**Global Crises Online: Uncertainty, Comparison, and Collective Sense-Making**

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**Abstract**

In an age of recurring crises, from pandemics to climate shocks, social media shapes how events are experienced. Rather than offering neutral information, platforms amplify selective images and narratives that can distort reality.

This essay sets out a three-part framework to explain the psychological impact of such mediation: intolerance of uncertainty, social comparison, and collective sense-making under algorithmic curation. Each process can heighten anxiety by rewarding novelty, emotional intensity, and simplified explanation, while under certain conditions they can also foster resilience. Three cases help understand this process: political misinformation exploits the human need for certainty, aspirational lifestyle content fuels upward comparison, and gender or class debates reveal how collective discussion can either inflame division or build awareness. Across these examples, resilience emerges when individuals apply media literacy and critical reflection, when platforms introduce modest friction and contextual cues, and when small, well-moderated communities prioritize verification and shared understanding.

In general, these findings suggest that while social media often intensifies anxiety during global crises, it can also be reoriented by proper touches to support reflection, solidarity, and adaptive responses.

***Keywords:*** *Global crises; Algorithmic curation; Intolerance of uncertainty; Social comparison; Collective sense-making*

**Introduction**

To live in the twenty-first century is to dwell in a state of perpetual crisis. Pandemics, climate disasters, and political unrest appear with increasing speed, leaving individuals searching for clarity in an environment defined by uncertainty. Yet the way people now encounter these crises is no longer direct. News, commentary, and even lived experience are filtered through the mechanisms of digital platforms, where algorithms select and amplify certain images, stories, and emotions. These platforms do more than inform. They reshape reality, producing illusions that unsettle and transform those who consume them (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

This essay argues that social media, by curating and amplifying content, creates distorted reflections of global crises. These distortions activate three psychological and social processes: intolerance of uncertainty, social comparison, and collective sense-making. These representations activate three interlocking processes that can yield anxiety and, under the right conditions, resilience. Across all three processes, algorithmic curation acts as a cross-cutting amplifier, shaping what becomes salient and how quickly it spreads.

The following sections develop this claim through three pathways by which global crises become personally salient online: political misinformation and the human need for certainty, aspirational content and the pressures of comparison, and gender and class debates where dialogue can reframe strain into social awareness and mutual aid.

**Political Distortions and Anxiety in Public Crises**

Social media platforms amplify political distortions because of how their systems are built. Engagement-driven ranking elevates content that provokes strong reactions, and human attention is especially sensitive to novelty and negative cues. Discomfort with uncertainty further pulls people toward simple, emotionally charged explanations. Together, these forces let falsehoods travel faster and farther than careful corrections, while verification lags because fact-checking takes time and neutral updates spread less widely (Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

After recent earthquakes, AI-generated or miscaptioned images of children trapped under rubble circulated widely despite lacking any link to the events. Independent fact-checks from Reuters and the Associated Press traced widely shared earthquake images to stock photographs or unrelated footage, not the events themselves (Reuters, 2023; Associated Press, 2023). Such vivid narratives spread quickly in moments of uncertainty and deepen anxiety rather than provide clarity. Psychology helps explain this pattern: intolerance of uncertainty heightens vigilance and worry, priming audiences to accept compelling stories over incomplete facts (Carleton, 2016; Hirsh et al., 2012). Evidence also associates heavier social media use with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms among adolescents and young adults, reinforcing the impact of exposure to distorted content (Keles et al., 2020).

The effects are not uniform. People with stronger information literacy or prior skepticism tend to cross-check, join discussion groups, and flag falsehoods, whereas communities with limited access to education or digital skills are more likely to feel overwhelmed. At the individual level, resilience grows with critical thinking and simple verification habits. At the systemic level, platforms that profit from engagement should be accountable for the speed of falsehoods and the slowness of corrections, and they should deploy interventions that make accuracy easier to notice and act upon in crises. Brief accuracy prompts, for example, reduce impulsive sharing by orienting attention toward truthfulness (Pennycook et al., 2021).

**Fabricated Upper-Class Lifestyles and Social Comparison**

One of the most potent sources of anxiety on social media is the relentless curation of wealth and success. Platforms revolve around “highlight reels”, carefully polished moments shared by users and amplified by algorithms that favor glamorous, attention-grabbing content. This dynamic resonates with Festinger’s social comparison theory (1954), which suggests that in the absence of clear benchmarks, people instinctively measure themselves against others. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of impression management and upward comparison, where ordinary users are constantly exposed to lives that seem richer, more successful, and more fulfilling than their own. Empirical reviews indicate that such frequent exposure to idealized lives is correlated with reduced well-being (Verduyn et al., 2017).

The influencer economy makes this situation more visible. Content creators often stage luxury apartments, designer hauls, and professional networking events as if they were ordinary parts of daily life. Many also highlight elite credentials to strengthen their image. Even when there is some truth behind these portrayals, they are frequently exaggerated to drive engagement, channeling status-seeking into a cycle of constant upward social comparison. Such behavior is strongly associated with envy and feelings of personal inadequacy, and with broader psychological strain, particularly among young people who use social platforms heavily (Keles et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2014).

The scope for resilience is uneven. Fact-checking accounts and “debunking” videos can expose staged scenes or fabricated claims, but they often circulate mainly among audiences who tend to be skeptical. For most users, resisting these aspirational illusions requires repeated transparency cues and explicit media literacy training that make the mechanics of impression management more visible. Individually, cultivating critical viewing, asking how and why content is staged—weakens the pull of comparison. Collectively, platforms and educators can reduce harm through labels that flag sponsored or staged posts, media programs explaining impression management, and community discussions that redirect attention toward more grounded forms of value. With such scaffolding, illusions of wealth and status remain potential sources of anxiety, yet they can also become occasions for reflection and resilience.

**Gendered Conflicts and Reframed Awareness**

Social media often reframes structural inequality as interpersonal hostility. Engagement-driven ranking favors moral-emotional and negative cues, so misperceptions about gender conflict remain highly visible and spread quickly in moments of uncertainty (Brady et al., 2017; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). This visibility draws people into collective sense-making. They join discussions for connection and clarity, yet weak verification can magnify misinterpretations and convert structural debates into personal blame.

Broader access to mobile internet has widened participation in public discourse. This inclusion is valuable, but it also increases the circulation of simplified claims about history and gender norms. A recurrent example argues that legalizing polygamy would improve society by restoring an “ancient” tradition. Historical work indicates that in many societies polygyny was largely restricted to elites because only they could support multiple households, which entrenched hierarchy and limited opportunities for ordinary men and women. Legal monogamy functions as a leveling institution that reduces elite monopolization and supports more widespread family formation (Henrich et al., 2012). When this context is absent online, anxiety and frustration rise as users encounter narratives that misattribute structural problems to gender antagonism.

Resilience becomes more likely when communities supply context and verification. Brief accuracy prompts reduce impulsive sharing by making truthfulness salient at the moment of decision, and crowdsourced fact-checking can surface reliable judgments that track professional fact-checkers at scale (Pennycook et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2021). Well-moderated, fact-oriented spaces help participants notice when status and class dynamics, rather than gender hostility alone, drive observed inequalities. They also provide social norms that reward careful claims and discourage sensationalism. Without such moderation, the same group processes can intensify polarization and deepen misperceptions (Sunstein, 2002).

Integrated with the broader framework, intolerance of uncertainty motivates the search for simple explanations, social comparison heightens emotional stakes, and collective sense-making under algorithmic curation determines whether communities escalate outrage or convert confusion into shared understanding. With context-rich moderation and simple accuracy tools in place, participants can redirect attention from gender antagonism toward institutional and class factors that better explain unequal outcomes, turning initial anxiety into critical awareness and collective resilience (Brady et al., 2017; Pennycook et al., 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Resilience in a world of constant crises is more than a slogan: it’s a capacity we can actively build, starting with people themselves. By developing media literacy, fostering a greater tolerance for uncertainty, and cultivating healthier habits of social comparison, we learn to slow down, verify sources, and look beyond headlines. But personal growth alone isn't enough. It must be supported by thoughtful choices in the platforms we use daily. Introducing slight friction before resharing, emphasizing contextual provenance, and algorithmically prioritizing reliability over sensationalism can help keep valuable information visible and reduce distortion.

Ultimately, resilience is sustained within communities. Small, well-moderated spaces that prioritize verification and honest dialogue can transform collective anxiety into shared understanding and mutual support. Together, these strategies translate a conceptual framework into practical reality. When we learn to tolerate uncertainty rather than fear it, when comparisons are grounded in context, and when belonging is nurtured rather than exploited, the very systems that once amplified anxiety can become channels for sense-making and collaborative action. We may not control the pace of global change, but we can influence how we respond, and in that choice, true resilience takes root.

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