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Scrolling While the World Warms: El Niño, the Cost-of-Living Squeeze, Digital Overconsumption and the Return of Barter

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ABSTRACT.

In October 2026, households face three pressures at once: a strengthening El Niño that threatens food and water security, a cost-of-living squeeze that forces choices between needs and luxuries, and a digital environment that encourages compulsive scrolling and viral artificial intelligence trends. This paper connects these pressures. It argues that the same logic of extraction that strains the climate and ecosystems also shapes everyday digital habits, and that the revival of barter and sharing economies is a reasonable response to economic strain but not a complete one. Drawing on recent reports and on research in economics, psychology and environmental humanities, the paper reviews the effects of El Niño, the revival of barter, the psychological costs of doomscrolling and the environmental footprint of AI image trends such as the 2026 "80s portrait" craze. It concludes with proposals for individuals, communities and policy-makers, and stresses that the evidence on the footprint of a single digital act is uncertain, while the evidence on aggregate scale is not.

Keywords: El Niño, cost of living, barter, doomscrolling, artificial intelligence, environmental footprint, consumption, biodiversity

1. Introduction

A household in 2026 may check the weather forecast, the price of vegetables and an endless feed of bad news on the same phone in the same hour. Each of these experiences appears separate, yet they are linked. A warming ocean affects rainfall and harvests, harvests affect prices, prices force families to separate needs from luxuries, and the anxiety caused by all of this is often managed by more time online, which in turn feeds a digital economy that depends on energy, water and hardware. At the same time, the effects fall not only on human beings but on the many other species that share the planet.

This paper takes these linked pressures as its subject. It asks four questions. What does the current El Niño mean for livelihoods and prices? How are people redefining need and luxury, and why are some returning to barter? How do doomscrolling and unwanted internet use affect well-being? And what is the environmental cost of viral AI trends, and how does it relate to the wider pattern of exploitation that harms the Earth and other species?

2. A strengthening El Niño

The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) reported on 31 July 2026 that El Niño was intensifying steadily and was expected to dominate global climate patterns from August to October, raising the likelihood of above-normal temperatures across much of the world and shifting rainfall patterns ("Strong El Niño"). By October, the WMO reported that El Niño was firmly established and strengthening, that sea-surface temperatures in the central and eastern tropical Pacific were expected to reach record levels from October to December, that the peak was forecast for December, and that the event was near-certain to persist through February 2027 and could be among the strongest since at least 1950 ("WMO Warns"). Another report on the forecasts notes that NOAA gave a greater than 90 percent chance of a very strong event in the 2026-27 winter, and that India's meteorological department had forecast a below-normal southwest monsoon of around 90 percent of the long-period average ("El Niño Is Back"). A humanitarian briefing based on WMO and crop-monitoring material also expects negative crop-yield impacts during the 2026-27 event (Welthungerhilfe). *[Update with the actual 2026 monsoon outcome and the latest WMO and NOAA statements before submission.]*

The WMO stresses that effects are uneven: some regions face drought and others flood risk, and outcomes depend on interactions with other climate drivers ("Strong El Niño"). For commerce, the pattern is familiar. Poor harvests raise food prices, drought strains water and power supply, and floods damage trade and transport. Because these pressures arrive on top of existing inflation, they deepen the cost-of-living problem for households with little savings.

3. The cost-of-living squeeze: need versus luxury

Maslow's hierarchy of needs places food, water and shelter at the base of human motivation and treats other goals as dependent on them. When prices rise, households are forced to protect the base of that pyramid and cut the rest. Veblen's account of conspicuous consumption adds a second view: much consumption is driven not by need but by status, and is shaped by what others can see. The current moment makes both ideas visible. A family weighs the price of vegetables against a new phone, a school fee against a subscription, and a trip against a debt.

The squeeze is a global pattern, not an Indian one. In October 2026, protests in Paris and other French cities, which began among high school students and widened into a movement over living costs, were reported to draw very large crowds ("France Protests"). Such protests show that cost-of-living pressure is experienced as an injustice as well as a budget problem.

A useful distinction can be drawn between three categories: *needs* (food, water, shelter, health, education), *wants* (comforts and enjoyments that improve life) and *compulsions* (habits produced or amplified by systems designed to capture attention or create fashion). Digital consumption sits uneasily across all three. A phone and a data connection are now needs for work, banking and schooling, yet endless feeds and viral trends are designed to turn a want into a compulsion. In this sense, the question is not whether people should have luxuries, but who benefits from a system that blurs the line.

4. "Going back" to barter

When money is scarce, some people return to older forms of exchange. A Boston Globe report notes that persistent inflation and high living costs are bringing barter back into communities and social media, citing the barter clubs that appeared in Argentina during its economic collapse, the Barter for a Better Fiji group that over a fifth of that country's population joined when tourism collapsed, and the spread of Buy Nothing groups ("Snow Removal"). A Canadian report likewise describes people trading skills and goods through local online groups in response to an affordability crisis, and quotes a management scholar who describes parts of the economy as overly financialised ("Trade Your Zucchini Loaf").

The historical picture should be handled carefully. Graeber argues that the popular story of a primitive world of pure barter that money later replaced is not supported by anthropological evidence, and that early societies relied more on credit, gift and obligation. The modern revival is therefore better described as a return to reciprocity than to an ancient system.

	Advantages	**Limits**
Household	Access to goods and services without cash; builds community ties	Needs a match between what each side wants; hard to pay rent, loans or taxes
Environment	Extends the life of goods; reduces demand for new products	Does not by itself reduce harmful production or energy use
Economy	Resilience in a downturn; informal safety net	Small scale; unrecorded; offers no protection for those with little to trade
Society	Trust, reciprocity, skill sharing	Can exclude the isolated or the very poor

Barter and sharing are therefore a useful supplement to the monetary economy, particularly for reducing waste and building solidarity, but they cannot replace public support, stable prices and fair wages.

5. Doomscrolling and unwanted internet use

People who feel anxious about prices and weather often turn to their phones, and the stream of alarming news they find can deepen the anxiety. An experiment with 299 participants found that spending as little as two minutes reading bad pandemic-related news on social media reduced positive mood ("Doom Scroll"; Buchanan et al.). A survey of about 1,100 US adults found that 16.5 percent showed severely problematic news consumption, and that 74 percent of that group reported mental health problems, compared with 8 percent of everyone else ("Doomscrolling May Be"; "Doomscrolling Can Become"). A study of more than 800 university students in the US and Iran linked doomscrolling to existential anxiety, despair and distrust, and described negative news as a source of vicarious trauma ("Doomscrolling Threatens"; "Are You Doomscrolling?"). These findings come from different samples and designs and show association more than proof of cause, but they point in the same direction.

For this paper, doomscrolling matters in two ways. First, it affects the capacity to make careful decisions about money and consumption, since anxious people may be more susceptible to impulse spending, comfort buying and escapist trends. Second, it consumes time and attention that could be spent on community action, learning or rest. Unwanted internet use, in the sense of time spent online that the user themselves wishes they had not spent, is therefore both a personal and a social cost.

6. AI image trends and the environment: the 2026 "80s portrait" craze

In September 2026, an AI-generated "80s portrait" trend spread across Instagram, in which users uploaded a photograph to an AI tool and received a retro-styled image ("What Is the ChatGPT"; "Everyone's Making"). Journalists soon asked about its environmental cost, and the answers show both the importance and the uncertainty of the issue.

What is known. Generating an image requires computing power, electricity and cooling, and data centres affect the environment through energy use and emissions, water consumption for cooling and the material footprint of hardware (Dudraj). A study by researchers at Hugging Face and Carnegie Mellon University that examined 17 AI models found that image generation requires far more energy than text generation, and that doubling the resolution raised energy demand by between 1.3 and 4.7 times (Dudraj; Luccioni et al.). Research on water use in AI systems has also drawn attention to the water footprint of cooling and electricity generation (Li et al.). The International Energy Agency's projections, as reported in the coverage, suggest that global data-centre electricity demand could roughly double by 2030 ("Everyone's Making").

What is uncertain. Estimates of the cost of one image differ widely. One report gives a figure of about 0.01 kilowatt-hours, roughly half a smartphone charge ("What Is the ChatGPT"), while another reports higher figures for some systems ("ChatGPT 80s Trend"). One report estimates about 29 millilitres of water per image (Dudraj), while another warns that a widely repeated claim of 500 millilitres per prompt is not what the underlying study found, and that footprints vary with model, hardware, data-centre location, cooling system and electricity source ("Everyone's Making"). Several reports agree that a single image has a relatively small footprint and that the real concern is scale: millions of people repeating the same trend, often generating several versions of the same image ("Love the 80s"; "The Price Behind").

Why it still matters. The trend illustrates how a short-lived fashion can add to a long-lived infrastructure. Data centres built to meet such demand compete for water and land. A planned multibillion-dollar Google data-centre hub in Andhra Pradesh has been reported to face opposition from environmentalists concerned about water supplies and wildlife ("Love the 80s"; Dudraj). Reports also note that these portraits involve handing personal photographs to commercial systems, a further cost that is easy to overlook ("The Price Behind"). It would be inaccurate to say that each AI image is a natural disaster; it is more accurate to say that viral digital habits externalise their costs, and that ordinary users rarely see or choose them.

7. Exploitation and its costs to the Earth and other species

The pressures described above share a common structure. They treat water, energy, attention and personal data as resources to be extracted, and they leave the costs to be paid elsewhere, by the climate, by communities and by other species. Nixon calls this kind of harm slow violence: damage that is gradual, dispersed and largely invisible to those who cause it. Ghosh argues that modern culture has found it hard to imagine this kind of planetary harm in its stories. Raworth proposes that economies should operate within a safe ecological ceiling while meeting everyone's social foundation, and Hickel argues that the pursuit of endless growth in rich economies is incompatible with that aim.

The consequences for other species are severe. The global assessment by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) found that around one million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction, with land and sea use change among the leading drivers and climate change an increasingly important one. A strengthening El Niño adds heat and rainfall extremes to these existing pressures, and expanding digital infrastructure adds new demands for land, water and power. Wildlife in the path of a planned data centre or in a drought-stricken forest does not take part in the economy that causes the harm, yet it bears part of the cost.

Source	What it contributes
WMO (31 July and 9 October 2026)	El Niño strengthening, record ocean temperatures, expected peak in December
Le360 and Welthungerhilfe	Very strong El Niño probability, below-normal monsoon forecast, crop-yield risks
Express Tribune on France	Cost-of-living protests as a sign of economic stress
Boston Globe and CBC	Barter and sharing revival amid inflation and affordability crisis
Health Communication, PLOS ONE and Computers in Human Behavior Reports studies	Psychological costs of doomscrolling
Kathmandu Post, Statesman, Brut and National Herald	Footprint of the AI 80s trend, with differing estimates
IPBES	Around one million species threatened with extinction

8. Discussion: what can be done

Individuals. People can reduce doomscrolling by setting time limits and checking news at fixed times, and can use AI image tools purposefully, avoiding repeated regeneration for trivial purposes. Researchers who studied doomscrolling suggest balancing negative content with positive information and taking breaks ("Doom Scroll"; "Doomscrolling Threatens").

- **Communities.** Swap groups, time banks, repair cafes and shared tool libraries can ease the cost of living and reduce waste. Schools and colleges can include media literacy and digital well-being in the curriculum.
- **Business and technology.** Companies can publish the energy and water footprint of their AI services, locate data centres with attention to water stress and local consent, and design tools that make low-resolution or limited-use modes the default. Retailers can support repair and reuse as well as sales.
- **Public policy.** Governments can strengthen early warning and food-security measures during El Niño, support households through targeted social protection, require environmental disclosure from data centres, and protect habitats from the pressure of new infrastructure.
- **The humanities.** Stories, poems and essays can help people recognise slow violence and imagine a different relationship with the planet. Teachers of literature can use climate narratives, such as those discussed by Ghosh, to help students connect distant causes with everyday choices.

9. Conclusion

The strengthening El Niño, the cost-of-living squeeze, the habit of doomscrolling and the rise of viral AI trends are not separate stories. They reflect a world in which natural, social and digital resources are drawn on faster than they can be replenished, while the costs fall on people with the least power and on species with no voice. The return to barter and sharing shows people's capacity for reciprocity, but it cannot repair the larger system. A more careful distinction between needs, wants and compulsions, together with transparent digital infrastructure, resilient food systems and a culture that takes slow harm seriously, offers a more realistic path. As the evidence on single digital acts is uncertain but the evidence on aggregate scale is strong, the responsible approach is to act on scale: to ask not only whether one portrait or one scroll matters, but what happens when billions of them are repeated.

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