration and memory retention reported by informants in the morning are clinical manifestations of a lack of REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, which is essential for memory consolidation [28,30]. Studies in Europe and North America similarly show a strong correlation between late-night device use and a decline in student GPA [31–33].

A unique finding at IAIN Kerinci is how the social environment (e.g., peers) acts as a reinforcement for doomscrolling behavior [34,35]. The presence of peers who are also active online creates a "maladaptive normalization" of staying awake late [36,37]. This collective culture allows individuals to feel less guilt when postponing sleep due to a sense of digital togetherness [38–40]. This contrasts with studies in individualistic societies, which tend to view doomscrolling as a form of self-isolation [41].

To clarify the relationship between these variables, the following flowchart illustrates the cycle identified in this study:

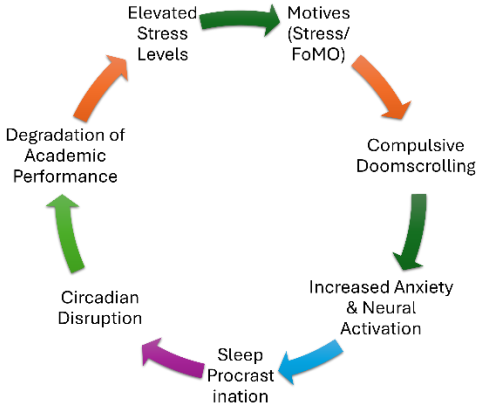

Figure 1. The Cyclic Interrelationship Between Variables

This diagram illustrates that students are trapped in a vicious cycle that is difficult to break without external intervention [42,43]. While informants are aware of the negative impacts, "self-awareness" is often overwhelmed by the persuasive design of digital platforms [44,45]. Mitigation efforts, such as disabling notifications, are positive initial steps; however, without robust self-regulation, technology will invariably prevail [44,46,47]. The integration of religious values and mindfulness in device usage presents a unique opportunity for students in Islamic higher education environments, such as IAIN Kerinci, to build a psychological defense [48].

Limitations of the Study

While this research provides deep insights into the phenomenon of nocturnal doomscrolling, several limitations must be acknowledged to provide a balanced interpretation of the results.

First, regarding data generalizability: The focus on seven informants at IAIN Kerinci offers rich phenomenological depth; however, these findings are highly contextual and cannot be directly generalized to the entire student population in Indonesia or globally. The dynamics of local culture, religious background, and the specific geographical environment of Sungai Penuh may shape behavioral patterns differently than those found in metropolitan areas or secular institutions [49,50].

Second, the self-reporting methodology: The research data relies entirely on the honesty and recall of the informants during in-depth interviews. There is a risk of social desirability bias, where informants may tend to understate their device usage duration or downplay psychological impacts they perceive as stigmatizing [51]. Future research utilizing objective data—such as smartphone "screen time" logs—would significantly help in validating the actual duration of doomscrolling more accurately..

Third, the qualitative cross-sectional design: This study captures the phenomenon at a single point in time. Because digital behavior evolves rapidly alongside platform algorithm changes (such as the transition from static content to highly addictive short-form TikTok videos), this study cannot monitor long-term behavioral shifts or the sustained effectiveness of the self-control strategies implemented by informants over time [52].

Finally, unexplored mediating variables: This study has not deeply differentiated between the impacts of various types of negative content (e.g., political news vs. social conflict vs. personal oversharing). Each content type likely carries a distinct cognitive load and emotional trigger, which may interfere with circadian rhythms in different ways [53].

5. Conclusion

This study confirms that nocturnal doomscrolling is not merely a trivial digital habit, but a manifestation of self-regulation failure with systemic impacts on student well-being. The core findings reveal that the compulsive consumption of negative content and late-night "oversharing" is triggered by a psychological paradox: students seek an escape from academic stress, only to become trapped in information anxiety and emotional exhaustion. At IAIN Kerinci, this phenomenon is exacerbated by peer social pressures that normalize a culture of staying awake late. A unique contribution of this research shows that exposure to unverified emotional content triggers "emotional contagion," which drastically disrupts circadian rhythms, impairs cognitive concentration, and erodes academic productivity the following morning.

5.1 Practical and Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this research enriches global literature on digital mental health by demonstrating that doomscrolling functions as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Practically, these results urge higher education institutions to move beyond a focus on technical proficiency and instead integrate mindfulness-based digital literacy and emotional management into student support systems. Preventive approaches that address both mental and spiritual aspects are crucial to breaking the cycle of declining well-being in an era of hyperconnectivity.

5.2 Future Research Directions

Given the limitations of the qualitative sample size in this study, future research should employ mixed-methods approaches to validate the correlation between doomscrolling intensity and sleep quality across broader populations. Additionally, longitudinal studies are necessary to observe the long-term effectiveness of behavioral interventions and the impact of evolving platform algorithms on student mental health.

Declarations

Author Contributions: The contributions of each author are defined as follows: Author 1 served as the corresponding author, designing the conceptual research framework, leading data analysis, and drafting the initial manuscript. Authors 2 and 3 were responsible for field coordination, data collection through in-depth interviews, and transcription. Authors 4 and 5 provided critical contributions to the global literature review and the development of the theoretical framework related to the doomscrolling phenomenon. Authors 6 and 7 focused on qualitative data validation (member checking), language editing, and ensuring the article structure aligned with the target journal standards. All authors have read, reviewed, and approved the final version of this manuscript for publication..

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article and assume full responsibility for the integrity of the presented content..

Ethical Approval

This study complied with the ethical protocols of the Institute for Research and Community Service at IAIN Kerinci under registration number In.31/L1/PP.00.9/10/2025..

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