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Tension in Attention: Hypervigilance Helps Explain Why Marginalization Leads to Doomscrolling

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The use of social media has become increasingly prevalent and this has yielded some benefits, such as providing an alternative to traditional news sources and facilitating interpersonal interactions. However, some uses can also bring adverse effects such as doomscrolling: the persistent, habitual, consumption of negative news through scrolling endless, algorithmically sorted feeds. Doomscrolling is known to contribute to anxiety, and past studies suggest that this anxiety occurs more often in members of marginalized groups. We hypothesize that this is due to vigilance for potential discrimination among the marginalized, consistent with Minority Stress Theory. In a preregistered study, we recruited 677 university students who rated themselves on measures of doomscrolling, hypervigilance, and marginalization. We then investigated the degree to which identification with membership in a marginalized group predicts doomscrolling, and whether hypervigilance acts as a mediator for this association. In our data, marginalization was indeed a predictor of doomscrolling, and hypervigilance partially mediated this relationship. Finally, we investigated two other hypotheses: whether marginalized individuals also experience lower life satisfaction, or greater social connectedness, as a function of doomscrolling, compared to those less marginalized. In both cases, marginalization was not a moderator of these effects. Our study presents evidence that hypervigilance motivates doomscrolling for members of marginalized groups, suggesting that interventions seeking to address doomscrolling among the marginalized should combat underlying fears of discrimination.

Public Policy Relevance Statement
This study examines the prevalent, but understudied, modern phenomenon of doomscrolling: habitual consumption of negative news on social media platforms. Our data show that marginalized individuals are more likely to doomscroll, and that they likely do so due to vigilance for threats to their community. Because doomscrolling is known to be unhealthy, these results illustrate how already vulnerable populations have additional health risks arising from the hostile world they face. Together, these results suggest a mixed set of effects arising from marginalized individuals' scrolling of news content on social media,

Keywords: social media habits, attention, marginalized minority group members, well-being

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Digital devices have become a mainstay of modern life, connecting people and globalizing the spread of information (Cénat, 2020). Thanks to these devices, people are presented with more news than ever before, with younger generations increasingly favoring social media for their news over traditional sources (Forman-Katz & Matsa, 2022; Makananise, 2022; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). One unfortunate outcome of all this is doomscrolling, a term Internet users coined in late 2018 to refer to "habitual, immersive scanning for timely negative information on social media newsfeeds" (Garcia-Navarro, 2020; Sharma et al., 2022). Nascent research on doomscrolling has uncovered that it is especially prevalent among sexual and gender minority women (Dyar et al., 2024). This may be because marginalized communities tend to be hypervigilant toward sources of discrimination (Riggle et al., 2023). In this preregistered study, we formally examine this possibility, testing the degree to which hypervigilance mediates the association between doomscrolling and feelings of marginalization. Our study also examines whether the negative outcomes of doomscrolling are worse for those who identify more strongly as marginalized. Lastly, we tested a novel hypothesis that doomscrolling may hold a hidden benefit, increasing the sense of social connection for those who feel marginalized, with shared fears bringing them closer to their communities.

The Health Implications of Social Media Use

The rise of social media platforms made a wealth of information readily accessible to users. But this rise has been accompanied by concerns that social media use is having a negative effect on well-being, and producing ill-being. Research into this possibility has ballooned in recent years, resulting in a similar explosion of reviews and meta-analyses (e.g., Appel et al., 2020; Kross et al., 2021). Valkenburg et al. (2022) have produced an umbrella review, which summarizes 27 different meta-analyses and reviews (each of which summarizes hundreds of empirical papers). Based on this review, associations with well-being are mixed, with time spent using social media predicting both positive outcomes (i.e., happiness) and negative ones (i.e., depression and anxiety). Although many have hypothesized a difference between active use of social media (e.g., posting) versus passive (e.g., scrolling), Valkenburg et al. (2022) did not find consistent evidence that these two forms of engagement function as expected. Specifically, active use does not necessarily predict positive well-being, and passive use is not clearly associated with ill-being. When findings in an area are mixed, there are often hidden moderators that should be examined. Consistent with this idea, Valkenburg et al. (2022) make three recommendations, two of which we address in this study: (a) investigating individual differences in how people respond to social media use and (b) considering the specific content of social media. In terms of the former, we focused on people who see themselves as marginalized within society, and for the latter, we study the consumption of negative news.

Social media platforms have become a powerful vehicle for spreading negative news content (Robertson et al., 2023). Because users often frequently repeat social media behaviors, such as scrolling or sharing, these behaviors can become a habit, one that differs in strength for different users (Anderson & Wood, 2021). Doomscrolling is an example of habitual social media use as it entails compulsively searching for negative news, to the detriment of users' mental health (Anand et al., 2022). Understanding the prevalence and persistence of doomscrolling requires understanding the nature of habits, and how they relate to compulsion and addiction. Social media habits persist despite negative impacts on users' well-being because habits are hard to control (Anderson & Wood, 2023; Bayer et al., 2022). Habits exist on a spectrum of behavioral frequency and automaticity. Automaticity refers to the extent to which a behavior is cued by the environment, rather than rewards or goals. Infrequent, less automatic behavior is weakly habitual, whereas highly frequent and more automatic behavior is strongly habitual. Extremely strong habits may—but do not always—result in compulsions or addictions. Compulsions are performed even when undesired, and social media compulsions are associated with negative outcomes like poorer sleep (Koban et al., 2023). Addictions can also result from strong habits, but in order for to qualify as an addiction there must be clinical consequences (e.g., physical symptoms of withdrawal; Fournier et al., 2023; Meier, 2022; Panova & Carbonell, 2018).

Why Do People Doomscroll?

Doomscrolling is a habit that can have compulsive qualities, perhaps especially when used to cope with stressful events that receive heavy news coverage, such as crises and political developments (Baker, 2021, p. 28; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). People often seek information as a means of gaining control over anticipated threats (Yang & Kahlor, 2013). This likely explains why the 2020 pandemic led to doomscrolling's rise to prominence (Buchanan et al., 2021). The rapidly developing threat of the pandemic produced constant alarming news, leading people to seek information to both relieve stress and protect their health (Price et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021).

The very nature of news, and social media feeds, also pushes consumers toward doomscrolling. News is produced to be as sensational as possible, by overemphasizing drama and often stretching truths to do so (Han & Yzer, 2020; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986). Appealing to emotions makes audiences more likely to consume even further, drawing and holding the attention of viewers for advertising, resulting in increasing profits and market share for news outlets (Cain-Arzu, 2016). In other words, news media may seem attention-grabbing because it is indeed purposefully designed as such. In the case of social media, these strategies are then combined with sophisticated algorithms that sort newsfeeds to continuously recommend the most attention-grabbing articles. Problematically, these attention-grabbing articles are often negative in nature because negativity is more successful in attracting attention (Trussler & Soroka, 2014). Sadly, our news ecosystem has developed to both generate and feed our desire for doomscrolling.

Who Is More Likely to Doomscroll and Why?

Reacting to the global rise in doomscrolling that accompanied the pandemic, popular media coverage began to speculate about its impact (Deering, 2021; Miller, 2020; Wu, 2020). Empirical research on doomscrolling has recently emerged to address this speculation, although the field is certainly nascent and existing research somewhat scarce.

The extant research on this topic has sought to characterize doomscrolling by identifying its correlates, among both the general

population and in specific groups. In general, doomscrolling is associated with a need to stay informed, as well as a confirmation bias in accordance with a negative view of the world (Anand et al., 2022). Particular demographic groups also appear to be more vulnerable to doomscrolling. One study found that doomscrolling is more prevalent among sexual and gender minority women, compared to cisgender women, for example (Dyar et al., 2024). This may be related to the fact that minority group members are more likely to pay attention to news relevant to their group, which is often negative (Saleem et al., 2021). For example, Black participants are more likely to pick news stories about their own racial group compared to White participants, and also attend to these articles for longer (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2008).

But why do minorities tend to engage more in the consumption of negative news related to their group? One possibility is the need to be vigilant regarding threats to one's own group. Although this vigilance is motivated by a desire to gain protection from discrimination, ironically the act of constant vigilance can have its own negative consequences. Minority stress theory hypothesizes that the disproportionately poor health observed in marginalized groups exists in part due to the stress of being vigilant toward discrimination (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003). One maladaptive form of vigilance is hypervigilance, a sense of alertness and tension regarding a perceived threat (Riggle et al., 2023). Constantly searching for potential threats contributes to inordinate amounts of stress for Black individuals (Smith & Patton, 2016) and LGBTQ+ people (Rostosky et al., 2022). Hypervigilance is most prominently found in those with intersectional identities, individuals who belong to multiple threatened groups (Riggle et al., 2023). Because protection from threat is a primary motive for information-seeking (Buchanan et al., 2021), marginalized individuals may doomscroll news relevant to their identities to anticipate future discrimination, with hypervigilance acting as the mechanism. The current study directly tests whether vigilance toward discrimination helps to explain the relationship between marginalization and doomscrolling.

What Are the Outcomes and Predictors of Doomscrolling?

Doomscrolling has been associated with several harmful outcomes, although in some cases the evidence is mixed. Past studies have found that doomscrolling predicts more negative affect, less positive affect, substance abuse (Dyar et al., 2024), less self-control, and increased stress, anxiety, and uncertainty (Anand et al., 2022). In light of these outcomes, the personality correlates of doomscrolling are as would be expected; doomscrolling correlates with higher neuroticism and lower levels of conscientiousness (Sharma et al., 2022). Source also seems to matter, with the outcome of doomscrolling differing depending on the particular social media platform (e.g., YouTube vs. Twitter; Buchanan et al., 2021). However, some studies have found contradictory results. For example, although one group found that those who doomscroll rely more on their smartphones (Anand et al., 2022), another group failed to observe this association, and also failed to replicate the previously observed correlation with uncertainty (Sharma et al., 2022).

The negative outcomes of doomscrolling also appear to be worse for members of marginalized groups. One study found that gender minorities experience greater distress, depressed affect, and anxious affect when reading about the recent pandemic compared to cisgender women (Dyar et al., 2024). These associations between marginalization, doomscrolling, and well-being are far from simple, however. Although people with disabilities engaged more with pandemic news compared to able-bodied individuals, this association holds even after controlling for the greater risk such individuals face (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2021). Moreover, Black women who also belong to sexual and gender minority groups actually doomscroll less than members of other racial groups, despite reporting worse pandemic stress and other well-being markers (Dyar et al., 2024). This valuable first study examining the relation between marginalization and doomscrolling did have some limitations, however. Doomscrolling was operationalized as a single item of exposure to pandemic news, for example, and data was collected during a period when positive news about the pandemic was also reported (e.g., the development of vaccines).[1] Clearly, the role that doomscrolling plays in the well-being of marginalized individuals requires further investigation. Our own study builds on this key study by measuring doomscrolling specifically using a validated questionnaire, considering a broader population of marginalized individuals, and also extends the investigation of well-being to life satisfaction.

Not surprisingly, daily emotions predict life satisfaction, defined as one's perceived quality of life (Diener et al., 1985). For example, negative life events predict worse life satisfaction (Ho et al., 2008). The established links between doomscrolling and negative affect make it likely that this behavior also results in less satisfaction with life (Dyar et al., 2024). Germane to our current study, marginalized individuals also tend to have lower life satisfaction (Hung & Chan, 2022; Knies et al., 2016; van der Star et al., 2021), including those members high in hypervigilance (Riggle et al., 2023). Existing research, however, has not yet examined whether doomscrolling is associated with less life satisfaction, nor whether this association is especially strong for marginalized individuals. The current study helps to fill this gap in our knowledge.

Given that social media appears to have positive as well as negative implications for well-being, it is worth examining whether there are any positive outcomes of doomscrolling. Intriguingly, there is evidence that engaging with threats toward one's minority group might be accompanied by a greater sense of social connectedness. Social connectedness is a feeling of closeness and belonging with others in one's social world (van Bel et al., 2009). This sense of belonging is key for the well-being of minority group members. In LGBTQ+ college students, low representation and high heteronormativity among peers is associated with lower social connectedness (Mason, 2021). However, for LGBTQ+ youth, the support of a gender and sexuality alliance reduces loneliness and decreases victimization, promoting a stronger sense of social connection (Day et al., 2020; Lardier et al., 2020). For ethnic minorities, being socially connected to others of their ethnicity positively predicts greater life satisfaction (Knies et al., 2016). Could engaging with news, even negative news, also increase social connection? News media does increase social connection in general, for some groups (e.g., those aged 50 and over; Fisher et al., 2021), and using social media to seek information about frightening events seems to increase social connectedness

[1] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this useful observation.

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(Wu-Ouyang & Hu, 2023). We therefore tested whether doomscrolling increases a sense of social connectedness for those feeling greater marginalization.

The Current Study

In this preregistered study, we investigated the relationships between perceived marginalization, hypervigilance, and doomscrolling. Building on a past study that identified greater doomscrolling among sexual and gender minority women (Dyar et al., 2024), we extend this work to test whether this generalizes to the degree one identifies as belonging to a marginalized group. By sampling broadly, and measuring the degree of self-perceived marginalization, we take an inclusive approach to measuring marginalization that is not limited to preconceived notions of what groups are marginalized. In addition, this approach allows for the examination of associations rather than mere group comparisons. Doing so affords a more nuanced representation of marginalization, one that does not assume that all members of a marginalized group feel equally marginalized. Moreover, perceptions of marginalization are likely to lead to hypervigilance, regardless of whether this perception is accurate or not. This study also examines a potential underlying mechanism, examining whether hypervigilance mediates the relationship between perceived marginalization and doomscrolling. We also sought to replicate the previous observation that doomscrolling predicts worse well-being, extending past work on negative affect to life satisfaction. Moreover, this study tested whether this association is stronger for those higher in perceived marginalization (i.e., a moderated relationship). Lastly, we examined a novel hypothesis: whether doomscrolling moderates any relationship between marginalization and social connectedness. The preregistration for all hypotheses, along with our analysis plan, is publicly available (https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=62R_V1Z).

Method

Participants

Data were collected from an undergraduate participant pool for a university located in a large city in Canada. As we preregistered, we sought a minimum of 500 responses as correlation estimates tend to stabilize at samples of 250 or greater (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). When data collection ended, the total sample was 819 participants, all of whom received course credit for participation. We excluded participants following our preregistered criteria, removing those with duplicate identification numbers ($n = 14$), participants who did not consent at the beginning or end of the study ($n = 80$), anyone under 17 years old ($n = 1$), and those who failed two or more attention checks (out of three possible, $n = 47$; based on the Conscientious Responders Scale; Marjanovic et al., 2014). All remaining respondents met our final inclusion criterion of answering at least 85% of the questions. These procedures resulted in a final sample of 677 respondents ($M_{age} = 19.57$ years, $SD = 4.24$). The majority of the sample were women (72.2%), with the main cultural backgrounds represented being South Asian (21%), North American (15.2%), and Middle Eastern (14.2%). A substantial minority of participants self-identified as members of a sexual minority (16.4%; $n = 111$). No data analyses were conducted until all data were collected. All of our materials, data, and analysis code are publicly available on our OSF project (https://osf.io/7d3rj/; Blacha et al., 2024).

Measures

Perceived Marginalization

Although marginalized individuals can be identified based on group membership, doing so may reflect researcher biases and preconceptions, and fail to account for disenfranchized groups. We thus examined subjective, self-perceived marginalization: the degree to which participants see themselves as belonging to a marginalized group. For our purposes, any felt sense of marginalization should operate to heighten hypervigilance and motivate doomscrolling, regardless of whether we (or any other researchers) agree that this group is actually marginalized. To measure perceived marginalization, we first presented this detailed definition:

> Some individuals in society face disadvantages or receive harassment based on their identities (e.g., racial, cultural, sexual, and ability status). These individuals frequently encounter discrimination and social stigma, and are sometimes targeted by discriminatory laws.

Respondents were then asked, "Based on this definition, do you identify as one of these people?" A Likert-type response scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*strongly identify*), with 3 labeled as *moderately identify*.

Doomscrolling

To measure the degree to which participants engage in doomscrolling, we relied on the Doomscrolling Scale (Sharma et al., 2022). This 15-item self-report measure assesses the severity of doomscrolling behavior based on questions such as "I stay up late at night trying to find more negative news," and "I am terrified by what I see on social media but I cannot look away." Participants rate their agreement using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). This measure exhibits the expected correlations with social media addiction, generalized anxiety, and the need to engage with digital communications, and is unrelated to trait personality (i.e., openness, extraversion, agreeableness) and self-esteem (Sharma et al., 2022). In a previous sample, the internal reliability for this measure was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$; Sharma et al., 2022).

Hypervigilance

Hypervigilance was measured as a potential mediator of the association between marginalization and doomscrolling, using the Brief Hypervigilance Scale (Bernstein et al., 2015). This five-item scale entails items such as, "I feel that if I don't stay alert and watchful, something bad will happen," and "When I am outside, I think ahead about what I would do (or where I would go) if someone would try to surprise or harm me." Respondents indicate the degree to which these items are self-descriptive using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). As evidence of its construct validity, the scale correlates with symptoms of PTSD and it also has high internal reliability ($\alpha = .84$; Bernstein et al., 2015).

Life Satisfaction

To extend past research on the negative well-being outcomes of doomscrolling, we measured how content participants felt in their lives with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). This scale consists of five items (e.g., "The conditions of my life are excellent.") with agreement rated on a scale ranging from 1

(*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Scores on this scale are positively correlated with perceived social support and mindfulness (Haliwa et al., 2022), with the same study reporting high internal reliability ($\alpha = .86$).

Social Connectedness

Lastly, we examined a potential positive outcome of doomscrolling, a greater connection to one's social group, using the Social Connectedness Scale (van Bel et al., 2009). This measure probes the quality of a participant's social relationships (online and in-person) over the past 2 weeks of their life, based on 22 items (e.g., "I feel a lack of contact with people in my social network"). We altered the wording slightly for four items, changing "How satisfied are you with" to "I am satisfied with," allowing us to use an identical response scale across items. Agreement with these items is indicated using a scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Higher scores on this measure are associated with the use of mediated social touch technology in geographically separated couples (i.e., pairs of haptic bracelets capable of sending signals to one another; van Hattum et al., 2022). Internal reliability for this scale is high ($\alpha = .93$; van Hattum et al., 2022).

Demographics

Participants also completed a demographics questionnaire that included questions regarding age, gender, and sexual orientation.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

All analyses were conducted with R in RStudio (Version 4.3.0, Rstudio Team, 2022). Descriptives and zero-order correlations for all variables appear in Table 1, including internal reliability (omega). Most of the sample rated themselves as low in perceived marginalization, with about a third reporting that they do not feel marginalized at all. Slightly more than a third identified as marginalized to a moderate degree or higher (38.7%). As evidence of validity for our measure of marginalization, White participants rated themselves as lower in marginalization ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.16$) compared to those Black or South Asian (Black: $M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.5$, Cohen's $d = 1.56$, 95% CI [1.29, 1.84]; South Asian: $M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.23$, Cohen's $d = 1.72$, 95% CI [1.47, 1.97]). Women also identified more strongly as marginalized ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.34$) compared to men ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.17$; Cohen's $d = 1.79$, 95% CI [1.61, 1.98]). Lastly, gay and lesbian participants identified more strongly as marginalized ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.37$) compared to straight participants ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.27$; Cohen's $d = 1.75$, 95% CI [1.55, 1.94]). On average, participants reported low levels of doomscrolling, with the mean falling well below the neutral midpoint of 4 (Table 1).

Participants who engaged in more doomscrolling tended to report lower life satisfaction, and weaker social connectedness, confirming its harmful influence (Table 1). As predicted, participants higher in perceived marginalization reported greater doomscrolling. Also as expected, those who identify more as marginalized reported greater hypervigilance. Lastly, hypervigilance was positively associated with doomscrolling, and this was the strongest association observed.

Primary Analyses

The following primary analyses were all preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=62R_V1Z). Regression diagnostics were conducted for all models, influential outliers were removed when necessary (and as noted), and robust regression methods were adopted if necessary.

Relation Between Marginalization and Doomscrolling

We conducted a simple linear regression to examine the relationship between perceived marginalization and doomscrolling. After running regression diagnostics, no influential outliers were detected or removed. As predicted, identifying as marginalized was associated with a greater tendency to doomscroll ($\beta = .14$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.20], $p < .001$). In this model, perceived marginalization predicted ~2% of the variance in doomscrolling ($R^2 = .02$), $F(1.163, 675) = 13.04$, $p < .001$. These results support the hypothesis that greater identification with membership in a marginalized group predicts more doomscrolling.[2]

Mediation of Relation Between Marginalization and Doomscrolling by Hypervigiliance

A bootstrapped mediation analysis was conducted to test whether hypervigilance acted as a mediator of the relationship between perceived marginalization and doomscrolling (Figure 1). This analysis revealed that hypervigilance partially mediates the relationship between perceived marginalization and doomscrolling (Indirect = 0.07, 95% CI [0.04, 0.10], $p < .001$). About 60% of the direct effect between marginalization and doomscrolling is mediated by hypervigilance (95% CI [0.33, 0.83]). This finding supports our hypothesis that hypervigilance plays a role in the relationship between perceived marginalization and doomscrolling.

Moderation of the Relation Between Doomscrolling and Life Satisfaction by Marginalization

Linear regression was employed to examine whether marginalization moderates the association between doomscrolling and life satisfaction, with those who are more marginalized hypothesized to experience worse effects of doomscrolling. Although marginalization and doomscrolling both predicted worse life satisfaction, in this model the confidence interval for doomscrolling included zero and was not statistically significant (doomscrolling: $\beta = -.15$, 95% CI [−0.31, 0.05], $p = .11$; marginalization: $\beta = -.21$, 95% CI [−0.38, −0.04], $p = .02$). The hypothesized interaction was also not statistically significant, with no evidence in the data for a moderation effect ($\beta = .01$, 95% CI [−0.01, 0.11], $p = .69$). The model explained about 5% of the variance in life satisfaction ($R^2 = .05$), $F(3, 673) = 11.04$, $p < .001$. However, marginalization does not appear to moderate the relationship between doomscrolling and life satisfaction.

Moderation of the Relation Doomscrolling and Social Connectedness by Perceived Marginalization

A final linear regression model was constructed to examine whether greater marginalization moderates the relationship between

[2] All analyses were also run treating marginalization as an ordinal variable. The results and conclusions remained the same, and these supplemental analyses are publicly available (https://osf.io/7d3rj/).

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Table 1
Descriptives and Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	*M*	*SD*	ω [95% CI]	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	19.57	4.24		—				
2. Marginalization	2.37	1.32		−.3 [−0.11, 0.04]	—			
3. Doomscrolling	2.53	1.17	.93 [0.92, 0.94]	−.04 [−0.11, 0.04]	.14 [0.06, 0.21]	—		
4. Hypervigilance	2.65	0.94	.80 [0.78, 0.83]	−.10 [−0.17, −0.02]	.19 [0.11, 0.26]	.42 [0.35, 0.48]	—	
5. Life satisfaction	4.04	1.35	.85 [0.83, 0.87]	.08 [0.00, 0.15]	−.19 [−0.26, −0.12]	−.12 [−0.20, −0.05]	−.14 [−0.21, −0.06]	—
6. Social connectedness	4.44	0.82	.89 [0.87, 0.90]	−.03 [−0.11, 0.04]	−.03 [−0.10, 0.05]	−.15 [−0.22, −0.07]	−.06 [−0.13, 0.02]	.33 [0.26, 0.39]

Note. Means, standard deviations, and correlations with CIs. Values in square brackets are the 95% CI for each correlation. Direct replications produce values that fall within the 95% CI 83% of the time based on simulations (Cumming et al., 2004). CI = confidence interval.

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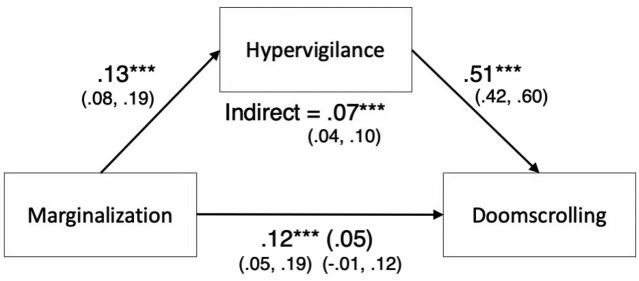
doomscrolling and social connectedness. Neither doomscrolling nor marginalization were strong predictors of social connectedness (doomscrolling: β = −.07, 95% CI [−0.21, 0.01], $p = .21$; marginalization: β = .02, 95% CI [−0.07, 0.15], $p = .65$). The predicted interaction between marginalization and doomscrolling was not observed, with no evidence of moderation present (β = −.01, 95% CI [−0.11, −0.03], $p = .54$). In this model, the two predictors explained roughly 2% of the variance in social connectedness ($R^2 = .02$), $F(3, 673) = 4.99$, $p = .002$.

Exploratory Analyses

The Social Connectedness Scale contains two subscales, based on factor analysis: (a) Sense of sharing and involvement (10 items, ω = .87, 95% CI [0.85, 0.88]), and (b) social appraisals (12 items, ω = .86, 95% CI [0.84, 0.88]; van Bel et al., 2009). The former is made up of items measuring a sense of intimacy and closeness with those in one's social network. In contrast, the social appraisal factor measures satisfaction with the size and quality of one's network. We thus conducted exploratory analyses examining how our variables relate to these two forms of social connectedness, which were not preregistered.

In zero-order correlations, sharing and involvement were not much associated with marginalization ($r = .02$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.09]), doomscrolling ($r = .00$, 95% CI [−0.08, 0.07]), nor hypervigilance ($r = .04$, 95% CI [−0.03, 0.12]). In contrast, social appraisal was negatively correlated with doomscrolling ($r = -.22$, 95% CI [−0.29, −0.14]) and hypervigilance ($r = -.12$, 95% CI [−0.19, −0.04]), and weakly negatively correlated with marginalization ($r = -.06$ 95% CI [−0.13, 0.02]). Both aspects of social connectedness were positively associated with life satisfaction, sharing and involvement: $r = .20$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.27]; social appraisals: $r = .33$, 95% CI [0.26, 0.40). Repeating our moderation analyses using these two aspects of social-connectedness, however, did not much change the results, with little evidence of moderation (see script on OSF). That said, the interaction term between doomscrolling and marginalization predicting sharing and involvement was negative and did not include zero (β = −.11, 95% CI [−0.15, −0.07], $p = .36$). Decomposing this interaction revealed that at low levels of marginalization, doomscrolling is a positive predictor of sharing and involvement, whereas at high levels of marginalization this association is negative.

Figure 1
Diagram of the Mediation Effect of Hypervigilance on Perceived Marginalization and Doomscrolling



Note. Direct effect after taking mediation into account is presented in parentheses.
*** $p < .001$.

Discussion

This preregistered study based on a large sample replicated previous findings that doomscrolling has a negative impact on mental health, extending past findings regarding affect and anxiety to demonstrate an association with life satisfaction. Our results are also in concord with previous studies reporting that specific minority groups tend to doomscroll more (i.e., sexual and gender minority women; Dyar et al., 2024), revealing a more wide-sweeping association between perceived marginalization writ large and doomscrolling. The fact that doomscrolling has a negative impact and is also more prevalent among marginalized groups makes understanding why it is that marginalized individuals doomscroll all the more paramount. To that end, we discovered that hypervigilance helps to explain this association. In fact, hypervigilance accounted for 60% of the total direct effect of marginalization on doomscrolling in our data. That said, associations between doomscrolling and life satisfaction, and doomscrolling and social connectedness, were not moderated by marginalization, counter to our predictions. Descriptive statistics revealed that our sample did not perceive themselves as high in marginalization on average, which is to be expected from a general sample of undergraduates. Thankfully, there was sufficient variability in marginalization scores to detect associations

with other measures, and no evidence of floor effects. Our sample also did not average high levels of doomscrolling, which may mean that it is not as prevalent among undergraduates as previously feared, or as previously reported during the height of the pandemic. Our sample also reported high life satisfaction and social connectedness, which is good news for those concerned about the mental health of young adults.

These findings build upon previous findings that members of certain marginalized groups are more likely to doomscroll compared to majority group members (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2021; Dyar et al., 2024; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2008). By identifying a mediator of this association in hypervigilance, our study sheds light on a mechanism behind this relationship. Although hypervigilance is known to accompany membership in a marginalized group (Riggle et al., 2023; Smith & Patton, 2016), it has never before been examined as a possible explanation for doomscrolling. Those who identify as part of groups that are marginalized in society, belong to communities that also tend to be stereotyped and sensationalized in the news. Troublingly, news organizations that choose to sensationalize discriminatory events in order to attract attention and increase profits, may bolster a marginalized individual's fear of discrimination. This fear can promote a vigilance toward discrimination that adversely impacts well-being (Frost & Meyer, 2023; Meyer, 2003). As a result, marginalized individuals should be informed of the ways in which news stories are selected and reported with the express purpose of evoking an emotional response. This awareness may enable marginalized individuals who doomscroll to identify how the chosen media is manipulating their sense of minority stress to keep them engaged. The connection between discrimination and hypervigilance offers a potential explanation for why members of marginalized groups are more likely to doomscroll compared to majority group members.

Although feeling more marginalized predicts a greater likelihood of doomscrolling, the negative effects of doomscrolling do not appear to be exacerbated by marginalization. We also found no evidence that doomscrolling helps marginalized individuals feel more connected to their social group. This finding runs counter to a previous finding that doomscrolling increases social connectedness by encouraging interpersonal interaction on social media (Wu-Ouyang & Hu, 2023). Our own data, in contrast, find that doomscrolling does not strengthen social connectedness, nor does this relationship differ based on the degree of perceived marginalization. This is perhaps a consequence of differences in methodology, as the previous group investigated doomscrolling specific to COVID-19 news. As a result, social media use and pandemic-related motivations for this use were somewhat confounded. It is possible that the previous researchers observed a relationship between doomscrolling and social connectedness because pandemic lockdowns stood as a barrier to face-to-face interactions, making internet use necessary to stay socially connected. Another consideration is that the experience of marginalization already has a negative correlation with social connectedness (Mason, 2021). In our preregistered analyses, we failed to replicate this negative association between marginalization and social connectedness. This may be because the measure of social connectedness we employed included two different aspects of social connectedness: (a) sharing and involvement, and (b) social appraisals. The latter incorporates some aspects of connection to the broader population, outside of one's identity group, and it did have a very weak negative association with marginalization in our exploratory analyses. The former aspect deals more with closeness to one's social network, and there was some weak evidence that marginalization moderates the association between doomscrolling and this form of social connectedness. However, the moderation was opposite to what we predicted, with those higher in marginalization reporting lower sharing and involvement the more they doomscrolled.

Overall, this study supports the idea that doomscrolling is a complex behavior that can have positive, negative, or null associations with various positive and negative outcomes. It is unclear whether any association is more important than any other, or that any of the negative consequences are so severe that habitual doomscrolling might be accurately described as an addiction. In fact, doomscrolling seems to serve particular goals and suit specific purposes, making it unlikely that it could be described as compulsive in most cases. Our study aligns with the idea that doomscrolling is a goal-directed behavior that may become habitual for certain users, including marginalized ones, without broad and severe negative consequences. This underscores the importance of avoiding addiction-related terminology when it does not apply, pathologizing relatively normal social media behaviors as a result (Anderson & Wood, 2021; Panova & Carbonell, 2018).

Several limitations of the study warrant further discussion. First, the study was correlational and therefore causality cannot be established for any of the observed associations. An alternative causal account to what we have proposed would entail doomscrolling causing hypervigilance, which in turn increases feelings of marginalization. Our data cannot rule out this possibility, as learning of threats to one's group on social media may result in heightened vigilance for further threats. However, it would not be ethical to construct a true experiment to address this limitation as doomscrolling is detrimental to mental health (Anand et al., 2022; Dyar et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2022). Proving causality is also complicated by the fact that marginalization is difficult to manipulate in an experiment. That said, there are some possible avenues for pursuing such work. Researchers could enlist a large number of confederates to ostracize a solitary participant and simulate marginalization. Although this method likely has limitations in terms of ecological validity, as it cannot capture the lifetime of damaging experiences faced by individuals who are members of actual marginalized groups. Another option could be to make marginalized identities either more or less salient through experimental primes. But once again the efficacy of such an approach may prove challenging as it can be difficult to ignore marginalized aspects of one's identity. In terms of causal direction, it is not likely that either doomscrolling or hypervigilance causes people to identify as members of a marginalized group, at least.

Our study also relied upon a student sample, which means that these results may not generalize to other populations. In terms of marginalization, our participants are less likely to experience some forms of discrimination, and perhaps more likely to experience other forms. For example, our participants are unlikely to be experiencing profound poverty or insecure housing. However, the student population at our university is also remarkably diverse in terms of ethnicity, religious beliefs, and gender identity. We observed quite a lot of variability in our measure of self-perceived marginalization, so restriction of range does not appear to be an issue for our analyses.

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Another limitation is that our study did not ask about the platforms or news sources used by participants. Previous research indicates that there may be small differences in doomscrolling behavior and outcomes based on the format of the news media employed (Buchanan et al., 2021). Incorporating news format or social media platform into a future study may help to detect subtle associations and strengthen observed associations. We also did not ask participants which news topics are involved in their doomscrolling. Beyond the assumption that participants face similar outcomes regardless of doomscrolling topic, we also assumed that marginalized individuals would doomscroll about their community (consistent with past research, Dobransky & Hargittai, 2021; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2008). Although the mediation result for hypervigilance indicates that this is likely the case, we cannot directly verify this assumption in our data. Our decision to measure doomscrolling in general, rather than doomscrolling for news regarding one's identity group(s), may have introduced measurement errors that would have attenuated our associations. A measure that takes the content being doomscrolled into consideration may therefore reveal stronger correlations. In addition, we did not experimentally manipulate the mediator, which would be necessary in order to make strong claims of mediation. Lastly, as our sample mostly consisted of women, our findings may not generalize to males or male-dominated populations. That said, our data set included contributions from over 165 males.

One direction for future research is introducing a qualitative approach. Individuals who perceive themselves to be marginalized could be asked open-ended questions about their doomscrolling experiences. This would help to provide information on the content of their doomscrolling: particularly the news topics and sources that prove problematic for these individuals. Another approach might be an observational study of doomscrolling behavior in a naturalistic setting, paired with survey questions probing motivations and experiences. Additional studies could identify sources of hypervigilance for marginalized individuals, laying the groundwork for possible interventions to reduce doomscrolling. Because hypervigiliance explained around 60% of the association between marginalization and doomscrolling, other potential mediators of this association should be explored, such as anxiety and/or trait neuroticism. As mentioned in our limitations, future research could also investigate whether doomscrolling is a problem across social media platforms. Future research may address whether doomscrolling's potential positive impact applies only to in-group social connectedness of marginalized individuals, rather than social connectedness in a general sense. One could also contrast social media doomscrolling with the consumption of more traditional media, such as 24-hr television news. Such work would help to clarify the role that algorithmic sorting plays in the feedback loop of doomscrolling.

In conclusion, our study reveals that greater perceived marginalization predicts a tendency to engage more in doomscrolling, that doomscrolling is associated with less life satisfaction, and that hypervigilance helps to explain why marginalization predicts doomscrolling. At the same time, doomscrolling does not appear to impact the life satisfaction or social connectedness of marginalized individuals in a manner distinct from the general population. Our work sheds light on an important and harmful, but little studied, modern phenomenon, and provides a foundation for future research and possible interventions to help marginalized individuals who doomscroll.

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