



Digital Dissociation and Doomscrolling in Gen Z: Psychological Impacts and Research Directions

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Abstract: Doomscrolling and compulsive smartphone use have become everyday habits for many college students in Generation Z. Although these behaviors are often dismissed as simply spending too much time online, this paper argues that the effects may go deeper, reflecting a form of *digital dissociation*. Drawing on existing research from psychology, media studies, and behavioral science, the review suggests that excessive exposure to distressing online content can contribute to emotional detachment, attentional fatigue, and a gradual weakening of identity clarity. Unlike most studies that focus on screen time or habit formation, this paper frames doomscrolling as a process with clinical relevance, connecting it to early signs of dissociative experiences such as time distortion, cognitive fog, and disrupted self-awareness. By pulling together different strands of evidence, the paper highlights important gaps in current literature, especially the lack of clinical models and longitudinal research. It concludes by proposing future directions, including ecological assessments, experimental work, and targeted interventions, to better understand how digital habits shape the emotional and cognitive lives of young adults.

Keywords: *Digital Dissociation, Doomscrolling, GenZ*

1. Introduction

In recent years, doomscrolling and compulsive smartphone use have subtly become ingrained in college students' daily routines, often framed as taking a break or staying informed. However, beneath the surface, these actions might be causing a more subtle and potentially

dangerous issue: a growing disconnection between youth and their own emotional and mental states. The obsessive consumption of unpleasant or upsetting internet content, known as "doomscrolling," has been associated with emotions of hopelessness, anxiety, and emotional numbness, especially in Gen Z members (Sharma et al., 2022; Thou, 2024). Although these effects are becoming more accepted as a regular part of being a student, less is known about the psychological effects of continuous digital immersion.

Numerous psychological issues, such as poor emotion regulation, procrastination, and attentional exhaustion, have been linked to problematic smartphone use, according to research (Chen et al., 2022; Liu, 2023). However, most of the research views these behaviors as discrete or behavioral, frequently presenting them as issues of screen time, habit formation, or willpower. A more clinical perspective is frequently lacking, one that considers the ways in which obsessive internet use may contribute to deeper psychological symptoms including depersonalization, cognitive fog, and a disrupted sense of self. These patterns reflect early indicators of dissociation, yet they are rarely classified as such.

The purpose of this literature review is to investigate the potential connections between college students' excessive smartphone use and doomscrolling and psychological suffering as well as a progressive loss of identity clarity, emotional control, and cognitive control. The objective is to draw attention to a crucial gap the lack of a conceptual framework that takes into account digital dissociation as a new phenomenon by combining the body of research from many fields of digital behavior, emotion, and cognition. This review aims to provide a clinically informed understanding of how Gen Z students psychologically navigate the digital environments they have grown up in.

2. Conceptual Foundations

A. Doomscrolling and Digital Overload

Doomscrolling refers to the act of compulsively reading online content that is upsetting or negative and is now increasingly integrated into the daily lives of students in college. Sharma et al. (2022) refer to doomscrolling "as a negative feedback loop of maladaptive engagement that continues thinking about a topic following an initial negative psychological outcome." Maladaptive engagement options such as doomscrolling do not facilitate productive engagement or make things clearer but instead lead to emotional battery and the perpetuation of avoidant behaviors. Doomscrolling is a common habit among college students that is often justified as a

form of taking breaks or a quick distraction while studying in classrooms, yet it can unconsciously seep into the behavior of students and their emotions.

Emerging evidence suggests that doomscrolling might be linked to more severe consequences than we had initially believed. Thou (2024) reports that habitual exposure to distressing online content correlates with heightened existential anxiety, reduced feelings of safety, and increased feelings of hopelessness and alienation. Info regarding a study by Singh and Narula (2024) comparing doomscrolling behaviors between low and high neuroticism and agreeableness among college Gen Z students indicates that doomscrolling correlates with those with high neuroticism and lower agreeableness to scroll more often. They found that those who doomscrolled reported significantly greater psychological distress compared to those who did not. Altogether, these studies indicate that doomscrolling paves a path that connects with emotional regulation and is potentially much deeper than a mere habit. Doomscrolling is part of our emerging adult's digital consumption and potentially highlights vulnerabilities poorly adapted to the online world.

B. Smartphone Addiction and Psychological Mechanisms

Related to doomscrolling is the phenomenon of smartphone addiction, which can be defined as excessive, compulsive use of smartphones in a manner that disrupts everyday functioning. While it is not a clinical condition, smartphone addiction exhibits commonalities with behavioral addictions, such as tolerance, emotional dysregulation, and withdrawal symptoms upon device separation (Preetha, 2025). Indeed, amongst university students, who rely heavily on smartphones for work and socializing, this computing pattern can be viewed as problematic behavior. In addition, procrastination, sleep deprivation, and inability to sustain attention are further correlated with high smartphone use and, unfortunately, these behaviors frequently are seen as non-pathological.

Aside from behavioral level, psychological frameworks have started to examine the mechanisms underlying smartphone addiction. Chen et al. (2022) showed that distressed students' metacognitive beliefs regarding emotional relief from smartphone usage contribute to their excessive usage despite its adverse effects on anxiety and stress. Liu (2023) highlighted low self-control and high academic procrastination as key units in the problem smartphone usage network. Smartphone over-dependence may thus reveal growing emotional struggles and indecisions instead of merely being an outcome of poor self-discipline or time management.

C. Digital Dissociation: An Emerging Framework

Doomscrolling and smartphone or social media addiction research has emerged largely along emotional and behavior lines. However, we may now have enough reason to propose a potentially more complicated and clinical psychological side effect: what we will tentatively term digital dissociation. Digital dissociation is based on known professional clinical psychological theory of dissociation: the mild, usually undetected or unconscious disconnection from aspects of one's own thoughts, feelings or identity that can be associated with chronic or habitual digital behavior that is both repetitive and immersive - in a psychological sense, though not necessarily a literal one. While there is no formal defined presence of 'digital dissociation' in clinical psychology literature at this time, it provides a basis for understanding the foggy, time-lapse and emotionally blunt psychological or emotional substrates many students report existing after heavy scrolling or screen time use.

These disconnected experiences may be ignored or normalized as burnout for a significant portion of Gen Z attending college-those who have never lived a moment of their "young" adulthood without their smartphones. Yet the hourly disconnects from the self that code-switching for an online context entail - disruption of the flow of time, of "having" the attention or "being" present, and of "feeling" (or of aware of one's feelings), is similar to the low-level dissociation that screening tools are designed to assess for in a clinical context. Nonetheless, most of the major studies on the repercussions of doomscrolling or heavy smartphone use do not consider dissociation in their discussions. The absence of such a discussion therefore merits attention—not only to ask how "doomscrolling" or smartphone use is bad for mental health, but how those behaviors perform a slow erasure of self-consciousness in their daily engagement.

3. Cognitive and Emotional Consequences in Students

A. Attention Fatigue and Executive Dysfunction

Engagement in digital activities such as doomscrolling or compulsive digital device use may cause a loss of cognitive integrity within essential neural underpinnings that support sustained attention and executive function. According to Sharma et al. (2022) online content is high in volume, velocity, and emotional valence, which may cause overstimulation in which the brain loses the ability to discriminate relevant details or to focus. Within a university environment, this may present as difficulty following course materials during lectures, increased susceptibility to distractions while studying, or the habitual need to multitask in order to acquire or retain

information. While these behaviors may be prevalent and expected among college students, they may also represent precursors to attention fatigue, in which attentional resources are compromised as the brain's executive functions become strained in the wake of continued digital exposure.

Moreover, problem smartphone use has also been identified as a risk factor for executive dysfunction, in a finding that adds to the presented impaired attention trends among excessive-smartphone users. Liu (2023) identified that smartphones adoptive students, had significant decreased levels of self-control and goal-directed behavior which are both integral to executive system functioning. Also, Chen et al. (2022) in their research identified that emotional distress and low metacognition awareness affected the compulsive smartphone usage among students as this creates a cycle where avoidance behavior further hinders one's ability to self-assess or conduct conscious decision-making. Especially when students use their smartphones as a means for both academic engagement and emotional escapism from reality, borders between focusing, getting distracted and dissociating draw ever closer. While such executive dysfunction does not display immediate impacts on academic outcomes, this could further develop over time to lessen emotional functioning and self-control as well among students.

B. Emotional Detachment and the Signs of Digital Dissociation

In addition to cognitive impacts, many students have also reported emotional impacts that accompany extended digital usage—a feeling of emotional numbing or detachment. Specifically, doomscrolling has emerged as a trend that instills feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and disconnection (Thou, 2024). What may have begun as a means of remaining connected or in control, repeated exposure to negative news content may instead dampen one's emotional reaction to the current events, leading to "emotional fatigue" (Sharma et al., 2022). Eventually, students may find themselves scrolling not for the purpose of becoming connected, but to bypass challenging emotional experiences all together. This change in behavior—from a place of seeking connection to avoiding negative feelings—may be an early indicator of emotional numbing.

Yet such disengagement (which is often undiagnosed) can be likened to dissociation - specifically, its subclinical variants. While derealization, depersonalization, identity fragmentation and other dissociative symptoms are traditionally relegated to clinical settings, similar phenomena have been documented increasingly in online contexts. Singh and Narula (2024) discovered that excessive doomscrolling and smartphone use among college-aged students often correlated with time distortion, amnesia, and lack of affectivity - all dissociative characteristics that underscored

their research. However, few studies have yet to apply a dissociative framework to these observations. Therefore, digital dissociation is introduced in this review to define this relatively harmless, tech-facilitated psychological disengagement that results from continued exposure to the digital world. Whereas clinical dissociation is often linked to trauma, digital dissociation stems largely from overstimulation, emotional avoidance, and self-regulation disruption (especially among students facing increasing academic and social demands).

4. Clinical Relevance and Research Gaps

While there is increasing interest in behaviors like doomscrolling and smartphone addiction, most studies do not examine the potentially relevant psychological processes. Most studies address the results of these behaviors, such as greater anxiety, lower academic performance, or time displacement, but do not consider how pandemic-type digital overexposure might affect self-regulation, emotional processing, or identity development (if at all) in the years to come (Chen et al., 2022; Liu, 2023). This framework excludes a crucial alternative possibility: that for some students, digital overexposure is not merely distracting or stressful but psychologically distanced in a dissociative-like manner.

The most striking omission in the existing research is a lack of a clinical model for emotional and cognitive disengagement as a potential outcome of digital media consumption. The symptoms identified in the studies by Chen et al. (2022), Liu (2023), and Singh and Narula (2024) - attention splitting, time losing, and lack of emotional response - correlate with possible effects of dissociation. However, no direct references are available that may relate digital behavior studies to clinical theories, such as derealization, depersonalization, or dissociative coping. The absence of terminology and theoretical competition in addressing digital engagement as a form of cognitive and emotional dissociation limits possible implications of the research findings in terms of the long-term impact of affectively charged, highly immersive digital exposure on hundreds of millions of young consumers' capacities to engage with their inner realities.

Most proposed intervention strategies highlighted in the recent literature involve behavioral strategies, from cutting down screen time, using app limiters, and improving digital hygiene (Preetha, 2025). While these are all valid interventions, it mainly bases the root of the problem with excessive use, instead of what exactly their digital activity is compensating for. In the case of doomscrollers who use the activity to manage existential anxiety or a heightened sense

of disconnection after hours of mindless scrolling, limiting online time may not help patch the original root of disconnection. This presents another critical gap to feature further clinically related online strategies that would consider both the behavioral front as well as the emotional reason behind their association with the digital form.

Lastly, we observed that longitudinal and developmental approaches are largely absent from the literature. There are no studies examining how various digital behaviors correlate with the potential decline or increase in our abilities to navigate life through emotional resilience, identity clarity, or intellectual functioning over time. For the current cohort of college students (Gen Z), most of whom lived their digital lives at an early stage in life, future studies should focus not only on the immediate consequences of digital compulsiveness and its prospective development during consequential life matrix openings (the onset of college, living on one's own, adulthood, etc.) (Sharma et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022).

By identifying these gaps, this literature review positions digital dissociation as an urgently needed concept—one that bridges behavioral and clinical psychology and opens new avenues for research, intervention, and understanding.

5. Future Research Directions

Future studies should aim for deeper psychological engagement, going beyond behavioral manifestations. Digital dissociation - a form of subliminal detachment, mediated through technology, from thought processes, emotions, and identity, should be further explored. At present, this term is rather theoretical and under-researched (Sharma et al., 2022; Singh & Narula, 2024). Future research initiatives should define and quantify digital dissociation, distinguishing it as a measurable construct. Models of clinical and cognitive psychology may serve as the basis for this quantification.

Additionally, longitudinal studies should be conducted to investigate the influence of digital dissociation and online disconnection on emotional regulation, identity formation, and cognitive flexibility over time. The majority of studies are cross-sectional, which does not allow to determine the cause-and-effect relationship and the dynamic of digital behavior (Chen et al., 2022; Liu, 2023). Digital behavior should be studied at critical periods of life: the transition from adolescence to college, the transition from college to young adulthood, etc., to understand the

developmental trajectory of digital dissociation and the potential correlates and moderators of its development.

A further direction for research could involve analysis of the association between digital behaviors with clinical manifestations such as anxiety, depression-like features, or subclinical dissociation. It would be interesting to assess if students reflecting high patterns of digital disengagement also display evidence of emotional numbing, depersonalization, or maladaptive coping (Preetha, 2025). Such information would provide some insights on whether digital dissociation can be regarded as an independent condition, or this is just a digital version of well-known clinical patterns.

Dailey (2019) highlights that there is a potential for methodological innovation. For example, experience sampling methods (ESM) or ecological momentary assessment (EMA) could be employed to assess immediate emotional and cognitive responses during activities or after using digital technologies (Chen et al. 2022). Researchers would be able to obtain real-time assessments of digital dissociation and extend beyond reliance on self-report questionnaire formats to initiate the mapping of digital dissociation in situ.

Finally, intervention studies should consider not only how to reduce doomscrolling or smartphone use, but how to rebuild emotional presence and cognitive clarity. Mindfulness-based interventions, metacognitive retraining, or therapeutic journaling may be promising areas for future testing—especially if designed with the digital habits and psychological needs of Gen Z in mind (Liu, 2023; Sharma et al., 2022).

6. Conclusion

The psychological risks of our hyper-connected lifestyles through technology merit more insight as social and digital life become overbearing to daily life. Through the literature, the devices and related habits of doomscrolling and smartphone addiction are framed as contemporary distractions across society, especially among students. Yet, the gravest concern revealed is just how naive these habits are in migrating emotional separation and cognitive disassociation reflected through dissociation. The trend of digital dissociation although not defined provides a framework of understanding of how normal our digital habits may seem but are inadequate to sustain emotional equity, self-governing and mental presence among students today (Singh & Narula, 2024; Chen et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022).

Synthesizing existing research on emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects, this review also posits that compulsive digital participation might involve psychological risks at subclinical levels. Specifically, students of Generation Z— a cohort that has lived all their lives with smartphones— might be particularly susceptible to this new type of mild, self-reinforcing and easily-deniable dissociation. By approaching compulsive digital participation as a clinical psychology issue rather than a behavioral science problem, the article aims to invite practitioners and researchers to think outside the box about digital wellness (Liu 2023; Preetha 2025).

Ultimately, recognizing and researching digital dissociation is not just an academic exercise—it is a step toward understanding how young people relate to themselves in an era where distraction is constant and emotional distance is easy to hide. Doing so may open the door to more meaningful interventions, better self-awareness, and a more grounded approach to mental health in the digital age.

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