

Seeking out Worrying Information: How and Why Individuals Engage with an Online “Doomer” Community

by

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Abstract

Doomscrolling — excessively scrolling through or reading about worrying news on the Internet — has become a modern phenomenon. Of the many online spaces for doomscrolling content, the r/collapse subreddit (on the popular Reddit website) is one of the largest and has grown significantly in recent years. This subreddit also has an associated server on Discord (a text and voice-based chat platform), which together make up the r/collapse community. To investigate why individuals engage with the community, I conducted a qualitative interview study of fifteen users from the subreddit and the Discord server, including moderators of both spaces. Drawing from a thematic analysis of these interviews, I show that there is more beneath the reductive term “doomscrolling”. What I observed from interviewed participants may be better described as “active” doomscrolling, which I saw as consisting of two parts: (i) actively seeking information perceived to be reliable and even actionable, and (ii) actively seeking emotional validation and support through that information seeking. I found that individuals in the community were fundamentally engaging in intentional information seeking and collective sensemaking. I also found that the Collapse Discord serves as a more cohesive and resilient partition of the r/collapse subreddit, while remaining aligned with the broader community’s sensemaking of information. I suggest that such cross-platform partitioning is a natural result of individuals trying to navigate an increasingly complex and ever-expanding information landscape.

Keywords: doomscrolling; doomer; information seeking; online communities; Reddit; Discord; Collapse; climate change

Dedication

To my friends and family.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In his touchstone 2021 Netflix special *Inside*, comedian Bo Burnham sings about “that funny feeling” — a commentary on the absurdities, ironies, and doom of the Information Age [8]. In recent years, this feeling seems to have only gotten “funnier” as we have seen extreme climate events, a pandemic, rising political polarization, war in Eastern Europe, and the advent of generative artificial intelligence.

Against this backdrop, “doomscrolling” has emerged as a modern phenomenon. The word has quickly entered into the mainstream lexicon, defined by the Cambridge dictionary as the activity of spending “a lot of time looking at one’s phone or computer reading bad or negative news stories” [18]. Doomscrolling can be done across a number of social media platforms [6] including Reddit, a widely popular online content aggregator and forum. Reddit consists of a large number of online communities known as “subreddits”, and a number of so-called “doomer” subreddits — containing content that is pessimistic or fatalistic about global problems — have gained popularity in recent years. One of the largest of these is the r/collapse subreddit, which has been characterized as the “doomscrolling capital of the Internet” [46]. The subreddit also has an associated space on Discord — a text and voiced-based chat platform — referred to as the Collapse Discord.

Recent work has looked into the emotional effects of doomscrolling after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic [56, 6, 48], as well as corresponding feelings of information fatigue [7, 22] and strategies for information avoidance [30, 40, 66]. However, besides focusing on pandemic-specific information, these have largely treated doomscrolling as an individual experience. Prior work on the motivations behind information seeking also leave the “why” of doomscrolling unclear. The literature suggests that seeking out information that is not immediately or practically relevant is driven by a cognitive motivation to reduce uncertainty about the world around us [61, 47, 53]. However, there is also ample work that highlights the emotional consequences of seeking out negative information [62, 6, 65]. Indeed, there exists a tension between the drive to seek out information about the world around us, and the potentially negative emotional effects of that information seeking. With this work, I aimed to gain an understanding of doomscrolling by focusing on it as a collective experience emergent

from the interactions afforded by Reddit and Discord. Why do individuals engage with the r/collapse community? What results from this — individually and collectively?

To answer these questions, I conducted a qualitative study of the r/collapse community, consisting of both the r/collapse subreddit and its corresponding Discord server. Over a period of three months, I interviewed users of the r/collapse subreddit, users of the Discord server, and moderators of both spaces. Through a thematic analysis of these interviews and a discussion of my findings, I make three main contributions in this work. I first unpack the term “doomscrolling”, finding it to be overly reductive in describing the intentional information seeking and collective sensemaking that I found on both the subreddit and the Discord. Second, I suggest that the Collapse Discord serves as a more specialized and resilient partition of the broader r/collapse community, but one that is still embedded within its information landscape. Finally, my findings extend recent computer-supported cooperative work literature that has examined how Reddit communities are similarly embedded [25, 60, 29]. Through my work, I find that individuals are fundamentally trying to make sense of an increasingly complex and overwhelming information landscape, and that this goes beyond mere “doomscrolling”.

Chapter 2

Related Work

Recent work has looked at (i) information seeking, (ii) doomscrolling, and (iii) Reddit communities, all of which are foundational for my study. I first review related work on information seeking, presenting research which provides insight on why we might seek out negative tangential information, while highlighting the tension that seems to exist between those motivations. Focusing on this tension, I next examine recent research specifically on the phenomenon of doomscrolling, which has largely been centered around the COVID-19 pandemic and on individuals. Lastly, I look at research on Reddit communities in order to gain insight on the nature of doomscrolling within online communities. My work seeks to address some of these tensions and gaps through my investigation of a doomscrolling community.

2.1 Information Seeking

One prominent aspect of doomscrolling on r/collapse is that of the inherent human drive to seek information. The desire to understand the unknown and seek out information is a fundamental part of the human condition. Curiosity has long been a central characteristic of human beings as with many non-human animals, and is closely related to both exploration and play. As Berlyne writes in his seminal work on curiosity and exploration [3], it would often appear that animals seek out certain behaviours for their own sake, even when these behaviours would seem counterproductive to more immediate concerns. Berlyne notes that a bird may approach a potentially threatening object at the risk of its life, while humans were reported to have played the lyre while Rome burned. Curiosity (and play) are powerful mechanisms, even when it could kill the cat.

Related to this, it is not obvious why we seek out information that is of no apparent immediate practical use to us. This is what van Lieshout et al. [61] refer to as “non-instrumental” information, and they argue that humans have an innate curiosity for this kind of information. According to van Lieshout et al., this non-instrumental curiosity is broadly driven by two primary goals — to (i) reduce uncertainty about the world around

us, and (ii) to acquire information which makes us feel good. Both the pandemic, and recent extreme climate events, present good case studies of uncertain and unsettling events for which there is a glut of negative information. Pikhala [47] outlines the complex and multifaceted nature of “eco-anxiety”, a term that encompasses anxiety around climate change. While eco-anxiety has many dimensions, Pikhala notes that one important dimension is that of “practical anxiety”, a term that Kurth [34] uses to refer to anxiety that can drive information-seeking and problem-solving. But such information seeking and acquisition can have negative emotional consequences. Whitmarsh et al. [62] found higher climate anxiety among those with more information-seeking behaviour around climate change. Meanwhile, Buchanan et al. [6] have found that exposure to peripheral COVID-19 information, through both social media feeds and videos, can have negative emotional consequences.

Sharot and Sunstein [53] have developed an information seeking framework which can provide more insight into the nature of non-instrumental information seeking. They provide a three-motive model of information seeking, in which information seeking is driven by practical, affective, and cognitive motivations. According to this model, the cognitive value of information could be a motive that leads us to seek out negative news for which there is no apparent practical or affective value. This framework was further examined in a follow-up study by Kelly and Sharot [31], who found that differences in the individual weightings of the three motives were associated with differences in information-seeking decisions. Differences in these motivation weights were found to have some relation to differences in general mental health, and a stronger cognitive motive for information seeking was associated with better mental health. But this is in tension with findings by Yang and Kahlor [65], who found that information seeking about climate change was associated with negative affect, and that positive affect was in fact associated with avoidance of climate change information.

While there are some suggestions as to why we seek out negative information — to reduce uncertainty about the world around us and to satisfy a cognitive need — the picture remains unclear. What also remains is the apparent tension between this drive to seek out information, and the emotional effects of that information seeking. Looking at negative information seeking through the phenomenon of doomscrolling could shed more light on this.

2.2 Doomscrolling

The term “doomscrolling” became popularized with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effects of — and responses to — information consumption during the pandemic has been the focus of recent work. Much of this work has looked at information consumption across different media. A systematic review of existing studies [56] found that increased consumption of COVID-19 news across different sources was associated with a decline in mental health among young adults in a number of different countries. A related

study on pandemic related news consumption among sexual and gender minorities [21] also looked at news sources more generally.

Studies suggest that a surge in cross-media COVID-19 news consumption during the initial outbreak of the pandemic was followed by information fatigue and avoidance [30, 7, 66, 22, 40]. Mannell and Meese [40] found that news avoidance during the pandemic had positive impacts on the well-being of Australian adults. Ytre-Arne and Moe [66] observed that Norwegians employed medium-based avoidance, which included limiting smartphone use and notifications. A survey of individuals in the United Kingdom [30] suggested that more people actively avoided news from sources that required more intentional exposure (i.e., television, news websites), than news from sources where exposure was more incidental (i.e., social media, messaging apps).

Some work has focused specifically on the consumption of news on social media. In an experimental study, Buchanan et al. [6] found negative emotional effects of even brief exposure to COVID-19 information on social media. An observational study by Price et al. [48] found an association between consumption of news on social media during the pandemic with elevated depression and PTSD symptoms, especially among those with existing psychological vulnerabilities. Notably, this association was not found for news consumption through traditional media sources.

One important way in which news consumed on social media differs from traditional media is the interactivity afforded by social media platforms. Recent work has shown that comments to news articles on social media feeds can colour readers' perceptions of those articles [4, 63]. People have also been found to over-infer public support for their own beliefs when reading posts that align with their views [38]. However, despite the fact that group comments can influence individual opinion-making, prior research has yet to examine doomscrolling as a collective activity.

In addition, while existing work has touched on other sources of negative news consumption [48, 40], there has not been a focus on doomscrolling content beyond the pandemic. This presents a gap, in view of declining concerns over the pandemic while climate anxiety continues to increase considerably, especially among younger generations [24]. Indeed, Clayton [13] has argued that climate change has become a psychological issue in its own right. A broader view of doomscrolling should therefore be taken, both with respect to content and to medium. For this, I turn to existing work on Reddit communities.

2.3 Reddit Communities

The variety and complexity associated with the term “online community” has been noted by Hwang and Foote [25], and is important to acknowledge. Here, as in other previous work, “online community” denotes exclusively online communities that do not have a substantial offline component. Reddit has grown into a central forum for such communities, and accord-

ingly has been the subject of extensive research in the field of computer-supported cooperative work [20, 54, 16, 25, 60, 29]. The increasing influence of Reddit has been underscored by recent sociopolitical phenomena spurred on by Reddit communities — r/wallstreetbets and the 2021 GME short squeeze [36], r/The_Donald and Trumpism [41], and r/antiwork and the broader anti-work movement [44].

Existing work has looked into what Reddit communities provide, and why people participate in them. Some communities provide important spaces for marginalized groups to assert and navigate their intersectional identities [20, 42]. Others are dedicated to mental health, giving individuals the anonymity to disclose sensitive information and providing some degree of social support [16]. Shelton et al. [54] suggest that Reddit communities can function as both confessional and carnival — a general space for disinhibition separate from users’ real social lives.

More recent work by Teblunthuis et al. [60] found that users essentially sought three benefits from Reddit communities: specific content, similar people, and large audiences. These benefits were found to be in tension with one another such that no single community could effectively provide all three, thus explaining why Reddit users sought a portfolio of similar communities. Hwang and Foote [25] found that small Reddit communities provide highly specific content and expertise around that content, while also providing a sense of community and camaraderie. Notably, Xiao et al. [64] found that online chemtrail conspiracy communities — including those on Reddit — conferred similar benefits. Users’ sought these spaces as sources of trusted information, expertise, and camaraderie. Indeed, a key function of Reddit communities — as with online communities at large — is to provide a space for information and knowledge sharing [28, 35]. Jones et al. [29] describe the *information stewardship* emergent from the r/science community, where the citizen-style journalism of moderators and other users facilitates the exchange of information as both a process and a product.

In recent years, a growing number of Reddit communities have also added companion communities on Discord [32], a text and voice-based platform popularized by the gaming community. Prior work on Discord communities has focused on the sociotechnical challenges for community moderators of these spaces [32, 27]. However, to our knowledge, work exploring the use of Discord spaces from the user’s side is lacking. Existing work on both Reddit and Discord communities has also mostly focused on communities providing hobby, leisure, gaming, or otherwise relatively niche content [25, 60, 32, 27]. Studying the r/collapse community, consisting of both Reddit and Discord spaces with ostensibly “doomer content”, addresses these gaps.

Chapter 3

“Doomer” Communities

“Doomer” is a term that arose from youth Internet culture, and is used to describe those who have pessimistic or fatalistic views about global problems, or who otherwise have some affinity with the term. There are a number of what can be referred to as doomer communities on Reddit, whose content reflects the definition of the term. One of the most prominent among these is r/collapse, a space dedicated to discussion about the possibility of not-so-distant civilizational collapse (hereafter referred to as *Collapse*), defined as a “significant decrease in human population and/or political/economic/social complexity over a considerable area, for an extended time” [49]. My work was centered around an investigation of the r/collapse community, focusing on the r/collapse subreddit itself and a companion Discord server. Below, I provide an overview of both spaces.

3.1 r/collapse

r/collapse is one of over a million Reddit communities [25], popularly known as “subreddits”. Subreddits are usually dedicated to specific topics — as r/collapse is — with their own specific rules about the kind of content that can be posted. Most subreddits are public, meaning that they can be accessed and viewed by anyone on the Internet. However, only those signed onto a Reddit account can post or interact with posts (e.g., voting, commenting). Notably, only a small number of those who might see a post will interact with it, a phenomenon popularly known as “lurking”. Reddit also allows users to subscribe to individual subreddits, with subscribed subreddits being added to the user’s home feed. r/collapse has over 450,000 such subscribers as of December 2022. The subreddit has grown significantly in size in recent years — from under 50,000 subscribers in 2017 — and was the subject of a 2020 TIME Magazine article [46], where it was referred to as the “doomscrolling capital of the Internet”.

Users of r/collapse can make posts, comment on posts, reply to comments, and vote (i.e., liking or disliking) on all content — a screenshot of the r/collapse page is shown in Figure 3.1. Subreddits are moderated by volunteer moderators, who have a high degree of

influence in organizing and shaping the discourse on a given subreddit [20, 43]. On r/collapse, moderators collaborate to enforce strict rules on post quality and approve all posts before they become public.

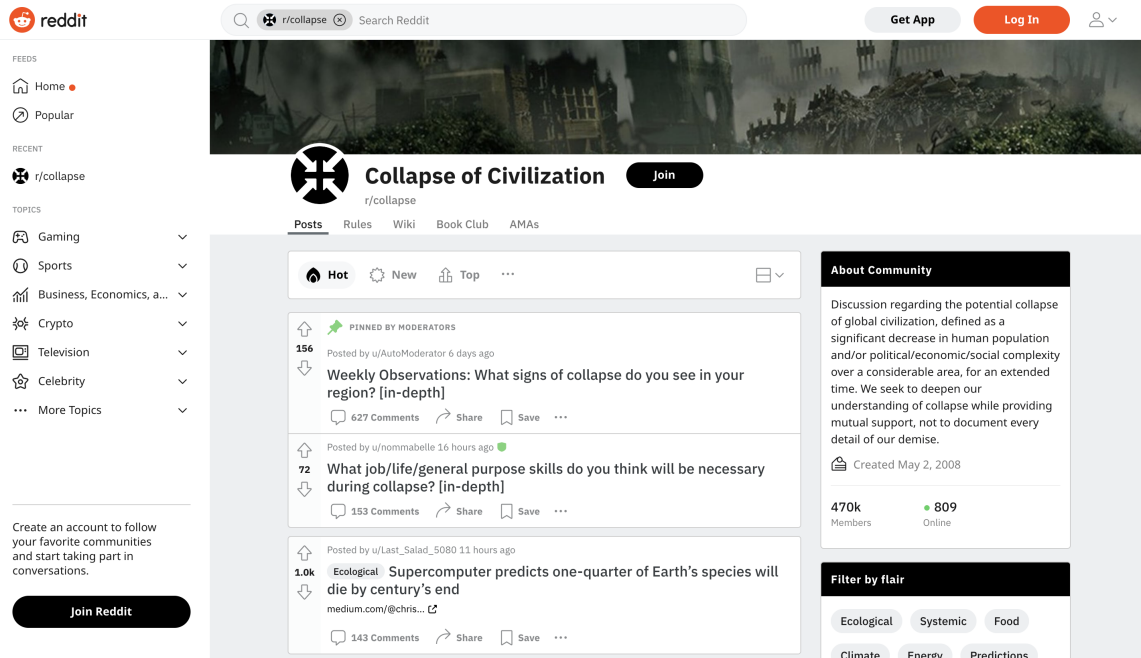


Figure 3.1: A screenshot of the r/collapse subreddit. The top two posts have been pinned by the moderators, while the third was one of the “Hot” posts at the time the screenshot was taken. Information about the community is displayed on the sidebar to the right.

3.2 Collapse Discord

Discord is a free text and voiced-based chat platform that has grown to over 150 million monthly active users since its launch in 2015 [19]. Originally designed to facilitate in-game voice chatting for gamers, Discord is now widely used for a number of purposes. Discord groups — known as “servers” — can help facilitate group chats among friends as well as course delivery in education. A number of subreddits now also have companion Discord servers [27, 32], including r/collapse. The r/collapse Discord server — with over 2000 members as of December 2022 — is linked on the sidebar of the r/collapse subreddit page.

Upon joining the Discord server, new members are first vetted by moderators and other senior members of the community, and must answer questions regarding their thoughts on Collapse and their motivation for joining the server before they are permitted to post. The Collapse Discord consists of a number of different “channels” dedicated to specific content (see Figure 3.2).

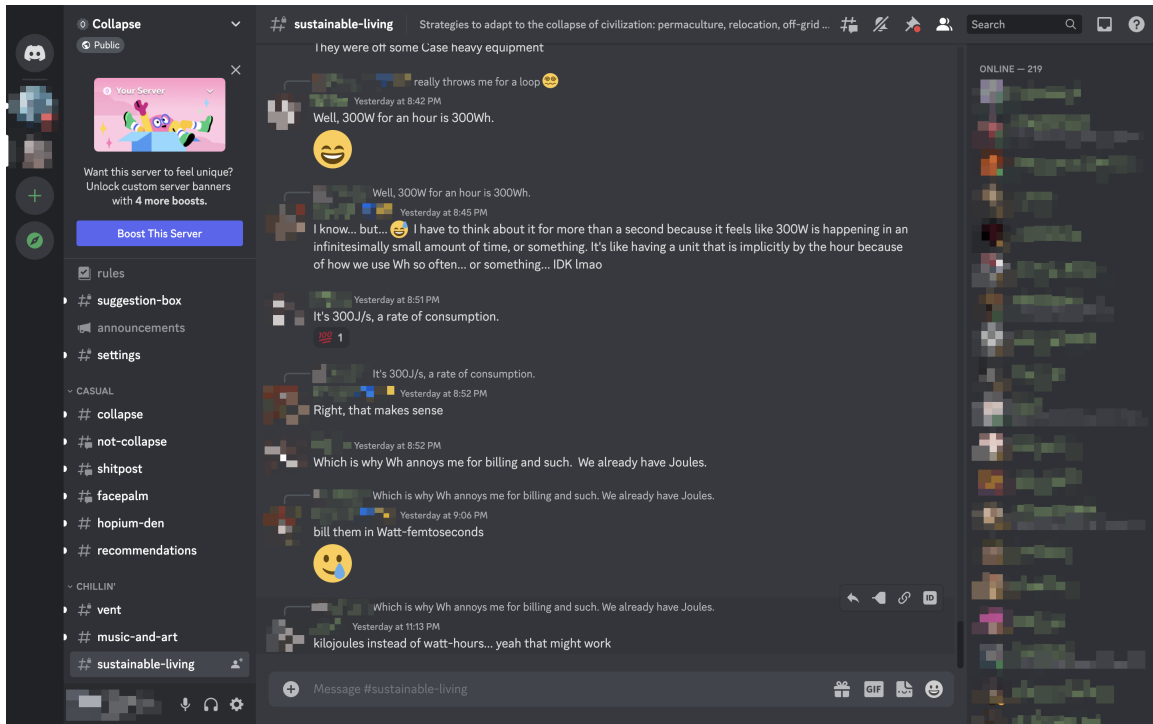


Figure 3.2: A screenshot of the Collapse Discord server. On the left is a list of channels within the server, dedicated to specific topics. On the right is a list of users who are online, with usernames and display pictures blurred. The scrolling text chat covers most of the screen, in the middle.

3.3 This Study

With this study, my goal was to gain an understanding of the r/collapse community by speaking to users of the r/collapse subreddit, users of the Collapse Discord, and moderators who moderate both spaces. My work was framed by three overarching research questions: Why do users engage with the r/collapse community? What are their views on Collapse? How do their views interact with their engagement on the community? This study received approval from the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University.

3.3.1 Participant Recruitment

I recruited and interviewed participants over three rounds, corresponding to each of the target groups. I first reached out to the r/collapse moderator team via modmail and recruited some of them to be interviewed. The moderators gave me access to the Discord server, along with permission to recruit other participants on there. I then recruited Discord users via a post on the Collapse Discord. Finally, I then made a post on the r/collapse subreddit to recruit users of the subreddit. In total, I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews over three months, consisting of three moderators (September 2022), five Discord users (Octo-

ber 2022), and seven subreddit users (November 2022). The general characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 3.1, with more specific information withheld in order to protect participant anonymity.

Reddit users are skewed towards being male, young, and from the Global North [10, 52]. Information about the gender of Discord users is not readily available, but users also skew towards being younger and from the Global North [26]. The majority of the study sample fit this description, although there was some notable diversity in age and region. While participants were not asked to provide their ethnic background, one participant self-identified as Latino and another self-identified as being of South Asian descent.

P#	Group	Gender	Age	Region	Education	Occupation
P1	Mod	M	30s	Central U.S.	Undisclosed	Web-related
P2	Mod	M	Early 30s	Pacific Northwest	Post-Secondary	Tech-related
P3	Mod	M	Late 20s	Midwest U.S.	Trade	Engineer
P4	Discord	M	30s	Western Canada	Trades & Technical	Various
P5	Discord	M	Early 30s	Pacific Northwest	Post-Secondary	Undisclosed
P6	Discord	M	30s	Sweden	Science background	Tech-related
P7	Discord	M	Mid 20s	Czech Republic	Trade	Self-employed
P8	Discord	M	Early 30s	Midwest U.S.	GED	Various
P9	Reddit	M	Mid 20s	Atlantic Canada	Undergraduate	Marketing
P10	Reddit	M	Early 40s	Pacific Northwest	Graduate	Health-related
P11	Reddit	M	Late 50s	Pacific Northwest	Undisclosed	Tech-related
P12	Reddit	F	Early 20s	California	Graduate	Student
P13	Reddit	F	Mid 60s	Northeastern U.S.	Undisclosed	Semi-retired
P14	Reddit	M	Early 20s	Texas	Undergraduate	Various
P15	Reddit	M	Late 20s	Northern England	Graduate	Unemployed

Table 3.1: General characteristics of interviewed participants. More specific information is withheld to protect participant anonymity.

3.3.2 Data Collection

One interview was conducted via Zoom, with the rest conducted via Discord audio calls. All interviews were conducted by the first author and audio recorded, and ranged in duration from 40 to 70 minutes. Interviews were then transcribed using the otter.ai¹ service, followed by some manual correction.

I used a semi-structured interview protocol to conduct the interviews, which can be found in Appendix A.2. The pre-written interview questions served as a guide rather than as a script, and participants indeed sometimes pre-empted certain questions, or touched on multiple questions within the same answer. The questions were designed to first set the stage and get participants to reflect on the broader context of doomscrolling, before moving

¹<https://www.otter.ai>

on to the heart of the matter — the how and why of their engagement with the r/collapse community. Interview questions could be roughly broken into four sequential sections: (i) the participant’s motivations for reaching out for an interview and engaging with the r/collapse community, (ii) their thoughts on the state of their society (as they chose to define it), (iii) the nature of their interactions with the community, and (iv) their relationship to Collapse outside of the community. All interviews were concluded by asking participants if they had anything to add to what they said, and if they had anything to ask the interviewer.

3.4 Qualitative Analysis

As with existing work on Reddit and Discord communities [25, 27, 32], I followed Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis approach [5]. I began by reading through and manually correcting transcribed interviews, which helped achieve an initial familiarity with the data. Interviews were then coded line-by-line [51], with example initial codes being “*desire to steer others in the right direction*” and “*people converging on Collapse from a range of perspectives*”. Higher-level codes were then generated from these initial descriptive codes, resulting in codes such as “*overlapping content*” and “*local resilience*”.

Participant-specific memos were written shortly after each interview was conducted, with additional memos written after each interview had been coded. These, along with emerging code groups, were discussed weekly with my supervisor. These recurring discussions allowed us to gauge when we reached information saturation [57], following Hwang and Foote [25]. Towards the end of the coding process, I created thematic maps out of the higher-level codes. Once coding was complete, I wrote a comprehensive memo on emerging themes generated from the code groups and thematic maps, which were then discussed at length with my supervisor. The themes which were finalized through this process are presented below.

Chapter 4

Findings

I identified four main findings from my analysis. The first two pertain to participants' motivations for engaging with the r/collapse community, while the final two pertain to participants' views on Collapse, and the interaction between their views and their engagement with the r/collapse community. These findings are presented in this section.

4.1 Desire to be heard

All participants expressed a fundamental motivation to be heard and to feel validated. Behind this is an overall desire to externalize one's own Collapse-related thoughts, worries, and views, and to see these reflected in others. These thoughts, worries, and views can be thought of as a psychological burden, expressed by P1 as the “feeling component or psychological layer”, by P8 as “once you know you can't not know”, and by P14 as the feeling that “I can't be the only one that feels this way”. Across the board, participants cited recent events which have increased this burden, including the election of Donald Trump, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and climate anomalies such as unseasonably warm weather in Atlantic Canada and Britain.

However, I found an interesting distinction between moderators/Discord users and Reddit users in the manner in which they wanted to be heard — whether they primarily want others to hear them, or to hear themselves in others. For moderators and Discord users, this is the former. They expressed their desire to ease the Collapse-uninitiated into a burdensome, difficult, and unpleasant Collapse conversation. P3 described this as making “the medicine go down a little easier”, while P2 emphasized that:

“If we can't provide a *great* environment, then we should at least provide one that helps people or, you know, helps people that seek it out”

P8, who helps mediate conflicts and those having a “difficult time” on the Discord, explained that:

“the intersection has always interested me, of confronting crisis and emotionally dealing with crisis. And that’s part of why I do what I do around these parts of the Internet”

For this group of users, the Discord has become an important social network of like-minded individuals, with participants forming genuine friendships with other Discord members. P5 explained his appreciation for having a “community full of educated, expansive, worldly people that also understood what I understood” — something that he found lacking in his in-person social circle. P4 described the camaraderie of the Discord, while also pointing out that this is “true of most servers”. P7 has made real friendships on the Discord — friends that he has ended up meeting in-person — and he explained that it is “what keeps me on the server”.

Reddit users largely wanted to hear themselves in others. These participants mostly lurk, without engaging with that content. P12 explained that she is on the subreddit to learn rather than to post or comment, and that she is careful about what she puts online due to the nature of her occupation and her gender. What Reddit participants expressed gaining from their lurking is the comfort in knowing that they are not alone — an unburdening of the psychological burden of Collapse. As P9 put it:

“So when r/collapse came up on Reddit as a suggested subreddit for me, I was suddenly like, oh yeah, I know. I’m on board for this.”

4.2 Appreciation of chosen space

Participants expressed an overall appreciation for their chosen primary space (Discord or Reddit), while expressing some disinterest or disdain for the other space. Moderators and Discord users acknowledged the challenges inherent to Discord — namely the vulnerability of Discord servers to infiltration by bad actors, such as those spreading fascist rhetoric. But they nonetheless expressed their preference of Discord to Reddit, primarily centered around their belief that Discord is conducive to more effective and intimate information sharing. Discord is described as a “more personal medium” (P8), where “people can keep up on things a lot faster” (P4).

Reddit users acknowledged the limitations of the Reddit platform in facilitating civil and productive discourse. P9 explained that he avoided wading into Reddit discussions as “it’s difficult to have conversations with people on Reddit — they become very entrenched in their own values”. But they also expressed appreciation for the subreddit, namely in the quality of the content and of the moderating team. P10 suggested that the strict posting rules enforced by the moderators, which, while acting as a barrier to him posting, was also a reason why “there’s just quite a quality in the collapse subreddit”. P12 observed that on r/collapse “there’s a very consistent praise of the moderators, which is rare”. Reddit users

were also largely previously unaware and disinterested in the idea of joining the Discord server, citing reasons such as being too old for Discord (P11), disliking the more social nature of the platform (P9), or being unwilling to be further exposed to more Collapse content (P14).

Interestingly, both Discord and Reddit users expressed appreciation for their respective space because of a shared perception of informational trust and legitimacy, in spite of overlapping content, as detailed below.

4.2.1 Informational trust and legitimacy

Across the board, participants expressed a trust in the information shared on both the Discord and the subreddit. Discord users portrayed the server as providing a circle of expertise, with insightful information coming from familiar and trusted sources. As P6 put it:

“The beautiful thing about this community is that we have different people who have different types of fascinations, and then share their insights. And I’m one of them, I kind of took over the whole energy and pandemic department. Like if there’s something, some new research coming out, I usually do a deep dive into that and put the summary into one of in-depth channels”

P7 explained how upon joining the Discord he found “a community where I was actually the one, you know, who could ask for something, and these people were able to explain it, dumb it down maybe sometimes”. For P8, the Discord is “basically the cutting edge, as far as I see it, of the Internet”.

Similarly, some Reddit users viewed r/collapse as a space for the unfiltered truth. P9 stated that the subreddit was “a great spot to stay up to date on these issues ... as they’re maybe not being reported by the mainstream news”. As P14 explained:

“I did it [browsed r/collapse] because I knew I wasn’t being lied to. Because I know that was the only place that would actually talk about the truth”

Other Reddit users were less inclined to view r/collapse as a space of absolute truth. However, even these users saw the subreddit as an important space for legitimate opinions which they found personally useful or relevant. P11 sees r/collapse as an aggregator of information, with a spin of “how this is going to kill us all or ruin civilization”, and what he perceives to be a disturbing amount of “misanthropy”. His browsing of r/collapse is motivated by a desire to “gauge the temperature of things in public discourse”. Indeed, this temperature-gauging was echoed by other participants. P13 believed that “there’s a 5% chance that most of what the people are saying on [/r]collapse could happen. And it’s a big enough deal, that 5% chance is significant”. P15 uses r/collapse to “get the news and see peoples’ opinions”, and noted that when he sees a significant news article he will think: “Oh, let me see what the collapse subreddit is saying”.

4.2.2 Overlapping content

There is a high degree of overlap in the actual news content shared on the r/collapse subreddit and the Discord. P7 explained that he mostly moved away from the subreddit after discovering the Discord since “the big stories, they just get to me anyway”. P8 mentioned never having really engaged with r/collapse as “a lot of the stuff was like, I was already aware of it ... I was already getting all of the same doomscrolling content elsewhere”.

Of course, the r/collapse subreddit and Collapse Discord are not the only places to get Collapse-related content. Participants often cited external media and other sources of information, such as books, podcasts, and other Collapse-related Discord servers. P4 mentioned having previously participated in other Collapse and “prepper” (those who proactively prepare for potential crises or emergencies) related servers. P12 is also a member of a Collapse-related subreddit that is catered to women and the female perspective on Collapse.

Furthermore, even with spaces that are not explicitly related to Collapse, there might be overlap with the content on r/collapse. P11 noted that “a lot of the news [on r/collapse] is just re-posts, from other subreddits I’m getting news as well, so I often see similar or the same posts”. The r/collapse subreddit had been suggested to participants through the r/antiwork subreddit (P9), while others were linked to r/collapse through comment threads on r/politics (P14) and r/worldnews (P15). This blurring of lines between r/collapse and other spaces is underscored by an anecdote by P15 about the r/casualUK subreddit — a subreddit initially created as a lighthearted and non-political space for UK-related commentary:

“But it’s funny, because now, the, like, everything just seems so problematic that even the [/r]casualUK subreddit is kind of depressing”

4.3 Other-awareness

A term often invoked by participants was that of “Collapse-awareness” — a realization of the distinct possibility (or probability, or inevitability, depending on one’s view) of civilizational collapse. This personal awareness usually preceded participants’ engagement with the r/collapse community, arising for example from prior exposure to other Collapse-related sources or — as in the case of one participant — through a degree in environmental sustainability. Participants also mentioned “lightbulb moments” such as the experience of providing disaster relief after Hurricane Harvey, or finding out about declining insect populations.

Participants were more interested in — and often referred to — others’ awareness of Collapse. P9 became “intrigued by the sort of vibe existing in society and within particular demographics these days that all have the same sort of vibe of this doom”. P4 expressed the belief that “people are talking about it in hushed tones, because they’re scared and they’re not sure what the outcome will be”. Participants widely agreed that there was a growth in

the mainstream awareness of Collapse, and of the r/collapse subreddit specifically. P3 noted spikes in r/collapse subscribers and activity after crises and other significant news events, such as the election of Donald Trump, the crossing of the 400 ppm CO2 threshold, and the overturning of Roe v. Wade. P5 saw the pandemic as having resulted in a significant perspective shift when “looking at the world kind of naturally frames things in an unpleasant light”, which led to people:

“having the door open a crack to accepting, or being interested in, or at least pursuing the engagement of many other serious issues that our civilization faces”

This was echoed by P10, who observed that people were converging towards Collapse from a range of ideological angles and perspectives. P15 stated his belief that people would inevitably become Collapse-aware as either they, or people around them, would “have something happen” to them, making them “see behind the curtain”.

Some participants expressed some indifference or raised concerns over this growing mainstream awareness. P1 commented on the perceptible growth of popular interest in the term “doomscrolling” leading up to and during the pandemic, but also believed that the growth of r/collapse could be attributable to the growth of Reddit more generally — a rising tide lifting all boats. P6 explained his belief that “awareness [of Collapse] is not the bottleneck anymore”, citing the fact that although “something like 70% of the U.S. population wants stronger action on climate change”, this action has been slow to come about. P8 expressed his concern that as Collapse became more mainstream “you will always inevitably have people trying to control the narrative anyway, and push things to their particular ideological strain, or their technofixes, or whatever they think is the solution to these crises”. As P12 put it:

“Well, a lot of people are becoming more Collapse-aware. I don’t think a whole lot of people are gonna do anything about it. Um, that is kind of a downside ... I think the human condition a little bit is the more numbers there is to something, the more people assume that someone else in the crowd is going to do it.”

4.4 Individual and local empowerment

A number of participants talked about having taken Collapse-motivated actions. Some of these were quite significant, such as planning to buy farmland and establish a homestead, wanting to move to an area perceived to be more Collapse-resistant, or having already made such a move. Across the board, participants emphasized the importance of both individual and local community resilience, and framed Collapse as being partly symptomatic of a loss of this resilience in the face of global capitalism and supply chains.

Overwhelmingly, participants expressed a distrust for “elites” and for politicians (“them”), and of their ability or willingness to help the broader population (“us”). P9 asserted that

there is “a sense of powerlessness amongst the average person, and I can’t speak to what the mindset of our elites are, because I can’t even fathom the psychology that goes into being that removed from the everyday”. P4 explained having the realization that “the people in charge are the people who make decisions, [and they] are not motivated to solve the problems that we have in front of us in a way that will actually help”. P11 expressed his worry about “the rise of various kinds of oligarchy in Canada as well as other countries around the world, and the populism associated with that”.

Many participants talked about their interest and activity related to self-sustainability and self-resilience. For P11, this came from a rural upbringing and outlook on life, picking up interests and skills from family and friends. He has also hosted workshops on various food preparation techniques and knowledge, explaining that he wanted to “pass on not only specific skills, but the reasons behind knowing these skills”. Others had less direct prior exposure to “prepper” skills, and participants mentioned their interest and engagement in sustainable living channels on the Discord. As P7 put it: “when you start learning about Collapse usually — or I think — a lot of people turn to self-sustainability, so there’s a lot of topics around that”. Indeed, P7 explained how his Collapse-awareness led him into gardening, something that he has now been doing for three years. For P7, his appreciation of gardening in part stems from his feeling of a re-connection to a more rustic way of life and community.

Participants also emphasized local political action in affecting meaningful change. P3 talked about his push for local-level policy changes, such as the naturalization of municipally-owned lawns. As he explained:

“So I really like local action in that regard and trying to push for, kind of, sustainably minded community at a local level. I think that you can see the most, you can see the results a lot better from local action”

P4 highlighted the unsustainable nature of urban zoning and his belief that zoning laws were contributing to the housing crisis, and emphasized the importance of zoning reform. He lamented, however, that “if you get people to go to their city hall, there’s actually very few people to show up for meetings”.

Participants talked about the need for community resiliency in the face of Collapse, emergent from individual resiliency — what P11 described as a mutual self-reliance and preparedness. P4 again invoked gardening in sharing his view that “if everybody had a garden, we would not have collapse”. He goes on to elaborate:

“Fundamentally, the emergent phenomenon is I want other people to have a garden too, because if I run out, I can just go over to my neighbor and say “Hey, do you have any potatoes?” You know, whereas the other perspective is, I really hope everyone else dies. Because that way, I’m the only one left. And that’s, that’s a really scary view to have on the world.”

Some participants talked about seeing personal evidence of community resilience in recent years. P12 shared the fact that local contractors in her community came to fix roofs for free in the wake of a recent storm. She observed that “I do see a lot of more people going out of their way to help people in dire situations. I think, you know, unfortunately you do have the people where, no, it’s never gonna change. But I think when things get really bad people do ultimately end up banding together”. In talking about his experience being flooded, and also drawing on his experience in military, P14 explained that:

“And you just, you just need to hold on to people, it’s, it’s just natural. I don’t have to say anything other than that. It’s just natural.”

Chapter 5

Discussion

Drawing from my findings, I discuss the need to go beyond the reductive term “doomscrolling” in explaining the information seeking and sensemaking I observed within the r/collapse community. I also discuss the partitioning of the r/collapse information landscape, connecting back to and extending prior work. Lastly, I discuss community resilience in the context of online communities, and extend this to a discussion of how we might foster more resilient offline communities in the face of challenges.

5.1 Beyond “doomscrolling”

Existing work on doomscrolling and negative information consumption has framed it in a rather one-dimensional fashion. Doomscrolling has been studied as a somewhat abstract and individual activity [56], with a lack of focus on the nature of consumed content and the manner in which it is consumed. Participants fit the definition and popular conception of doomscrolling — spending time scrolling through and reading depressing or worrying content. But I found this term to be too reductive, failing to adequately describe what it is that participants were doing, and why they were doing it.

At a higher-level of analysis, participants were seeking out and gaining many of the benefits from online communities outlined in previous work. My work echoes prior findings that participants are motivated to find content, camaraderie, and expertise in a variety of online communities [25, 64, 60]. My work adds to the spectrum of studied communities, which have ranged from niche hobbies [25, 60] to conspiracy-related topics [64]. While online communities differ widely in content and tone, it seems that users of these communities are deriving similar social benefits.

My work also extends findings from prior work looking at online communities which deal with some burden of knowledge, or a deeper psychological burden. Andalibi and Garcia [1] found that women who had experienced pregnancy loss engaged with online spaces in seeking both informational validation (through the seeking of validating information) and experiential validation (through the seeking of validating interpersonal interactions). Both of

these were in service of seeking emotional validation and a restored sense of normalcy. Xiao et al. [64] found that validation for deeply held but non-mainstream beliefs — and a sense of “not being the only one” — was derived from engagement with Chemtrail conspiracy communities.

I found that interviewed users of the r/collapse subreddit and Collapse Discord were similarly seeking to unburden themselves. I found a distinction between whether this unburdening was primarily achieved through being heard by others, or through hearing others in themselves. Notably, participants across the board were intentional about this aim. Moderators and Discord users were committed to providing a space for Collapse discussion, finding meaning in externalizing their thoughts, worries, and views concerning Collapse. Meanwhile, Reddit users were conscious of their engagement with a space provided by and curated by others.

In light of my findings, I propose that it is necessary to differentiate between two kinds of doomscrolling — “active” and “passive” doomscrolling. I argue that interviewed participants were largely engaging in active doomscrolling, which I saw as consisting of two parts: (i) actively seeking information that is perceived to be reliable and even actionable, and (ii) actively seeking emotional validation and support through that information seeking. I believe that this sheds some light on the tension I highlighted earlier in Chapter 2.1 between the drive to seek out information about the world around us and the potentially detrimental emotional effects of that information seeking. For the interviewed participants, the r/collapse community seems to be a fairly “safe” space through which they can consume distressing information with the support of a community.

In contrast, I see “passive” doomscrolling as being the less intentional, and less mindful, consumption of distressing information. To be sure, ‘Collapse-like’ news is certainly not restricted to the r/collapse community, nor is it restricted to Reddit — Bo Burnham has received acclaim for speaking to the pervasiveness of the doom and gloom of Western society. In part as a result of what Cooke [14] calls the “information overload” of modern information consumption, this doom and gloom can now be passively absorbed across a number of platforms [30]. This kind of information consumption — less intentional and perhaps even mindless — aligned with my personal preconception of what doomscrolling was. Based on the outcome of my study, I now believe that passive and active doomscrolling can be seen as the extremes of a spectrum of information consumption intentionality, and individuals can fall anywhere along that gradient.

I identify that what emerges from the “active” doomscrolling of participants engaging with the r/collapse community is an instance of collective sensemaking through a crisis — the perceived unfolding of civilizational collapse. Existing work on collective sensemaking in crises has looked at relatively acute crises, such as terror attacks [33] and the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill [15]. While Collapse differs in that it is perceived as a chronic crisis occurring over an indefinite timeline, the r/collapse community is undoubtedly a space for

crisis sensemaking. In a review of literature on crisis and change, Maitlis and Sonenshein [39] note the importance of shared meanings and emotions in sensemaking during crises. The r/collapse community functions as a space to facilitate this sharing, creating a shared identity that, according to Maitlis and Sonenshein, provides “a vital anchor around which collectives construct meaning and understand their experiences.” The collective sensemaking of the r/collapse community also exhibits characteristics of citizen science [15] and demonstrates information stewardship [29].

Closely related to this collective crisis sensemaking, another element of active doomscrolling that I observed was an emphasis on actionability. As mentioned, some individuals took significant individual actions, such as moving to what were perceived to be more Collapse-resistant areas or buying farmland. While these more significant actions may have come about at a more individual level — and were afforded by individual circumstances — the seeking and sharing of actionable information was generally important at the group level. This was seen to a lesser extent on the subreddit, but to a more significant degree on the Discord. One prominent example of this was the sustainability focus within the Discord, with subspaces dedicated to sustainable living, such as sharing horticultural and gardening advice. The kind of practical and actionable information shared within these spaces reflects a desire towards action, and to *do* something, based on active doomscrolling.

5.2 Gated communities?

Chun [11] has described how online social networks have dissolved the masses into “gated neighbourhoods”, as homophilic tendencies lead individuals to gravitate towards the people and spaces perceived to be most similar to them. “Echo chamber” — a term that has also entered into mainstream parlance — might come to mind whenever such online spaces are discussed in this way.

At first glance, it would appear that the r/collapse community extends Chun’s analogy, consisting of what appear to be separate “walled compounds.” Strict rules for posting content are enforced on the r/collapse subreddit, while Collapse Discord members are first vetted before they can post — an even higher wall. Furthermore, I found that there was a separation in affiliation between Reddit and Discord users, with each group primarily inhabiting their own space while being disinterested in the other.

However, while being somewhat walled off in terms of access, both spaces were still receiving and engaging with similar content. Rather than resulting in hermetically sealed spaces, this separation of spaces allowed participants to better control how they consume and contribute information, echoing the findings of Hwang and Foote [25] who referred to this as a partitioning of a given information landscape. This partitioning allows for more specialized spaces catering to more specific needs, as identified by Teblunthuis et al. [60]. My findings extend this prior work which has focused on Reddit communities, by finding

similar patterns in the partitioning of the Collapse Discord from the r/collapse subreddit. A growing number of Reddit communities now have companion Discord servers [32, 27], but to my knowledge there has been a lack of work comparing and contrasting Discord servers with their associated subreddits — one of the contributions of this work.

Recent work has shown that while network-based social media such as Twitter and Facebook tend to create echo chambers, Reddit actually tends towards more cross-group interaction and less segregation of information [12, 17]. Interestingly, while I found that the Collapse Discord resembles a closed social network — a walled compound — it remained engaged with a larger body of information. This seems to resonate with recent work by Guess et al. [23], who critique the narrative around the pervasiveness of echo chambers on social media as being amplified and distorted.

5.3 Community resilience

“Resilience” is a word that I heard many times during my interviews. This word was often used in the context of resilience towards natural and economic crises — storms, heatwaves, and supply chain breakdowns. However, a larger overarching theme that also emerged was that of a more nuanced form of resilience, a kind of general social resilience to more than just acute shocks.

There is an interesting analogue that might be drawn from the aforementioned partitioning of spaces to participants’ attitudes on the importance of smaller-scale resilience in the face of Collapse — of the importance of self-resilience and local community resilience rather than relying on vulnerable global supply chains. The offshooting of the Collapse Discord might be seen as a smaller, but more responsive, adaptive, and “local” online community within a noisy and ever-expanding global information landscape. Drawing on Butler et al.’s [9] modified Attraction-Selection-Attrition theory for online communities, I observe how the Collapse Discord is a space with higher participation costs and strong topic consistency cues (signalling content consistency and continuity), resulting in a community that is smaller and more focused. Such communities have more “community resilience”, defined by Butler et al. as a membership that is more “willing to remain involved in the face of variability and change in topics discussed” (p. 700). Indeed, interviewed members of the Collapse Discord painted a picture of a cohesive and personal space, resistant to attacks and infiltration by bad actors.

The increasingly dominant narrative surrounding information and communications technology (ICT) in the modern era, and social media specifically, is that it has contributed to increasing polarization, loneliness, and doom. However, an interesting avenue to consider is how resilient online communities, and ICT more broadly, might help foster the resilience of *offline* communities. The utility of ICT is being increasingly studied in the context of crisis informatics [50, 55]. The use of ICT tools to help facilitate offline community responses to

crises among older adults has also been studied [58]. Community resilience to disasters has become of great interest to emergency response personnel and government officials [45], and information shared on social media can help crisis responders take action [67].

Taylor et al. [59] have discussed how the connectivity and timely information exchange of social media provided a source of psychological support during natural disasters. What I have found from my study is broadly in line with this finding, and the “active” doomscrolling I encountered here can be summed up as the seeking and providing of psychological support through painful information seeking. This support is more immediate on the Collapse Discord, a smaller and more resilient partition of a larger informational space. P2 shared his belief that while Reddit does not scale well, it will connect to other platforms (such as Discord) that are more appropriate. As Reddit, and the Internet continues to expand, I believe this partitioning of space will continue.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Contributions

The word “doomscrolling” has entered into the mainstream consciousness with the events of recent years, but despite being widely used, it is a term that has not been fleshed out. Through my study of the r/collapse community, I contribute towards further unpacking the term as well as the broader “doomer” zeitgeist on the Internet today. Interviewing fifteen moderators and users from the r/collapse subreddit and the associated Collapse Discord, I found that individuals across both groups were engaging in intentional information seeking and collective sensemaking. More specifically, I propose that the term “doomscrolling” is too reductive, and suggest that interviewed members of the r/collapse community engage in what could be called “active” doomscrolling. I define active doomscrolling as consisting of actively seeking information perceived to be reliable and even actionable, while also actively seeking validation and support through that information seeking. This differs from the mainstream conception — and my preconception — of doomscrolling as a largely mindless, passive, and compulsive activity.

I found the Collapse Discord to be a more specialized, cohesive, and resilient partition of r/collapse — allowing individuals more control over their consumption and contribution of content — while remaining connected to the same body of information. I found that the offshooting of the Collapse Discord augments the broader community while remaining engaged with the same content, rather than detracting from it or becoming an isolated echo chamber. Ultimately, I suggest that smaller online communities such as the Collapse Discord are more resilient spaces, fostered by the community. This contributes to the broader literature on crisis informatics, and especially on the ways that communities process and deal with critical information.

Fundamentally, what I observed from the r/collapse community offers insights into trends in the current broader Internet landscape. The sheer amount of information on the Internet, and the potential for even more information created by generative AI, poses significant challenges. The potentially detrimental effects of passive consumption of legit-

imately distressing information — passive doomscrolling — bears important discussion. Active doomscrolling could be a road map for a healthier and more effective way to consume information in the modern day. To deal with the information overload of the modern day, the active seeking of emotional support and validation through difficult information consumption could reflect a growing inclination towards smaller, more intimate online sense-making groups.

Given this, online platforms that support the formation of smaller, specialized groups — such as Discord — might become increasingly more attractive to individuals. The Collapse Discord in particular is an example of a smaller, more specialized group that can encourage more meaningful interactions and offer a refuge of sorts from the noise of modern information — this seems to me a very natural human tendency towards more “real” interaction. I note that interviewed moderators and core users of the Collapse Discord might be viewed more cohesively as senior members of the community, and that seniority represents a community standing or role that is applicable across other communities as well. Providing tools that allow users to set content preferences, prioritize relevant information, and allow senior members to better share their expertise could empower individuals to curate their online experiences more effectively. While the term “echo chamber” has garnered widespread negative attention and discussion, it does not accurately describe what I observed across the r/collapse community, and my findings suggest that we should perhaps be less quick to jump to that term. By understanding the nuances of different online communities, we can then identify the true echo chambers that perpetuate harmful narratives and work towards mitigating their negative impact, while supporting those communities that help people navigate and process information in an increasingly overwhelming information landscape.

6.2 Limitations and Future Work

While I believe that my work makes some important contributions, I also acknowledge some limitations. First, the privilege of doomscrolling, discussing doomscrolling, and certainly of writing about doomscrolling must be acknowledged. Those at the margins of our global society are, and will continue to, live through the worst of the issues that those of us in wealthy nations have the privilege of discussing — a reality acknowledged by a number of participants. While there was some notable diversity in age and region, participants were entirely from the Global North, overwhelmingly male, and mostly young. It is important to keep in mind the particulars of this perspective, and to remember that there are non-Western perspectives and experiences on online interactions and the Information Age [37, 2]. Related to this, I want to acknowledge that I am leaving out important discussion of complex environmental, socioeconomic, and political issues, as this was beyond the scope of this thesis. I stress that this is not meant to paper over these issues.

I talked to a cross-section of the r/collapse community — moderators, Discord users, and Reddit users — but I note that interviewed participants all reached out to be interviewed. I acknowledge that those so inclined might inherently be more active and intentional about what they are doing. Important voices that are left out are members of the r/collapse community who may be deeply immersed in the content, but who are not inclined to talk to researchers over the Internet — this may represent a substantial majority. I note that I potentially also left out voices from other spaces in the r/collapse community, the existence of which I only discovered through my interviews. I was also only able to interview a portion of those who reached out on Reddit expressing interest in being interviewed (responding to requests on a first come, first served basis), as I did not want to recruit disproportionately more Reddit interviewees than moderators and Discord users. I acknowledge that this smaller and more specialized sample size poses challenges for generalizability. As such, this work should be taken as a more exploratory investigation rather than being an all-encompassing analysis.

As I point out in Chapter 5.1, doomscrolling and “doomer” content are certainly not limited to the r/collapse community. Future work could look at other popular spaces whose tone and content are in the vein of r/collapse, such as r/lostgeneration and r/LateStageCapitalism, which have over 350K and 800K subscribers respectively. But even in spaces not ostensibly related to Collapse, it appears that Collapse is “creeping in” — something echoed by participants. This of course goes beyond the Reddit platform, and future work should further investigate doomscrolling on platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. In studying the r/collapse community, our work makes a start at understanding the present streak of doomerism on the Internet, which is left for future work to further flesh out.

6.3 Final Words

We have undoubtedly experienced serious challenges in recent years — extreme climate events, a global pandemic, political tension, geopolitical conflict, and the advent of advanced artificial intelligence. Beyond their more immediate effects, these events have posed significant psycho-social challenges. One way in which this has manifested is through the phenomenon of doomscrolling, defined as consuming content on social media that is depressing or worrying. There has also been a palpable atmosphere of doomerism on the Internet, especially on the popular information aggregator site Reddit.

Doomscrolling is an interesting puzzle, as it is an activity that would appear to be both unpleasant and unproductive. With this thesis, I looked to unpack the both the “how” and the “why” of this phenomenon. The multifaceted nature of doomscrolling makes it challenging to pinpoint a singular explanation. However, at its core, doomscrolling reflects the core human desire to comprehend and navigate the world around us. Beyond this, active doomscrolling represents the intricate relationship between our quest for understanding, the

challenges of navigating a growing information landscape, and our innate need for human connection. In the face of all the uncertainty and complexity of the modern world, people are fundamentally trying to understand, and to not feel so alone in that endeavour.

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Appendix A

Study Materials

A.1 Consent Form



FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION, ART AND TECHNOLOGY
School of Interactive Arts + Technology

Informed Consent Form

The University and those conducting this research study subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, or about the responsibility of the researcher, or if you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in the study, please contact the SFU Office of Research Ethics using this reference number: 30001178. (See contact information below)

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received this document, which describes the procedures, whether there are possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information provided in this document, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study. If you do not wish to indicate consent on this form, you may also do so verbally prior to the beginning of the interview. By consenting, you have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

Project Details:

Title: Doomscrolling on r/collapse

SFU ethics application number: 30001178

Principal Investigator Name: Wolfgang Stuerzlinger

Version: 1.0

Date: August 4th, 2022

Student Lead: Kevin Huang

Investigator Department: School of Interactive Arts and Technology

Purpose and goals of this study:

This study aims to gain an understanding of the r/collapse community, and the motivations for members' engagement with the community. The goal is to better understand the causes and implications of the growing popularity of r/collapse, and position it within the broader popular and Internet culture.

In this study we will collect the following data and use these data collection methods:

- Interviews that combine structured and open-ended questions for up to 45 minutes. Interviews will be conducted via video-conference tools like Zoom or Discord. The study includes one interview with the potential for one follow-up interview.

Having been asked to participate in the research study named above, I indicate that I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to me in taking part in the study as described below:

Risk to the participant, third parties or society: None anticipated.

Potential benefits: There are no potential benefits to the study. Participants will not receive payment for participation in the study.

Refusal or withdrawal: Refusal to participate or withdrawal/dropout after agreeing to participate will not have an adverse effect or consequences on the participants, their employment, education or services. Participants can withdraw by contacting any of the listed researchers at any time over the study. Participants will be prompted for their continued participation or withdrawal after the first and any potential follow-up interview. Participants are asked to notify their withdrawal within four weeks after an interview, but withdrawal will be granted at any time.

Benefit of confidentiality: Pseudonyms will be used to refer to participants. Collected data will be kept in a locked cabinet at SFU in the principal researcher's office located at Surrey Central campus. All digital data will also be stored in a password protected folder on SFU supported online cloud storage. Data will be kept for three years after the completion of the study. Data will be accessible only to the principal investigator and student lead involved in the study.

The use of Zoom or Discord for interviews will involve using US companies. Any data you provide may be transmitted and stored in countries outside of Canada, as well as in Canada. It is important to remember that privacy laws vary in different countries and may not be the same as in Canada.

Audio and Multimedia: Select "Yes" or "No" for each question.

1. Do you give permission for audio recording of the interview? __ Yes __ No
2. Do you permit the use of text, videos, images, photographs, and other media uploaded by yourself on the r/collapse subreddit? __ Yes __ No

Inclusion of names of participants in report of the study: Data will be reported confidentially, through the use of pseudonyms.

Dissemination Plan: Reported data may be used in public dissemination (thesis, papers, conference presentations, etc.) directly related to this research project.

I have read/heard and understand the risks and contributions of my participation in this study. I acknowledge that I have been informed that I will have the opportunity to review and approve any written materials before they are published. I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time. I additionally agree to participate in this study.

Signed: _____ Date: _____
(Participant)

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact the SFU Office of Research Ethics at dore@sfu.ca or 778-782-6618.

A.2 Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Broad study description:

This qualitative study aims to gain an understanding of the r/collapse subreddit community, and the motivations for members' engagement with the community. The goal is to better understand the causes and implications of the growing popularity of r/collapse, and position it within the broader popular and Internet culture.

Research Questions:

Why do participants engage with the r/collapse community?

What are their views on Collapse?

How do their views interact with their engagement on the community?

Interview Questions

This interview will take 30-45 minutes and will be conducted over videoconferencing such as Zoom or Discord.

- 1) Why did you agree to take part in this interview?
- 2) Demographic information?
- 3) What are your thoughts about the term doomscrolling?
- 4) How did you end up here, talking to me? How did you end up on the r/collapse community?
- 5) What are your thoughts about the state of your society? You can define it as locally or broadly as you like.
- 6) How much do you interact with the r/collapse community?
- 7) Why are you on r/collapse?
- 8) To what extent can you talk about Collapse with people in your own life?
- 9) Do you think that r/collapse has shaped your views or behaviours?
- 10) What do you make of the recent growth of r/collapse?
- 11) Are you aware of the Collapse Discord?
- 12) Are you hopeful?
- 13) Is there anything you want to add or ask me?