

The relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety among tiktok-using university students

*Ajeng Dwi Luthfi'ah¹, Onny Fransinata Anggara²

^{1,2}Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author

E-mail: ajengdwi.23018@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Received:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
25 June 2026	02 July 2026	20 July 2026	01 October 2026

How to cite (APA 7th style): Luthfi'ah, A. D., Anggara, O. F. (2026). The relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety among tiktok-using university students. *Proyeksi Jurnal Psikologi*, 21(2), 255-268. <https://dx.doi.org/10.30659/jp.21.2.255-268>

Abstract

The rapid growth of TikTok has increased users' exposure to algorithmically personalized digital content, including repeated encounters with negative information that may foster doomscrolling behavior. This study investigated the relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok. A quantitative study employing a cross-sectional correlational design was conducted with 200 undergraduate students recruited through purposive sampling. Data were obtained using the Social Media Doomscrolling Scale and the Academic Anxiety Scale. Descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank correlation were applied because the doomscrolling variable did not satisfy the normality assumption. The findings demonstrated a statistically significant positive but weak association between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety ($\rho = 0.301$, $p < .001$), indicating that students with greater doomscrolling intensity tended to report higher levels of academic anxiety. The relatively weak association suggests that doomscrolling constitutes one of several factors associated with academic anxiety rather than its sole explanation. Furthermore, these findings extend existing evidence on the psychological consequences of doomscrolling by identifying its association with academic anxiety in the context of TikTok use among university students. From a practical perspective, the results underscore the importance of encouraging healthy social media practices and strengthening self-regulation strategies to support university students' psychological well-being and academic functioning.

Keywords: academic anxiety; doomscrolling; social media; TikTok; university students

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has transformed the way people obtain information, communicate, and access entertainment in their daily lives. One platform experiencing rapid growth is TikTok, which has a very broad user base in Indonesia. Data from Kemp (2025) indicates that TikTok had approximately 108 million users aged 18 and older in Indonesia as of early 2025, based on advertising audience data. TikTok also plays a significant role in how individuals access, share, and utilize information (O'Brien et al., 2025).

The high intensity of TikTok usage is supported by an algorithm-based recommendation



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system that personalizes content according to users' preferences and interaction history. This personalization algorithm reinforces content recommendations that align with user preferences, thereby increasing repeated exposure to similar content (Baumann et al., 2026). This mechanism allows users to continuously receive information relevant to their preferences, thereby increasing their exposure to similar types of content. At the same time, continuous exposure to content also increases the likelihood that users will repeatedly receive information with negative undertones. Such repeated exposure to negative content can encourage individuals to continue scrolling through and consuming negative information on social media—a behavior known as doomscrolling.

Doomscrolling is the tendency of individuals to continuously scroll through or repeatedly consume negative information or news, even though such information evokes unpleasant emotions, such as sadness, fear, or anxiety (Wafa et al., 2024). This behavior generally arises as a response to feelings of uncertainty, which drives individuals to continuously check digital media to gain clarity about the situation they are facing (Dixit & Ashutosh, 2025). This condition can develop into a cycle that leads individuals to be exposed to negative information through social media with increasing frequency.

Cognitive Load Theory, developed by Sweller (1988), emphasizes the limited capacity of cognitive processing during learning and problem solving. Based on theoretical considerations, computational modelling, and experimental findings, Sweller (1988) contended that means-ends analysis, commonly used in conventional problem solving, can place significant demands on cognitive resources, thereby limiting the capacity available for schema acquisition. Sweller (2020) highlighted two key constraints of working memory: its restricted capacity and the limited time for which novel information can be maintained. Brockbank et al. (2026) provided preliminary empirical evidence that maladaptive affect may contribute to extraneous cognitive load in learning contexts. They also discussed how working-memory overload may impair schema construction, while emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and overwhelm may consume working memory resources and interfere with task-relevant processing. In addition, Pang et al. (2024) reported that information overload on social media was positively associated with social media exhaustion and academic anxiety among international university students. From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory, these findings provide a basis for considering whether repeated exposure to large amounts of negative information through doomscrolling may involve greater cognitive and emotional demands relevant to academic functioning. Consequently, Cognitive Load Theory provides a theoretical perspective for examining the relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok.

Academic anxiety is a form of anxiety that arises specifically in an educational context and differs from general anxiety in that it is related to various academic demands, such as exams, assignments, and presentations (Idoiaga-Mondragon et al., 2025). Finch et al. (2024) define academic anxiety as a negative emotional response experienced by students when facing academic stressors that are perceived to exceed their capabilities. High levels of academic

anxiety can disrupt the learning process, impair attention and memory (Li et al., 2025), and increase the risk of academic procrastination, low self-confidence, and various mental health issues (Syahda et al., 2025). Various studies indicate that academic anxiety is influenced by a range of factors, including both individual characteristics and the academic environment (Finch et al., 2024).

Previous studies have shown that doomscrolling is linked to a range of psychological consequences among young adults. A systematic review conducted by Iqbal & Iqbal (2026) shows that this behavior is consistently linked to increased anxiety, depression, psychological distress, sleep disturbances, and a decline in subjective well-being. The results are consistent with a study by Satıcı et al. (2022), which showed that individuals who engage in doomscrolling more frequently tend to experience psychological distress, which in turn is linked to lower mental well-being, life satisfaction, and harmony in life.

The impact of this behavior is not limited to general psychological well-being but also has the potential to affect psychological conditions related to academic demands. Cahya & Khoirunnisa (2026) reported that doomscrolling not only affects emotional well-being but also impacts students' academic behavior. These findings are supported by research by Sa'idah & Aryani (2025), which shows that the higher the frequency of doomscrolling, the higher the levels of anxiety and sleep disturbances, and the lower the concentration while studying. In line with these findings, Usman et al. (2025) also reported that doomscrolling has a significant negative impact on students' mental well-being, as evidenced by increased anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and sleep disturbances among students. In general, various previous studies have consistently indicated that doomscrolling is associated with a range of negative psychological consequences and may be linked to aspects of psychological functioning in an academic context.

Although an increasing number of studies have shown a link between doomscrolling and various psychological effects, empirical evidence specifically addressing its relationship with academic anxiety remains relatively limited, particularly among university students who use TikTok. Most previous studies have focused more on general anxiety, psychological distress, or overall mental well-being, while the relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety has not been extensively examined. These findings indicate a need for further research to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety in an educational context.

Unlike many social media platforms, TikTok primarily distributes content through algorithmic recommendation systems rather than users' social networks or followed accounts (Boeker & Urman, 2022). The algorithm personalizes content by continuously analyzing users' behavioral signals, such as watch time, likes, comments, and other interaction patterns. As a result, users are repeatedly exposed to similar types of content through a continuously personalized stream of short videos, allowing the recommendation algorithm to rapidly refine subsequent content (Boeker & Urman, 2022). These algorithmic characteristics may facilitate repeated exposure to similar content, including negative information, making TikTok a particularly relevant platform for examining doomscrolling behavior. This argument is supported

by Muhimmah (2026), who found that higher doomscrolling intensity among university students who use TikTok was associated with higher levels of anxiety.

The study focused on academic anxiety as the outcome variable because this form of anxiety is specific to the academic domain and conceptually distinct from general anxiety. Cassady et al. (2019) describe academic anxiety as a broad construct encompassing anxiety arising from various academic activities and demands, rather than being limited solely to evaluative situations such as examinations. Although academic anxiety is conceptually related to general anxiety, it specifically reflects emotional responses to academic contexts and therefore constitutes a more context-specific psychological construct. Accordingly, examining academic anxiety as a distinct construct may provide a more specific understanding of the relationship between doomscrolling intensity and anxiety experienced in academic settings.

Thus, the novelty of the present study is reflected in its focus on the relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety, a psychological outcome specific to the academic context that has received limited empirical attention in doomscrolling research. Unlike previous studies, which have largely focused on general anxiety, psychological distress, and overall mental well-being, this study expands on existing research by examining academic anxiety as a distinct psychological outcome among university students who use TikTok. Therefore, this study offers a more focused understanding of the relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety within an academic context.

Based on the above discussion, the hypothesis of this study is that there is a positive relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok. The higher the doomscrolling intensity, the higher the level of academic anxiety experienced by university students.

RESEARCH METHOD

A quantitative approach was adopted for this study, with a cross-sectional correlational design used to investigate the association between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok. In this study, doomscrolling intensity served as the independent variable, whereas academic anxiety was treated as the dependent variable. Data were obtained from an online questionnaire during a single data collection period.

The study participants consisted of 200 active students from the Class of 2024 in Faculty X at University Y who were TikTok users. An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power version 3.1.9.7. The analysis was used to determine the minimum sample size required for the study. Assuming a two-tailed significance level of .05, statistical power of .80, and an expected medium effect size ($p = .30$), the analysis indicated a minimum sample size of 84 participants. Therefore, the final sample of 200 participants exceeded the minimum required sample size and was considered adequate for the correlation analysis. Faculty X was selected because it represented the target population of the study and provided access to participants who met the predetermined inclusion criteria. The sampling technique used was purposive

sampling, with the following participant criteria: (1) students from Faculty X, Class of 2024, at University Y, and (2) TikTok users. Data collection was conducted online via Google Forms.

This study used two research instruments. The first instrument was the Social Media Doomscrolling Scale developed by Shabahang et al. (2022). This study used the Indonesian-adapted version of the instrument (Firmansyah & Ardelia, 2026). The scale assesses doomscrolling in the broader context of social media use rather than being specific to a particular social media platform. Therefore, the items were retained in their adapted form without platform-specific modification. To examine the suitability of the scale for the target population, the instrument was pilot-tested on 31 respondents with characteristics similar to those of the target population, including TikTok use. The instrument consists of eight items measured using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree).

The second instrument was the Academic Anxiety Scale developed by Cassady et al. (2019). For this study, the instrument was translated into Indonesian by the researcher. The translated version was subsequently reviewed through an expert judgment process and revised based on the feedback received. After the revision process, the instrument was pilot-tested on 31 respondents with characteristics similar to the target population to examine its validity and internal consistency. The final instrument consists of 11 items measured using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all typical of me) to 4 (Very typical of me).

Pilot testing confirmed that all items in both instruments met the predetermined item validity criteria. The item-total correlation coefficients for the Social Media Doomscrolling Scale ranged from 0.318 to 0.797, whereas those for the Academic Anxiety Scale ranged from 0.496 to 0.801. In addition, the Social Media Doomscrolling Scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.867$), as did the Academic Anxiety Scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.883$). These findings indicate that both instruments demonstrated adequate validity and internal consistency for use in the present study.

JASP version 0.19.3.0 was used for statistical analysis. Participant characteristics and score distributions for each variable were summarized using descriptive statistics. Doomscrolling scores were categorized into three levels (low, moderate, and high) using empirical norms based on the mean and standard deviation of the study sample, following Azwar (2012). The cut-off criteria were defined as low ($X < M - 1 \text{ SD}$), moderate ($M - 1 \text{ SD} \leq X < M + 1 \text{ SD}$), and high ($X \geq M + 1 \text{ SD}$). Based on the sample mean ($M = 19.600$) and standard deviation ($SD = 7.871$), the resulting cut-off values were 11.729 and 27.471. Because the total scores were integer values, these cut-offs corresponded to score ranges of 8 – 11 for low, 12 – 27 for moderate, and 28 – 48 for high doomscrolling intensity. Academic anxiety scores were categorized into four categories (not anxious, mild academic anxiety, moderate academic anxiety, and high academic anxiety) based on the cut scores identified by Finch et al. (2024) for the Academic Anxiety Scale. The categories were defined as follows: not anxious (11 – 14), mild academic anxiety (15 – 20), moderate academic anxiety (21 – 29), and high academic anxiety (30 – 44). Normality tests were conducted using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Since one of the variables did not meet the assumption of normality ($p < 0.05$), hypothesis testing was performed using Spearman's rank correlation

(Spearman’s rho) with a significance level of 0.05.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Characteristics of Participants

The participants’ characteristics are presented to provide an overview of the distribution of participants by gender, age, and average daily TikTok usage.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants (N=200)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	43	21.5
	Female	157	78.5
Age	18 years	2	1.0
	19 years	50	25.0
	20 years	106	53.0
	21 years	38	19.0
	22 years	4	2.0
Average TikTok use/day	< 1 hour	18	9.0
	1 – 3 hours	79	39.5
	3 – 5 hours	71	35.5
	> 5 hours	32	16.0

The sample consisted predominantly of female participants, as shown in Table 1, and was mainly comprised of 20-year-old students. Most participants reported using TikTok for between one and three hours per day.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics provided an overview of the distribution of doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety scores among the participants.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Doomscrolling	200	19.600	7.871	8.000	48.000
Academic Anxiety	200	26.210	6.606	11.000	44.000

Descriptive statistics for the research variables, including the mean, standard deviation, and score range for doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety, are shown in Table 2.

Distribution of Doomscrolling Categories

Table 3. Distribution of Doomscrolling Categories

Doomscrolling Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	32	16.0
Moderate	141	70.5
High	27	13.5
Total	200	100.0

As presented in Table 3, most participants were classified as having a moderate level of doomscrolling intensity, whereas relatively few participants fell into the low or high categories.

Distribution of Academic Anxiety Categories

Table 4. Distribution of Academic Anxiety Categories

Academic Anxiety Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Not Anxious	9	4.5
Mild Academic Anxiety	33	16.5
Moderate Academic Anxiety	91	45.5
High Academic Anxiety	67	33.5
Total	200	100.0

Most participants experienced moderate academic anxiety, as shown in Table 4, followed by those in the high category. Only a small proportion of participants reported no academic anxiety.

Normality Test

Prior to hypothesis testing, the data were subjected to a normality test to determine the appropriate statistical method.

Table 5. Normality Test Result

Variable	Shapiro-Wilk (W)	p	Distribution
Doomscrolling	0.951	< .001	Non-normal
Academic Anxiety	0.992	0.296	Normal

The Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that doomscrolling scores were not normally distributed, whereas academic anxiety scores met the assumption of normality (Table 5). Therefore, Spearman's rank correlation was used for hypothesis testing.

Spearman's Rank Correlation

The relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety was analyzed using Spearman's rank correlation.

Table 6. Spearman’s Rank Correlation between Doomscrolling Intensity and Academic Anxiety

Variables	Spearman’s rho (ρ)	p	N
Doomscrolling – Academic Anxiety	0.301	< .001	200

The analysis showed a statistically significant positive relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok (Table 6). Although the relationship was weak, the findings suggest that students with higher doomscrolling intensity tended to report higher levels of academic anxiety. Thus, the research hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

The present study found a significant positive relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok ($\rho = 0.301$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that students with higher doomscrolling intensity tended to report higher levels of academic anxiety. However, the relatively weak correlation coefficient indicates that the relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety is modest. In the context of university students, repeated exposure to negative information through doomscrolling may be associated with additional psychological burden when students simultaneously face academic demands, such as exams, assignments, and expectations regarding academic performance. Therefore, the relationship observed in the present study should be understood within the broader context of students' academic experiences, in which multiple psychological, academic, and environmental factors may interact in relation to academic anxiety.

The relatively weak association observed in the present study may reflect the multidimensional nature of academic anxiety. Previous studies have shown that academic anxiety is associated with various internal and external factors beyond doomscrolling. Findings by Julianti et al. (2025) indicate that academic anxiety is associated with internal factors such as self-efficacy, as well as external factors including academic interactions, family pressure, social support, and the learning environment. In addition, Mutolib et al. (2026) reported that academic workload is associated with academic anxiety, while Ghattas & El-Ashry (2024) showed that maladaptive emotion regulation strategies are also associated with academic anxiety. Therefore, the present findings suggest that doomscrolling should be understood as one of several factors associated with academic anxiety rather than its sole explanation. Consequently, interventions aimed at reducing academic anxiety should not focus solely on limiting doomscrolling behavior but should also address other psychological and academic factors associated with academic anxiety, such as academic workload, self-efficacy, emotion regulation, and social support.

The positive relationship observed in the present study can be considered from the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988). Rather than establishing a causal mechanism, this theoretical perspective provides one possible framework for interpreting the

observed association. Ahluwalia (2025) found that individuals with higher frequencies of doomscrolling tended to experience greater information overload, depletion of cognitive resources, mental fatigue, and poorer working memory performance, indicating disruptions in cognitive functioning following prolonged exposure to negative online information. These findings provide a possible context for considering whether higher doomscrolling intensity may be associated with greater cognitive demands; however, the present study did not directly assess cognitive load or establish that doomscrolling depletes cognitive resources. Sharma et al. (2022) also suggested that doomscrolling is driven by individuals' tendency to repeatedly seek negative information in response to uncertainty and anxiety. Furthermore, Sharpe et al. (2025) reported that doomscrolling is associated with maladaptive cognitive processes, including rumination and difficulties in emotion regulation, which may prolong negative emotional states. Taken together, these findings offer a theoretical interpretation of the positive association observed in the present study. Given the relatively weak correlation, doomscrolling is best understood as one of several factors associated with academic anxiety rather than as a primary explanatory factor.

Among the participants, daily TikTok use of 1–3 hours was the most commonly reported. This indicates that the platform has become part of students' daily digital activities. Through continued use, users may receive personalized content recommendations shaped by their previous interactions with the platform, resulting in repeated exposure to similar content (Wicaksono et al., 2024). This repeated exposure may facilitate doomscrolling behavior. The duration of TikTok use observed in this study therefore provides additional context for understanding doomscrolling behavior among university students who use the platform.

The current findings are consistent with previous research reporting a positive association between doomscrolling and anxiety (Wafa et al., 2024; Soraci et al., 2025). Ang (2025) further reported that greater engagement in doomscrolling was associated with higher psychological distress, including increased anxiety symptoms. However, unlike previous studies that primarily focused on general anxiety or psychological distress, the present study suggests that a similar association is also evident for academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok. These findings suggest that the psychological consequences of doomscrolling may not be limited to general emotional well-being but may also be relevant to anxiety experienced within academic contexts.

The descriptive analysis showed that moderate doomscrolling intensity was the most common category among the participants (70.5%). Academic anxiety was also most frequently reported at moderate (45.5%) and high (33.5%) levels. High doomscrolling intensity was reported by only a small proportion of participants. Most participants were instead classified in the moderate category, showing that this level was predominant in the sample. A considerable proportion of participants also reported moderate or high levels of academic anxiety. This finding suggests that academic-related anxiety warrants attention among university students. The descriptive results further indicate that both doomscrolling and academic anxiety were present at notable levels among university students who use TikTok. The findings therefore

support the view that doomscrolling may represent one of several factors associated with academic anxiety rather than a sole explanation for it.

The present findings suggest that doomscrolling is one of the factors associated with academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok. They also extend previous research by indicating that the link between doomscrolling and anxiety can be considered in relation to students' academic anxiety. From a practical perspective, these findings point to the value of promoting healthier social media use alongside existing mental health initiatives in higher education. Universities may consider psychoeducational programs that address digital well-being, emotional regulation, and self-regulation in social media use. Such programs could help students recognize and manage excessive doomscrolling while supporting healthier digital habits. In turn, these efforts may contribute to students' psychological well-being and their capacity to manage academic demands, potentially addressing one of the factors associated with academic anxiety.

Several limitations need to be considered when understanding these findings. The cross-sectional design captures the association between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety at a single point in time. Therefore, the findings do not establish a causal relationship between the two variables. The sample also came from a single university and was recruited using purposive sampling. This sampling approach may restrict the extent to which these findings can be generalized to students from different universities, geographic locations, and demographic backgrounds. Another consideration concerns the gender composition of the sample. Female participants accounted for 78.5% of the respondents, resulting in an imbalanced distribution. This condition may introduce potential sampling bias and warrants caution when interpreting the findings across genders. Future research could use longitudinal designs to examine how doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety relate to each other over time. Longitudinal data would also allow researchers to examine the temporal sequence between changes in doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety more closely. Recruiting participants from multiple universities and obtaining a more balanced gender distribution may further improve the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could also examine other psychological and contextual factors, such as self-efficacy, academic workload, social support, emotion regulation, and digital well-being, to broaden the understanding of factors associated with academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok.

CONCLUSION

The present study found a significant positive relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety among university students who use TikTok. Although the association was relatively weak, students with greater doomscrolling intensity generally reported higher levels of academic anxiety. These results suggest that doomscrolling should be understood as one of several factors associated with academic anxiety rather than its sole determinant. In this regard, the findings provide a more context-specific understanding of doomscrolling in relation to academic anxiety among university students and add to the existing body of literature on this

topic.

The findings also have practical implications for promoting healthier patterns of social media use alongside existing mental health initiatives in higher education. Universities may consider implementing psychoeducational programs that promote digital well-being, emotional regulation, and self-regulation in social media use to help students recognize and manage excessive doomscrolling behavior. Such efforts may promote healthier digital habits and support students in maintaining psychological well-being and managing academic demands, thereby addressing one of the factors associated with academic anxiety. Future studies are encouraged to adopt longitudinal or experimental designs, recruit participants from more diverse educational settings, and investigate additional psychological and contextual variables to clarify further the temporal relationship between doomscrolling intensity and academic anxiety, as well as to broaden the understanding of factors associated with academic anxiety among university students.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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