The Collapse of Digital Defences:
A Terror Management Approach to Patricia Lockwood's
No One Is Talking About This

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Abstract

Patricia Lockwood's No One Is Talking About This (2021) is her debut novel that exhibits the mental strain of existing in a social media encapsulated world, overloaded with crisis. Attributing the core ideas of Terror Management Theory (TMT), this study examines the novel's portrayal of how continuous exposure to collective mortality salience in virtual platform leads to emotional stagnation and ironic detachment. The protagonist initially navigates the hyper-connected reality by immersing in doomscrolling and participating in meme culture, as a coping strategy against existential threat. In contrast, as the plots moves, the narrative shifts when she faces relational mortality salience realizing her niece's terminal condition. The experience of personal loss acts as a barrier for her defence mechanisms, dismantling the protective layer of digital detachment. Studying this transition, the paper explores the psychological sequence of events and responses involved when mediated defences collapse under the weight of personal grief, positioning the novel as a reflection of modern existential anxiety in the context of digital culture.
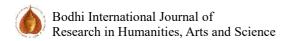
Keywords: terror management theory, emotional saturation, doomscrolling, defence mechanism, relational mortality salience, digital culture

Introduction

Literature is a route map of human life. It displays social, political, economic, environmental and psychological realities of its time. It is an encyclopaedia of human experiences. It is intersected with multiple aspects of literature including philosophy, history and politics which makes it interdisciplinary. It navigated intricate layers of social structures from oral tradition to digital narratives. As literature continues to negotiate with postmodern concerns, there is an obvious impact on the behaviour of human life. It serves not only as a repository of knowledge but also as a reflective archive of societal evolution.

Digital Humanities is a dynamic and interdisciplinary field of research. It records the growing technological and digital media progresses in today's engaged world. It blends the interpretive practices of humanities and the advancements of Tech-enabled platforms. It provides a critical infrastructure to analyse identity, overstimulation and environmental collapse. It engages with themes of this kind providing an innovative and transformative approach. It also reflects the response of humanity to

the media saturated life under the construction of psychological and cognitive processes.

A growing and renowned 1982 born American poet, essayist and novelist, Patricia Lockwood is famous for her debut novel *No One Is Talking About This.* Before her contributions to novel writing, she has written two poetry collections titled *Balloon Pop Outlaw Black* and *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals.* She is the owner of multiple awards which includes, The Thunder Prize for American Humor for her 2017 memoir *Priestdaddy,* The Dylan Thomas Prize for her 2021 debut novel *No One Is Talking About This.* She is also contributing her expertise as an editor since 2019 for the London Review of Books. She is the only writer whose fiction and nonfiction works got repeated in The New York Times Bestseller list in a short span of time. Her very recent work include *Will There Ever Be Another You* published in 2025.

No One Is Talking About This (2021) is a gripping work which is written in a pure stream of consciousness style. In the first half, digital performance overtakes real-life connections. The unnamed protagonist feels numb and overloaded as she constantly gets engaged with the world crisis. She also gets trapped in the absurdity of the digital world. She feels helpless and becomes unreactive for all the problems that happens around her. In the second half, there is a sudden change of channel which shows a personal crisis. The protagonist's sister gives birth to a baby with severe illness. This idea inculcates the life's uncertainty which she understood through niece who is in her deathbed. She becomes highly affective grappling with relational mortality salience. The novel gives a reality strike that brings back her alive with feelings, to react, to respond, to love, to cry, to grieve, and most importantly to be present in the non-virtual realm. The novel concludes with proving the failure of digital barriers.

The novel is analysed applying psychological approach to literature. Human behaviour is often influenced by the nature of present affective experiences, which may or may not be shaped by prior experiences. The select novel *No One Is*
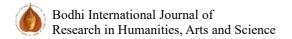
Talking About This is interpreted with psychological insights that act as a medium to exhibit the inner thoughts and conflicts, coping mechanisms and existential transformation experienced by the character. The structure of the psychological response aligns with the terror management principles showing the failure of the defences when confronted by personal loss.

Terror Management Theory (TMT) is a social psychology model that was established by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski. They introduced the term in their book *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* in 2015. It states that a common psychological confrontation arises from the intuition to avoid harm, while being aware that death is unavoidable and unpredictable. The anxiety generated by this tension is handled using defence strategies like escapism and constant social media views. It furnish meaning and permanence through offsetting symbolic culture overshadowed by personal significance of death.

The concept of TMT was initially developed by social psychologists Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski. But the idea of TMT is traced earlier back to Ernest Becker's 1973 work *The Denial of Death*. It is a Pulitzer prize winning nonfiction. Becker states that the initial human reaction would be distraction or avoidance from the impending crisis that is inevitable.

In accordance with Terror Management Theory, individuals cope with the panic of death by two forms of defence mechanisms. Proximal defences are explicit defences which attributes denial of personal vulnerability or diverting from the thoughts related to death. Conversely, Distal defences are implicit defences involves reinforcing cultural beliefs, boosting self-worth, and the adoption of group identities or values that provide meaning and symbolic immortality. These combined strategies work in easing the fear triggered by the awareness of mortality.

"When people are reminded of their mortality, they cling more strongly to their cultural worldviews and strive to bolster their self-esteem, because these psychological constructs

provide protection against the fear of death". (Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 127)

Researchers have recorded Lockwood's use of fragmented narrative and affective saturation to showcase digital consciousness. The protagonist's engagement with social media is a strategical method she employs to manage her affective overload. Contemporary literary studies have focussed TMT associating it to trauma studies, grief narratives, and post-apocalyptic fiction. However, its use in post-internet fiction is still confined. This paper fills that gap by aligning the novel's form and content with the trajectory of mortality salience and defence breakdown.

The novel addresses both individual and collective mortality salience in a hyper-digital setting. Lockwood's work serves as an exceedingly rich site for TMT analysis. A distinct representation of defensive strategies both put into effort and taken out of picture is provided by the protagonist's change in attitude from ironic detachment to existential engagement.

The core idea of TMT when analysed in relevance to digital humanities portrays that both are distinct but indirectly intersect with each other in innovative and interdisciplinary research. The internal conflicts caused due to the overstimulation and hyper engagement in media saturated world triggered the guidance of defence mechanisms. TMT claims that in sequence to adequately shield oneself from existential anxiety, individuals generate social paradigms and self-esteem buffers. The protagonist in Lockwood's work initially use humour, digital detachment, and social media performance to overcome the anxiety triggered on by the salience of collective mortality. These symbolic defensive measures, however, collapse when a personal crisis (her niece's life threatening illness) occurs. According to the paper, Lockwood's book shows how defence mechanisms of the digital age breakdown when faced with relational mortality by graphing an alley from avoidance to existential engagement.

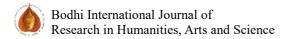The novel travels through stages of digital crisis management which is evident in the protagonist life.

Initially she is totally addicted and overstimulated by the virtual content uploaded in so called "The Portal". Through constant consumption of climate disaster news, wildfires, melting ice cups, and extinction events, she identifies mortality salience.

In Lockwood's novel, the main character's habit of doomscrolling, her use of humour, and her ironic detachment all hint at ways she's trying to cope. The chaotic news and bizarre content she consumes allow her to engage with the idea of death without really getting too close to it. These defences aren't necessarily unhealthy, rather, they're a way to adapt to the quirks of digital life. Still, according to TMT, these coping strategies can be fragile and might fall apart when someone faces their own mortality up close. When her niece gets diagnosed, it throws a wrench in her usual ways of dealing, because this kind of relational mortality requires her to be emotionally present, unlike the abstract collective mortality she's used to. The protagonist's breakdown shows that both her close and distant strategies didn't work, leading to a dramatic showdown with some deep existential dispute.

The protagonist uses irony and detachment as defensive techniques to cope through the never-ending loop of worldly destructions. This study evaluates how human behaviour is formulated based on the death awareness using the concepts of TMT.

In the first half of the novel, the main character is deeply engaged in a digital world. Her connection to the portal is both personal and distant. *"Why did the portal feel so private, when you only entered it when you needed to be everywhere?"* (Lockwood 3). This line deals with the protagonist's existential disconnection and persuasive loneliness, while being engaged in the collective digital space.

The Portal provides her with community, significance, and a way to distract herself. But it also highlights her inability to contribute to the virtual world, as she seeks recognition, inclusiveness, and popularity in the temporal world. *"There were only two questions at three in the morning, and they were Am I dying and Does anybody really love me."* (Lockwood 8).

She consumes digital media continuously and absorbs the outpoured emotions flooded in social media like climate crisis, political wars, human rights abuses. She gets diverted from those collective mortality as she scrolls through the micro-videos which emits an array of divergent emotions every second. This shows the temporariness of shared emotions online. She in order to get through the rough state of human experiences begins doomscrolling as her defence mechanism.

> "*The people who lived in the portal were often compared to these legendary experiment rats who kept hitting a button over and over to get a pellet. But at least the rats were getting a pellet, or the hope of a pellet, or the memory of a pellet. When we hit the button, all we are getting was to be more of a rat.*" (Lockwood 90).

These defences, though, are flimsy. The central character endures developing psychological estrangement and excessive stimulation. She acknowledges to the futility of her reactions and indicates at how digital shorthand has seized the place of her emotional vocabulary. Death terminates to be a lived experience and turns into a scrolling spectacle.

> "*We took the things we found in the portal as much for granted as if they had grown there, gathered them as God's own flowers. When we learned that they had been planted there on purpose by people who understood them to be poisonous, who were pointing their poison on us.*" (Lockwood 92).

The climatic shift happens when her sister's child is diagnosed with a terminal illness incurable. Her niece's suffering cannot be abstract or scrolled. It stipulates emotional presence, affective response, care and vulnerability. After traversing the portal, the protagonist enters an area of embodied grief. She no longer finds meaning in media saturated engagement, and hr symbolic defensive structures crumble. This breakdown reinforces TMT's argument that relational mortality may trigger defence mechanisms to collapse. Vitally, this collapse is portrayed as a means in attaining authenticity rather than as a failure. The protagonist starts to connect, grieve, as

well as feel difficult times. The tone becomes softer, images linger, and sentences get longer as the narrative style changes in the second part of the novel. Ironic distance is substituted by emotional depth. The following lines from the novel highlights the unnamed narrators decision to spend quality time with her niece. It records the collapse of defence mechanism and embrace of existential connection.

> "*I can do anything for her,*"…….
> "*A minute means something to her, more than it means to us. We don't know how long she has – I can give them to her, I can give her my minutes*". Then, almost angrily, "*What was I doing with them before?*" (Lockwood 171).

The central character of the novel, does not switch her cope with new cultural beliefs or ideologies. Instead, after the rupture of all the defence strategies, she embraces the unpredictability of death and grief. This transition moves forward to the TMT's framework: Existential acceptance and emotional growth. She accepts death rather than fights it. This resolution provides an example of how facing loss can lead to psychological development.

Conclusion

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* is a revamped version which is a novel idea that enters the theoretical field of psychological analysis. Integrating binocular vision into Terror Management Theory, the novel is an apt example of how digital media's defence mechanism initially provides a risk-free reliable environment, and ultimately collapse under the pressure of personal crisis. The novel channelizes from ironic detachment to existential attachment demonstrates the limits of symbolic defences and the necessity of emotional presence. Mortality when face directly and not through memes and scrolling, she models a healthier and more grounded response to existential anxiety. Lockwood offers more than a cultural critical overview through her debut novel *No One Is Talking About This.* Her work sheds light on prevalent societal issues and explores potential solutions. It also provides a psychological map for navigating the trauma of modern existence. The novel justifies that emotional

growth and meaning is possible through the life of the unnamed protagonist. But it will be easily accomplishable only when we understand the ephemeral sense of doomscrolling and put away gadgets and acknowledge the inevitability of life.

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