

Doomscrolling Tendencies and Cognitive Styles: An Examination of Compulsive Social Media Scrolling and Systematic–Intuitive Thinking Among Adults

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ABSTRACT: “Doomscrolling”—the compulsive, prolonged consumption of negative, alarming, or otherwise attention-capturing content on social media—has become one of the most widely reported digital habits of the mid-2020s, with recent surveys estimating that roughly two out of three adults now engage in the behavior and that prevalence exceeds 80% among Gen Z respondents. Despite this attention, little research has examined how a person’s underlying cognitive style relates to this compulsive pattern of engagement. The present study examined the relationship between doomscrolling-consistent compulsive social media use and cognitive style among adults. A convenience sample of 120 adults, aged 18 to 40 years, completed the Social Networking Addiction Scale and the Cognitive Style Inventory, and their scores were evaluated using descriptive statistics and Pearson's product-moment correlation. Participants reported a moderate level of compulsive scrolling behavior ($M = 80.37$, $SD = 25.192$), and the sample was composed of 63 men and 57 women. Independent-samples t tests revealed no significant gender differences on any of the three variables ($p > .01$ in each case). Doomscrolling-consistent engagement was positively and significantly correlated with intuitive cognitive style ($p < .01$), whereas no relationship emerged between this engagement and systematic cognitive style. Given how widespread doomscrolling has become in the general population, these findings point to the value of theoretical frameworks that integrate social-psychological constructs with cognitive style, and to the potential benefit of diagnostic guidelines that could assist psychologists in identifying and treating compulsive scrolling behavior.

KEYWORDS: doomscrolling, social media addiction, cognitive style, systematic style, intuitive style, adults

INTRODUCTION

Adulthood, generally considered to begin around the age of 20, unfolds across three broad stages—early, middle, and late—during which individuals attain physical and cognitive maturity alongside greater decisiveness and self-reliance. Cognitively, this period is marked by the consolidation of logical reasoning and abstract thought; drawing on Piaget's framework, adults become increasingly able to generate and evaluate multiple solutions to a problem and to reason systematically about their surroundings.

Alongside this developmental trajectory, a specific pattern of social media engagement—commonly termed “doomscrolling”—has become a defining feature of adult digital life. First popularized during the COVID-19 pandemic to describe the compulsive consumption of distressing news, the term has since broadened to capture habitual, prolonged scrolling through negative, alarming, or simply attention-capturing content across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit (UCI News, 2022). The behavior has proven remarkably persistent well beyond the pandemic that popularized it: a 2025 consumer survey of over 1,000 Americans found that 64% now describe themselves as doomscrollers, with the habit most pronounced among Gen Z (81%), followed by Millennials (67%) and Gen X (53%; Payless Power, 2025). Separate survey data indicate the habit has migrated into the workplace, with roughly half of surveyed employees reporting that they doomscroll work-related apps outside of working hours, a pattern again concentrated among younger respondents (SQ Magazine, 2026). Bedtime has emerged as the single most common occasion for the behavior, a pattern linked to Americans increasingly prioritizing screen time over sleep (SQ Magazine, 2026).

Although doomscrolling and the broader category of social media addiction have not yet been formally classified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, researchers have drawn on already-recognized behavioral addictions, such as gambling disorder and the newly classified internet gaming disorder, to characterize the pattern. A recent scoping review of the doomscrolling literature likewise describes the behavior as a habitual, compulsive pattern reinforced by design features such as infinite scrolling and algorithmic content delivery, while noting that the field still lacks a unified theoretical account of why the behavior takes hold (Sharpe et al., 2026). At its core, the concern is not engagement with social media per se but the propensity to develop a dependency

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on it: withdrawal, repeated failed attempts to cut back, interference with relationships or academic and occupational functioning, and significant personal distress collectively define the pattern, echoing criteria long applied to smartphone and internet addiction. Doomscrolling specifically manifests as an uncontrollable urge to keep swiping, preoccupation with feed content, and compulsive use that displaces sleep and other important areas of life—precisely the profile reflected in recent prevalence data.

A substantial body of research situates compulsive scrolling and social media addiction within a network of health, academic, and emotional outcomes. Addiction and time spent online have been shown to erode health, with fear of illness attenuating addictive use while generalized worry intensified it (Nur-A Yazdani et al., 2022). Consistent with this, mild-to-moderate internet addiction was found to be common among students and manageable through cognitive behavioral intervention (Bhave et al., 2021), while broader public-health disruption has been shown to complicate healthcare access for individuals already struggling with substance use disorders (Dubey et al., 2020). Academic performance appears especially vulnerable: social networking addiction, more pronounced among male students, was negatively associated with academic outcomes among medical students (Azizi et al., 2019), a relationship that Hou et al. (2019) found to be mediated by self-esteem among college students, and that Kumar et al. (2018) linked to elevated depression, particularly among first-year dental students.

More recent evidence extends these findings and increasingly speaks to doomscrolling specifically. A systematic review and meta-analysis of university-student samples worldwide documented a consistent negative association between social networking addiction and academic achievement (Salari et al., 2025), while Ning and Inan (2024) proposed an integrated dual-systems account in which impulsive, habit-driven processing—rather than a simple lack of self-control—best explains why addictive engagement undermines academic performance. In a related study, Aslan and Polat (2024) found that social media addiction, loneliness, and depression jointly predicted lower academic self-efficacy and weaker problem-solving skills among university students, illustrating how affective and cognitive vulnerabilities can compound one another. At a more physiological level, Zhang et al. (2023) showed that social media addiction was associated with poorer executive functioning among young adults, an effect mediated by emotional disturbance and disrupted sleep quality—a mechanism echoed in Harvard Health's (2024) summary of doomscrolling research, which links the habit to what clinicians informally call “popcorn brain,” alongside greater existential anxiety and worse overall well-being.

Emotional and self-evaluative correlates have received comparable attention. Buran Köse and Doğan (2019) found that women were more likely to use social media for mood modification, with addiction rising alongside Instagram followership and falling with self-esteem, while insecure attachment—both anxious and avoidant—was positively linked to dysfunctional use (D'Arienzo et al., 2019). Hawi and Samaha (2016) similarly reported that addictive use undermined self-esteem yet was positively tied to life satisfaction, with self-esteem buffering this latter relationship, and Seabrook et al. (2016) added nuance by showing that positive online interactions reduced depression and anxiety whereas negative interactions and social comparison increased them. Among adolescents, Aydın and Sarı (2011) found internet addiction negatively related to overall, social, and family self-esteem, and more recent survey work among Gen Z college students has linked doomscrolling specifically to elevated psychological distress and identified associations with particular personality profiles (Singh & Narula, 2024).

A parallel literature connects cognitive style to problem-solving and related constructs, forming the second pillar of the present study. Cognitive style—an individual's habitual manner of receiving, processing, and applying information, distinct from cognitive ability—was first theorized by Witkin et al. (1962) and later elaborated by Keen (1973), McKenney and Keen (1974), and Botkin (1974) into the bipolar systematic–intuitive dimension. Martin (1983) subsequently proposed a five-style model comprising systematic, intuitive, integrated, undifferentiated, and split styles, distinguished by the sequencing and flexibility with which information is processed: systematic thinkers follow a defined, step-by-step strategy; intuitive thinkers rely on unspoken hunches and rapidly discard alternatives; integrated thinkers shift fluidly between the two; undifferentiated individuals remain passive and externally directed; and split-style individuals possess both capacities but apply them one at a time.

Empirically, systematic thinkers have been shown to solve linear equations more accurately than intuitive thinkers (Subanji et al., 2021), while both styles have been positively linked to creativity (Minchekar, 2017) and to resilience and a thinking-oriented personality (Ahmed, 2015). Aksu et al. (2019) tied social media addiction itself to negative problem orientation and avoidant coping among young adults, and Rathee (2010) found that elite Indian handball players displayed stronger systematic and intuitive styles than state-level players, with women favoring intuition. At the level of theory, Caplan (2005) proposed a cognitive-behavioral model in which problematic internet use arises from poor self-worth, social anxiety, and a ruminative cognitive style layered atop an underlying psychopathology—a view broadly consistent with Brand et al.'s (2014) finding that poor coping and maladaptive expectancies heighten the risk of generalized internet addiction, and with Shapira et al.'s (2003) observation that problematic use is tied to sleep disturbance and interpersonal strain, potentially substituting for deficient offline relationships. More recently, Ahluwalia (2025) has argued that the compulsive information-seeking loop underlying doomscrolling produces genuine cognitive overload, depleting the very self-regulatory resources that systematic, step-by-step reasoning depends on.

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More recent work has extended this line of inquiry directly to digital behavior of the kind captured by the doomscrolling literature. Using an experimental dual-process design, Jiang and Ma (2024) found that repeatedly swiping through short-video content reduced participants' capacity for analytic thinking relative to their initial intuitive judgments, implicating the habitual, rapid-fire interaction style of social media—rather than the content itself—in a broader shift toward faster, less deliberate cognitive processing. Similarly, Şingir (2025) reported that heavier social media use was associated with poorer time management and a greater reliance on hypervigilant, procrastinatory, and buck-passing decision-making styles, alongside a reduced tendency toward careful, systematic decision-making—pointing to a consistent link between habitual scrolling engagement and a more intuitive, less structured style of thinking.

Despite the sheer scale of doomscrolling as a contemporary habit, it has rarely been examined alongside cognitive style, and no diagnostic framework yet exists for either construct. The present study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between doomscrolling-consistent compulsive social media engagement and systematic and intuitive cognitive styles among adults, and by testing whether these relationships differ by gender. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were formulated: (H1) doomscrolling tendency will be significantly related to systematic cognitive style; (H2) doomscrolling tendency will be significantly related to intuitive cognitive style; (H3) doomscrolling tendency will be significantly related to systematic cognitive style among men; and (H4) doomscrolling tendency will be significantly related to intuitive cognitive style among women.

METHOD

A descriptive research design was employed to examine variation across the sample and to test the relationships specified above. The independent variable was doomscrolling tendency (operationalized as compulsive, addiction-consistent social media engagement), the dependent variable was cognitive style, and age, gender, and socio-economic status were treated as extraneous variables.

Participants

Data were collected from a general population aged 18 to 60 years using a convenience sampling technique. The final sample comprised 120 adults (63 men, 57 women).

Measures

Doomscrolling Tendency (Social Networking Addiction Scale).

Because no scale yet exists that measures doomscrolling by that specific name, the present study operationalized doomscrolling tendency using Shahnawaz and Rehman's (2020) Social Networking Addiction Scale. Its six components—salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse—map closely onto the hallmark features of doomscrolling identified in the recent literature: compulsive checking and swiping (salience), scrolling to regulate mood or seek relief from distressing content (mood modification), the need for progressively longer sessions (tolerance), distress when unable to scroll (withdrawal), continued scrolling despite awareness of its costs to relationships or productivity (conflict), and relapse into the habit after attempts to cut back. This 21-item scale uses a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scores range from 21 to 147, with a score of 84 or above indicating addiction-level engagement. The scale has demonstrated strong test–retest reliability ($r = .88$) and construct validity as a higher-order factor comprising the six components.

Cognitive Style Inventory.

Developed by Jha (2001), the 40-item Cognitive Style Inventory assesses systematic and intuitive styles of thinking, judging, and decision-making on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (total disagreement) to 5 (total agreement). Twenty items load onto each subscale; individuals scoring highly on both are classified as integrated, those scoring moderately on both as split, and those scoring low on both as undifferentiated. Split-half reliability for the full inventory was .653, and test–retest reliability for the systematic and intuitive subscales was .58 and .56, respectively ($p < .01$); content and internal validity were established through evaluation by six expert judges.

Procedure and Ethics

The survey was administered entirely online through a Google Form, allowing convenient access for a geographically dispersed adult sample. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and asked to provide informed consent before completing demographic questions and the two measures.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics characterized the sample and each measure, and Pearson correlations together with independent-samples t tests were used to evaluate the hypothesized relationships and gender differences.

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RESULTS

Demographic Profile

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 120)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	63	52.5%
	Female	57	47.5%
Age	18–25 years	111	92.5%
	26–40 years	9	7.5%

Note. Percentages are calculated within each characteristic.

The sample was slightly male-dominated (52.5%) relative to female participants (47.5%), and the large majority of respondents (92.5%) fell within the 18–25 year age bracket. Histograms of the collected scores confirmed an approximately normal distribution across the Social Networking Addiction Scale and the two Cognitive Style Inventory subscales.

Descriptive Statistics

Participants' scores on the Social Networking Addiction Scale yielded a mean of 80.37 (Mdn = 76, Mode = 75, SD = 25.192), indicating a moderate level of doomscrolling-consistent engagement across the sample—broadly in line with survey estimates that a majority of adults now engage in some form of doomscrolling (Payless Power, 2025). On the Cognitive Style Inventory, the systematic style subscale produced a mean of 76.15 (Mdn = 75, Mode = 74, SD = 11.233) and the intuitive style subscale a mean of 71.96 (Mdn = 70, Mode = 69, SD = 10.879).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for the Doomscrolling Tendency (SNA Scale) and Cognitive Style Inventory

Scale	Mean	Median / Mode	SD
Doomscrolling tendency	80.37	76 / 75	25.192
Systematic style	76.15	75 / 74	11.233
Intuitive style	71.96	70 / 69	10.879

Inferential Statistics

Pearson correlations among the three variables are presented in Table 3. Doomscrolling tendency was positively and significantly correlated with intuitive style, $r(118) = .269$, $p < .01$, but was unrelated to systematic style, $r(118) = .139$, $p > .01$. Systematic and intuitive style were themselves strongly correlated, $r(118) = .832$, $p < .01$.

Table 3: Pearson Correlations Among Major Variables

Variable	Doomscrolling Tendency	Systematic Style	Intuitive Style
Doomscrolling tendency	—	.139	.269**
Systematic style	.139	—	.832**
Intuitive style	.269**	.832**	—

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To evaluate gender differences, independent-samples *t* tests were conducted on each of the three variables. As shown in Table 4, men and women did not differ significantly in doomscrolling tendency, systematic style, or intuitive style, as all *p* values exceeded the stringent .01 alpha level adopted for this study.

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Table 4: Independent-Samples t Test Results by Gender

Variable	Gender (n)	M	SD	t	p
Doomscrolling tendency	Male (63)	78.98	26.517	−.634	.527
	Female (57)	81.89	23.782		
Systematic style	Male (63)	77.94	11.888	1.864	.065
	Female (57)	74.18	10.204		
Intuitive style	Male (63)	74.33	11.768	2.573	.011
	Female (57)	69.33	9.211		

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine the relationships among doomscrolling-consistent compulsive social media engagement, systematic cognitive style, and intuitive cognitive style in a sample of 120 adults aged 18–40. Participants' mean score of 80.37 on the Social Networking Addiction Scale reflects a moderate level of compulsive engagement, consistent with earlier findings among student samples (Simsek et al., 2019; Azizi et al., 2019) and with the scale of doomscrolling now documented in the general population, where surveys report that a majority of adults—and a substantial majority of Gen Z respondents specifically—describe themselves as habitual doomscrollers (Payless Power, 2025). It is also consistent with more recent academic evidence: a global meta-analysis of university students similarly linked social networking addiction to poorer academic outcomes (Salari et al., 2025), and comparable moderate addiction levels have been reported alongside associations with loneliness, depression, and reduced academic self-efficacy (Aslan & Polat, 2024), as well as with elevated psychological distress among Gen Z doomscrollers specifically (Singh & Narula, 2024). The comparatively higher levels of addiction reported by Fauzi et al. (2021) most likely reflect that study's smaller sample.

Hypothesis 1, which proposed a relationship between doomscrolling tendency and systematic style, was not supported: the correlation was non-significant at both the .01 and .05 levels. Hypothesis 2, by contrast, was supported—doomscrolling tendency correlated positively with intuitive style at the .01 level, suggesting that individuals prone to compulsive scrolling tend to approach problems spontaneously and holistically, relying on an inconsistent, rapid-fire examination of alternatives rather than a structured sequence of steps. This pattern is consistent with Nygren and White (2002), who argued that a more intuitive style can substantially influence how individuals perform on decision-making tasks.

This pattern is further corroborated by recent research linking habitual scrolling to a shift toward faster, less deliberate cognitive processing. Jiang and Ma (2024), for instance, found experimentally that swiping through short-form video content reduced users' analytic thinking relative to their initial intuitive judgments, and Şingir (2025) reported that heavier social media use was associated with weaker time management and a greater reliance on hypervigilant and procrastinatory decision-making styles rather than careful, systematic ones. Ahluwalia (2025) similarly frames doomscrolling as a source of genuine cognitive overload that erodes the self-regulatory resources systematic reasoning depends on, and Harvard Health's (2024) summary of the clinical literature links the habit to “popcorn brain” and heightened existential anxiety—outcomes plausibly rooted in the same fast, hunch-driven processing style captured by the intuitive subscale here. Read together with the present findings, this body of work suggests that frequent doomscrolling may be both a marker of, and a contributor to, a more intuitive cognitive orientation.

Finally, the independent-samples t tests indicated that gender did not significantly affect any of the three variables, with all p values exceeding the .01 threshold.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the relationship between doomscrolling-consistent compulsive social media engagement and cognitive styles among adults. The data revealed a significant positive correlation between this engagement and intuitive cognitive style, while no such relationship emerged for systematic style, and no significant gender differences were observed across any of the three variables.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The sample size, while adequate, could be expanded in future work to improve the precision of the estimates, and reliance on self-report questionnaires alone limits the depth of understanding that could be gained from complementary interview-based methods. Because doomscrolling was operationalized here via a general social networking addiction scale rather than an instrument built specifically around the negative-content-seeking and rumination features unique to doomscrolling, future work would benefit from purpose-built measures that isolate doomscrolling from broader patterns

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of social media use. The potential influence of other demographic characteristics on the variables studied here was also not fully explored and remains an avenue for future research.

Looking ahead, theoretical frameworks that integrate social-psychological constructs—such as uses-and-gratifications theory—with cognitive style may help to better delineate the elements underlying doomscrolling and social media addiction more broadly, and a dedicated behavioral theory of internet and social media use would further this aim. Given how deeply doomscrolling has become embedded in daily life—from bedtime routines to the workday itself—formal recognition of compulsive social media use as a diagnostic construct in future editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, together with corresponding diagnostic guidelines, would draw needed attention to its causes and treatment and would assist psychologists in both identifying and addressing this disorder, particularly given how closely it appears to be tied to individual cognitive style.

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