

Research Paper

Relationship Between Psychological Distress, Narcissism, And Maladaptive Daydreaming Among Adolescents

Asilaa Abbas^{1*}, Manoj R², Sudar Oli D³

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming, psychological distress, and narcissism among adolescents. Using convenience sampling technique, 271 adolescents (ages 13-17) from educational institutions in Chennai participated in the study. Participants completed standardized measures, including the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16), Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, and the Brief Pathological Narcissism Inventory. Obtained data was analyzed using Excel, with correlational analysis, t-tests to compare maladaptive and non-maladaptive daydreamers, and linear regression to assess the predictive role of psychological distress and narcissism on maladaptive daydreaming. The results revealed that maladaptive daydreamers reported significantly higher levels of psychological distress and narcissism compared to non-maladaptive daydreamers. Correlational analysis showed positive relationships between maladaptive daydreaming, psychological distress, and narcissism. Additionally, linear regression analysis indicated that psychological distress and narcissism significantly predicted maladaptive daydreaming in adolescents. These findings suggest that maladaptive daydreaming may serve as both a coping mechanism and a contributor to increased psychological distress and narcissism, underscoring the importance of addressing these factors in adolescent mental health interventions.

Keywords: *Adolescence, maladaptive daydreaming, psychological distress, narcissism*

Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by several physiological, emotional and psychological changes lasting through a transitional period of childhood to adulthood. This transitional phase is accompanied by prominent challenges and additional difficulties, including academic stress, identity and role confusion, perceived stress, relationship challenges among peers, social inclusion, bullying, and other challenges.

Adolescent coping mechanisms are of importance in terms of research, as they are more susceptible to emotional distress due to ineffective coping strategies. One often overlooked but significant coping technique of adolescents facing such emotional strain is maladaptive daydreaming—a tendency to escape into elaborate, vivid fantasies to avoid real-life

¹Student, M.Sc. Clinical Psychology, Dr. M.G.R Educational & Research Institute

²Head of the Department, Department of Psychology, Dr. M.G.R Educational & Research Institute

³Asst Professor, Department of Psychology, Dr. M.G.R Educational & Research Institute

*Corresponding Author

Received: March 25, 2025; Revision Received: April 22, 2025; Accepted: April 26, 2025

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challenges. These daydreams offer temporary relief from distress but also significantly interfere with daily functioning, relationships, and mental health.

The intersection of narcissism, psychological distress, and maladaptive daydreaming is underexplored, particularly regarding their interrelationships and combined effects on mental health, presenting a unique challenge in understanding adolescents' emotional lives. Mental health in adolescence is an important area of study that focuses on the psychological, functional, and developmental aspects of adolescent growth during which the development of mental health disorders is often likely to arise. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) reported that 10–20% of children and adolescents worldwide have mental health problems.

Psychological distress, characterized by symptoms such as lost interest, sadness, hopelessness, restlessness, and feeling tense (Mirowski and Ross 2002), is a state of emotional suffering that manifests in various ways. Psychological distress manifests in multiple ways, including emotional symptoms such as sadness, hopelessness, and irritability, behavioral symptoms such as withdrawal from social interactions, self-harm, or aggression, and physical symptoms such as fatigue, potentially interfering with daily functioning. Stress in adolescence is significantly related to anxiety, depression, and suicide (Byrne et al. 2007; Grant 2013). The present study investigates the level of psychological distress among adolescents and maladaptive daydreaming along with narcissism.

Psychological distress in adolescence often triggers the use of defense mechanisms. These defense mechanisms are adaptive responses allowing adolescents to manage their emotional difficulties however, over reliance leads to maladaptive coping that hinders emotional development. Daydreaming often serves as a medium of escape for adolescents dealing with psychological distress; it allows them to immerse themselves in a world of fantasy constructed to ease their difficulties. Daydreaming is a form of self-generated thought and imaginative experience where an individual shifts their attention away from the present moment and becomes absorbed in a vivid stream of thoughts, images, or scenarios through the drifting of human consciousness. The pathological form of daydreaming was first described by Somer (2002) who emphasized that, in some cases, daydreaming may be an intrusive and hardly controllable phenomenon that replaces real-life interactions, a condition conceptualized as 'maladaptive daydreaming'. Of all ages of life, adolescence may well represent the best-suited one to investigate daydreaming because its frequency and intensity both tend to decline gradually into adulthood (Giambra, 1979, 2000). Maladaptive daydreaming can be used as a coping mechanism in adolescents to experience positive emotions related to the content of daydreaming, social avoidance, procrastination, and stress management however it can cause intrapsychic conflicts or frustration when daydreaming is disturbed, yet it plays a significant role in emotional regulation as it affects emotions and mood. A study by Somer et al. (2019) empirically confirmed that maladaptive daydreaming enables the individual to regulate emotions to some extent and create protection against external and internal reality. Exploring psychological distress and maladaptive daydreaming brings into question the role of personality traits and the interplay of these factors. In particular, the trait of narcissism has gained increasing attention in the developmental literature.

Narcissism, derived from the Greek myth of Narcissus, reflects an inflated but fragile self-love. In the myth, Narcissus rejects the love of the nymph Echo in favour of his own

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reflection, leading to both his and Echo's demise. Narcissus embodies arrogance and a near-perfect self-view, while Echo represents fragility, with self-worth dependent on external validation. These contrasting traits have merged in the modern understanding of the narcissistic personality, which combines both self-absorption and a deep need for external affirmation. In its extreme form, narcissism is a personality disorder that involves grandiose views of self, an inflated sense of entitlement, and exploitive attitudes toward others (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Grandiose narcissism is more outwardly confident and attention-seeking, while vulnerable narcissism involves deeper emotional sensitivity and insecurity. Both types rely on a preoccupation with self-image and a need for validation but express it in different ways. It is believed in both the popular and theoretical literatures that adolescents are particularly susceptible to narcissistic tendencies, and that the management of narcissism may well differentiate normal from dysfunctional adolescent development (Bleiberg, 1994).

Many authors link grandiose fantasies directly with pathological narcissism (Back et al., 2013) but there is insufficient evidence how grandiose and vulnerable narcissists differ in daydreaming activity. Pathological narcissism is characterized by problematic interpersonal behaviors, and an increased need for external validation. Evidently, these interpersonal problems may contribute to psychological distress, potentially accounting for the association between pathological narcissism and psychological distress symptoms.

The present study focuses on psychological distress and its severity between maladaptive daydreamers and non-maladaptive daydreamers while exploring narcissistic traits among adolescents. The relationship between psychological distress, narcissism, and maladaptive daydreaming is complex and multifaceted. While psychological distress often serves as a precursor or exacerbating factor for maladaptive daydreaming, the role of narcissism in this dynamic remains underexplored. An exaggerated sense of self and a strong desire for approval are common signs of narcissistic tendencies, which can increase susceptibility to several types of psychological distress. Maladaptive daydreaming, on the other hand, may be a coping strategy for those who are having emotional difficulties, or a way for them to indulge in narcissistic dreams of idealized power and success.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To investigate the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming, psychological distress and narcissism among adolescents.
- To assess the difference in level of psychological distress and narcissism between probable Maladaptive daydreamers (MD) and Non-Maladaptive daydreamers (non-MD) among adolescents
- To determine whether psychological distress predicts Maladaptive daydreaming among adolescents.
- To determine whether narcissism predicts Maladaptive daydreaming among adolescents.

Hypothesis (H0)

- **H01:** There is no significant relationship between the level of psychological distress, maladaptive daydreaming and narcissism among adolescents.

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- **HO2:** There is no significant difference in level of psychological distress between probable Maladaptive daydreamers (MD) and Non-Maladaptive daydreamers (non-MD) among adolescents.
- **HO3:** There is no significant difference in level of narcissism between probable Maladaptive daydreamers (MD) and Non-Maladaptive daydreamers (non-MD) among adolescents.
- **HO4:** Narcissism and psychological distress are not significant predictors of maladaptive daydreaming in adolescents.

Sample

The study employed a convenience sampling method of data collection. The sample consisted of 271 adolescents aged 13 to 18, enrolled in educational institutions in Chennai. The sample included 151 males and 120 females. Data were collected through standardized instruments to assess Maladaptive Daydreaming, psychological distress and narcissism. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation from both the participants and, when applicable, their parents or guardians, ensuring voluntary and ethical participation.

Instruments

Three scales were administered via questionnaires to the participants,

1. **Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale:** The 16-Item Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16) was developed by Somer et al. (2017). The Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale-16 is a 16-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure Maladaptive Daydreaming. A 16-item maladaptive daydreaming measure replaces the preceding 14-item maladaptive daydreaming scale. The scale varies from 0% to 100%, with 10% intervals (0 % = never to 100% = all of the time). A score of 40 or higher indicates clinical-level maladaptive daydreaming suspicion which successfully discriminates self-identified maladaptive daydreamers from non-maladaptive daydreamers, and it displays good internal consistency and temporal stability (test-retest reliability, $r = .92$). A cut-off score of 60% can accurately distinguish between excessive and typical daydreamers. Alpha coefficient of .79 was acquired for this scale indicating strong internal consistency among the scale items, suggesting that they measure the same underlying construct reliably.
2. **Kessler Psychological Distress Scale:** The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10) developed by Professor Ronald C. Kessler of Harvard University, is a simple, self-report questionnaire designed to measure the level of psychological distress an individual has experienced in the most recent 4-week period. It focuses on symptoms of anxiety and depression, assessing the severity of emotional states rather than diagnostic criteria. The scale comprises of 10 questions that are answered using a five-point scale (where 5 = all of the time, and 1 = none of the time). For all questions, the client circles the answer truest for them in the past four weeks. Scores are then summed with the maximum score of 50 indicating severe distress, and the minimum score of 10 indicating no distress. The total internal consistency of the Psychological Distress Scale was $\alpha=0.844$. The internal consistency of the K10, measured by Cronbach's alpha, typically falls in the range of 0.85 to 0.90, which indicates strong internal consistency. This suggests that the items in the scale are highly correlated and measure the same underlying construct of psychological distress. The test-retest correlation of K10 is typically around 0.80 or higher, indicating high stability of results over time. The scale has good Construct Validity indicating strong correlations with other mental health measures (0.70–0.80).

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3. Brief-Pathological Narcissism Inventory (B-PNI): The Brief Pathological Narcissism Inventory (BPNI) is a psychological tool designed to assess narcissistic traits related to pathological narcissism. The 28-item version of the BPNI, developed by Schoenleber et al. (2015), is a self-report questionnaire that measures different aspects of narcissism, including vulnerability and grandiosity, which are often present in pathological forms of narcissistic personality disorder. Each item on the 28-item inventory asks respondents to rate statements related to these aspects of narcissism on a scale (typically a Likert scale, such as 1-5), with higher scores indicating greater levels of narcissistic traits. The B-PNI has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.80.

Procedure

The study employed a sample of 271 adolescents within the age of 13 to 17 and the data was obtained through questionnaires. The study employed correlational analysis to investigate the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming, psychological distress and narcissism among adolescents. Independent sample t-tests were conducted to assess the difference in level of psychological distress and narcissism between probable Maladaptive daydreamers (MD) and Non-Maladaptive daydreamers (non-MD) among adolescents and Linear regression analysis was employed to determine whether psychological distress and narcissism predicts Maladaptive daydreaming in adolescents.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 indicates the correlation matrix for Maladaptive Daydreaming, Psychological Distress and Narcissism

S.no	Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	r		
					1	2	3
1.	Maladaptive Daydreaming	47.5158	34.40		0.1705**		
2.	Psychological Distress	25.6199	7.26	271	0.1748**	0.3672**	
3.	Narcissism	70.3837	18.80				

**p < 0.01, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 1 shows the relationship between Maladaptive Daydreaming, Psychological Distress and Narcissism examined by Pearson's correlation analysis. The mean score of maladaptive daydreaming is 47.5158 and the standard deviation is 34.40 and the correlation coefficient between MD and Psychological distress is 0.1705** indicating positive correlation. The mean score of psychological distress is 25.6199 and the standard deviation is 7.26 and the correlation coefficient between psychological distress and Narcissism is 0.3672** indicating positive correlation and the mean score of Narcissism is 70.3837 and the standard deviation is 18.80 and the correlation coefficient between Narcissism and maladaptive daydreaming is 0.1748** indicating positive correlation.

Table 1 represents the results obtained correlational analysis and the Pearson's Correlation coefficient 2-tailed was calculated. The obtained correlation coefficients were found to be significant at the 0.01 level indicating strong positive correlation. Therefore, the null hypothesis "there is no significant relationship between the level of psychological distress, maladaptive daydreaming and narcissism among adolescents" is rejected. The results

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indicate that maladaptive daydreaming, psychological distress and narcissism are directly proportional to each other and it can be inferred that increase in one variable causes significant increase in other variables.

Table No. 2 indicates the t-test: Two Sample Assuming Unequal Variances for Psychological Distress among MD and non-MD groups

	Maladaptive Daydreamers	non-Maladaptive Daydreamers
Mean	27.4345	22.6601
Variance	54.13939977	36.89320388
Observations	168	103
df	246	
t Stat	5.787832554	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.00**	
t Critical two-tail	1.969654176	

The *t*-value is 5.787. **The *p*-value is < .00001. The result is significant at $p < 0.01$.

Table 2 indicates the results of the independent sample t-test conducted to compare the level of psychological distress between two groups, Probable Maladaptive Daydreamers (mean = 27.43, SD = 7.35) and non- Maladaptive daydreamers (mean = 22.66, SD = 6.07). The results of the F-test indicated a significant difference in variances between the two groups, $F(167, 102) = 1.47, p = .018$. Since the variances were found to be significantly different, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated, justifying the use of the t-test assuming unequal variances.

The obtained results showed a significant difference between the two groups, $t(246) = 5.79, p < .001$, with probable maladaptive daydreamers reporting higher levels of psychological distress than non-maladaptive daydreamers. The observed difference between the two groups is statistically significant, therefore the null hypothesis, “there is no significant difference in level of psychological distress between probable Maladaptive daydreamers and non-maladaptive daydreamers among adolescents” is rejected.

Table No. 3 indicates the t-test: Two Sample Assuming Equal Variances for Narcissism among MD and non-MD groups

	Maladaptive Daydreamers	non-Maladaptive Daydreamers
Mean	75.36904762	62.25242718
Variance	308.0665811	323.9944793
Observations	168	103
Pooled Variance	314.1061559	
df	269	
t Stat	5.913877646	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.00**	
t Critical two-tail	1.968821974	

The *t*-value is 5.9138. **The *p*-value is < .00001. The result is significant at $p < 0.01$.

Table 3 shows the results of the independent sample t-test comparing the level of narcissism between two groups, Probable Maladaptive daydreamers ($M = 75.37, SD = 17.57$) and non-Maladaptive Daydreamers ($M = 62.25, SD = 17.98$). The assumption of equal variances was confirmed by the F-test ($F = 0.95, p = .38$), which indicated no significant difference in

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variances between the two groups, justifying the use of the standard two-sample t-test (assuming equal variances). Results of the t-test indicated a significant difference in narcissism scores between probable Maladaptive daydreamers ($M = 75.37$, $SD = 17.57$) and non-Maladaptive Daydreamers ($M = 62.25$, $SD = 17.98$), $t(269) = 5.91$, $p < .001$, with probable maladaptive daydreamers reporting significantly higher levels of narcissism than non-maladaptive daydreamers.

The observed difference is statistically significant, therefore the null hypothesis, “there is no significant difference in level of narcissism between probable Maladaptive daydreamers (MD) and Non-Maladaptive daydreamers (non-MD) among adolescents” is rejected.

Table No. 4 shows Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Maladaptive Daydreaming for Psychological Distress and Narcissism among Adolescents (N=271)

Scales	Adjusted R square	β	F	Significance F
Model 1	0.02546073	0.8073**	8.053997	0.004886209
Model 2	0.026943437	0.3198**	8.476	0.003899773

Model 1 = Psychological distress predicting maladaptive daydreaming; Model 2 = Narcissism predicting maladaptive daydreaming. ** $p < 0.01$

Model 1: Predicting Maladaptive daydreaming from psychological distress

Model 1 shows the results of the simple linear regression to examine the relationship between the psychological distress (X) and maladaptive daydreaming (Y). The regression model is statistically significant, $F(1,268) = 8.05$, $p = 0.0049$, indicating that psychological distress significantly predicts maladaptive daydreaming. The model explained 2.55% of the variance in maladaptive daydreaming (adjusted $R^2 = 0.0255$)

The regression coefficient for psychological distress is $\beta = 0.8073$, which suggests that for each 1-unit increase in psychological distress, Maladaptive daydreaming is expected to increase by 0.8073 units, assuming other factors are constant. The p-value for psychological distress was $p = 0.0049$, indicating that this relationship is statistically significant.

Model 2: Predicting maladaptive daydreaming from narcissism

A second regression model examined whether narcissism predicts maladaptive daydreaming. The results indicated that the model was statistically significant, $F(1,268) = 8.48$, $p = 0.0039$ suggesting that narcissism significantly accounts for variation in maladaptive daydreaming. The model explained 2.69% of the variance in maladaptive daydreaming (adjusted $R^2 = 0.0269$)

The regression coefficient for psychological distress is $\beta = 0.3198$, indicating that for each 1-unit increase in narcissism, maladaptive daydreaming is expected to increase by 0.3198 units, assuming all other variables are held constant. The p-value for narcissism was 0.0039, suggesting that the relationship between narcissism and maladaptive daydreaming is statistically significant.

When comparing the two predictors, it becomes clear that while both psychological distress and narcissism are individually significant, they appear to influence maladaptive daydreaming in different ways. Psychological distress likely leads individuals to use maladaptive daydreaming as an emotional escape from negative feelings or overwhelming

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stress, whereas narcissism may contribute to maladaptive daydreaming by fueling self-aggrandizing fantasies that reinforce the individual's inflated sense of self-importance.

The p-value for psychological distress was $p = 0.0049$ and the p-value for narcissism was 0.0039, suggesting that psychological distress and narcissism are significant predictors of maladaptive daydreaming. Hence, the null hypothesis, "Narcissism and psychological distress are not significant predictors of maladaptive daydreaming in adolescents" is rejected.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between psychological distress, narcissism, and maladaptive daydreaming among adolescents and seeks to understand the predictive role of psychological distress and narcissism in maladaptive daydreaming. The results of the study indicate that maladaptive daydreaming is significantly associated with both psychological distress and narcissism in adolescents. The results provide empirical evidence that maladaptive daydreamers have significantly high levels of psychological distress and narcissism compared to non-maladaptive daydreamers.

The results of regression analysis indicate that psychological distress and narcissism significantly predicts maladaptive daydreaming however the relatively small percentage of variance explained by the models and the effect sizes suggest that other psychological and cognitive factors may be significant contributors. These findings demonstrate that maladaptive daydreaming may both be a coping mechanism and a contributing factor to the exacerbation of narcissism and psychological distress in adolescents.

The findings of the study align with previous research that establishes a relationship between psychological distress, narcissism and maladaptive daydreaming. Musetti et al. (2023) demonstrated a longitudinal link between maladaptive and increased psychological distress over time. The present research shows significant correlation between maladaptive daydreaming and psychological distress among adolescents and indicate that psychological distress plays a predictive role in maladaptive daydreaming. The results implicate that maladaptive daydreaming is linked to notably higher levels of psychological distress among adolescents and psychological distress is significantly higher among maladaptive daydreamers than non-maladaptive daydreamers reinstating the finding that maladaptive daydreaming is significantly linked to distress levels in adolescents. Maladaptive daydreaming has been associated with increased levels of perceived stress and lower life satisfaction highlighting the detrimental effects of Maladaptive daydreaming and its implications for mental health (Chaudhary et al., 2022).

Maladaptive Daydreamers often engage in vivid fantasies where they are the central figure, this may foster a heightened sense of self-importance and entitlement, core features of narcissism. The findings remain consistent with the central idea of excessive involvement in vivid fantasies and indulgence in daydreams pertaining to narcissism in adolescence. Maladaptive daydreaming presents as an opportunity for adolescents to avoid reality and facing their insecurities that might underlie their narcissistic fantasies. The results consistent with reported higher levels of narcissism in Maladaptive daydreamers as compared to non-Maladaptive daydreamers may implicate that narcissistic traits might play a significant role in manifestation of maladaptive daydreaming. This could be due to maladaptive daydreaming being opted as a defense mechanism against underlying insecurities. Results may also indicate the underlying pathological nature of maladaptive daydreaming though

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existent literature views maladaptive daydreaming as a dissociative behavior overlooking the underlying interplay of personality traits. Pietkiewicz et al. (2023) identified narcissism as a strong predictor of maladaptive daydreaming, consistent with the results of the present study. Similarly, a study by Ghinassi, Fioravanti, and Casale (2023) indicated that vulnerable narcissism predicted MD through characterological shame. The relationship between MD and narcissism appears to be influenced by underlying psychological factors. Maladaptive daydreaming plays a compensatory role, helping individuals regulate unmet personal needs (Brenner, 2020). Although distress and narcissism are important predictors, further research may examine how they interact with other variables, such as self-esteem, emotion regulation, personality traits, or childhood experiences, to create a more comprehensive understanding of maladaptive daydreaming.

This study underscores the need for further exploration of the interplay between narcissistic tendencies, maladaptive daydreaming, and psychological distress during adolescence. Empirical evidence indicates that adolescents exhibiting elevated narcissism levels may increasingly resort to maladaptive daydreaming as a coping mechanism, a pattern shown to exacerbate psychological distress. Further research should employ longitudinal studies to explore the causal relationships among narcissism, maladaptive daydreaming, and psychological distress.

While the present study provides valuable insights into the relationships between maladaptive daydreaming, psychological distress, and narcissism, the study sample primarily consists of adolescents, restricting the generalizability of findings to other age groups. Exploring these relationships in adults or clinical populations could provide deeper insights into the developmental trajectory and long-term consequences of maladaptive daydreaming. Another limitation is that the study explains only a small percentage of variance in maladaptive daydreaming, suggesting that additional factors, such as coping mechanisms, childhood trauma, attachment styles, or personality traits, may play significant roles. Future research should explore these variables to develop a more comprehensive understanding of maladaptive daydreaming.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Abbas, A., Manoj, R. & Oli, D. S. (2025). Relationship Between Psychological Distress, Narcissism, And Maladaptive Daydreaming Among Adolescents. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 13*(2), 995-1004. DIP:18.01.086.20251302, DOI:10.25215/1302.086