

Research Paper

Maladaptive Daydreaming and Big Five Personality Traits Among Emerging Adults

Mathew Reji¹, Athena Maria Vadakan¹, Emin Sajan Mathew¹,
Amal Asokkumar^{2*}

ABSTRACT

Maladaptive daydreaming is a psychological tendency to be immersed in vivid and elaborative daydreams which has a significant impact on the many aspects of an individual's life. Previous research show that maladaptive daydreaming is linked to other distressing psychological states such as stress, reduced life satisfaction etc. As maladaptive daydreaming is being considered as a tendency that may require mental health care, understanding how an individual's personality is linked to this phenomenon is very important. The present study explores the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and big five personality traits among emerging adults. The study follows a correlational research design and used the maladaptive daydreaming scale (MDS-SF5) and Big Five personality inventory (BFI-10) to collect the data. The results showed a significant relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and the traits of openness to new experience and agreeableness. This result suggests the further possibility of considering other factors and variables that could affect maladaptive daydreaming among the emerging adults' population.

Keywords: *Maladaptive daydreaming, Personality Traits, Emerging Adults*

Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) is a psychological phenomenon where individuals become deeply absorbed in vivid, elaborate daydreams that can dominate their waking hours, often at the expense of real-life interactions and responsibilities (Maffetone, 2018). MD is a tendency where an individual goes through significant psychological discomfort in relation with highly visual, emotionally charged and narrative driven daydreaming closely related to compulsive fantasizing. Daydreaming by itself is not considered harmful, and often facilitates various productive psychological activities. But Maladaptive daydreaming on the other hand, creates a situation where the individual experiences shame, isolation and other psychological issues. Maladaptive daydreaming has received much attention in the recent years with many individuals across the world sharing their concerns and demanding the condition be deemed clinically significant. Clinicians and

¹UG Student, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jyoti College of Management and Technology, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jyoti College of Management and Technology, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala

*Corresponding Author

Received: July 17, 2025; Revision Received: December 01, 2025; Accepted: December 05, 2025

Maladaptive Daydreaming and Big Five Personality Traits Among Emerging Adults

researchers are speculating the possibility of MD as an accessory to various psychologically distressing states, if not a disorder by itself. If the regular dreams are connected to nightmares, maladaptive daydreaming is very well coined as a nightmare.

MD is closely associated with social anxiety, OCD, emotional regulation and suicidal intent. The research in maladaptive daydreaming is showing a certain clinical significance to this tendency. Vs and Roneena (2022) conducted a case study of a 19-year-old engineering student which showed how MD can be a coping mechanism for childhood trauma, which signifies MD as not only as a possible symptom of psychological issues but also as a possible mechanism to deal with pre-existing mental health problems. The researchers have tried to raise awareness of this condition that has a resemblance of behavioural addiction and often unnoticed or understood in clinical contexts. Among the Indian youth there is a significant amount of MD reported with strong relationship with stress, reduced life satisfaction (Chaudhary et al. 2022). The youngsters reported MD as part of their imagination and planning mechanism, but it also has a hint of escaping from their current reality of life. This suggests that there is a multifaceted presence of maladaptive daydreaming in various situations related to youngsters' mental health.

Recent studies provide much light onto how maladaptive daydreaming can be dealt with as a potential psychological syndrome. In 2023, Herscu and colleagues made an important advancement in this topic by developing a structured one-of-a-kind treatment program for MD. The program was facilitated online in a period of 8 weeks and used psycho education, and motivational enhancement techniques along with mindfulness and self-monitoring. The full intervention group and partial intervention group (without self-monitoring) showed significant improvement in their distress associated with MD. There was a marked difference in the symptoms and frequency of MD, as well as, improvement in day-to-day functioning. Shanbhag and Pothiyil (2024) therapy case study also demonstrated a marked 60% reduction of MD fantasies while the participants social functioning and academic performance went up. This study establishes MD as a clinically significant as well as treatable condition or a maladaptive coping mechanism, which may arise along with other psychological issues.

As we focus on the subjective interiority of an individual, the personality traits are major set of variables that could affect how a person initiates or maintains maladaptive daydreaming. Allport (1937), had defined personality as a dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to the environment. Personality creates a unique image for everyone, distinguishing them from one another and it often directs people's action including how they respond to their life events. A multitude of factors are engaged in the development of a person's personality which can range from genetics to social upbringing. Personality psychology has yielded many valuable insights on to human behaviour and Big-5 personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1985) is now considered the gold standard for trait-personality theories. The big 5 gives a very comprehensive and wholistic approach to understanding an individual and its effects universal in the field of psychology that it could virtually affect everything including maladaptive daydreaming.

The present research aims to explore the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and the big five personality traits among emerging adults. Understanding the relationship between personality factors and maladaptive daydreaming could help develop valuable understanding about the subtle and potential connections underlying the mechanisms. Emerging adulthood as a transitional period connects the age group of an adolescent to an

Maladaptive Daydreaming and Big Five Personality Traits Among Emerging Adults

adult. It is not devoid of its own challenges and possibilities. As a period of self-focus and identity exploration emerging adulthood marks the individual gaining autonomy over their life decision (Arnett, 2000). Even though emerging adults are not completely involved in the commitments of adulthood the time period creates a large set of changes in a very short span of time. Emerging adults deal with more things by default simultaneously and maladaptive daydreaming could very well be a significant part of their psychological landscape as the previous research indicate. Maladaptive daydreaming prone individuals could exhibit consistent behaviour patterns which could be related to their personality traits as well. The benefit of understanding the connection between traits and MD is wide-ranging from applications in educational practices to healthy employee training. This research holds particular significance for mental health professionals seeking to comprehend and effectively address MD related issues among the young adults.

Objective

The main objective of the research is to explore the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and big five personality traits among emerging adults.

Hypothesis

- **H1:** There is no significant relationship between openness to experience and maladaptive daydreaming.
- **H2:** There is no significant relationship between conscientiousness and maladaptive daydreaming.
- **H3:** There is no significant relationship between extraversion and maladaptive daydreaming.
- **H4:** There is no significant relationship between agreeableness and maladaptive daydreaming.
- **H5:** There is no significant relationship between neuroticism and maladaptive daydreaming.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 100 participants in the age group of 18 to 22. Convenience sampling method was employed to collect the data. Prior to the data collection the consent of participants was obtained and, objective of the research and confidentiality of the collected data was assured. All participants were acknowledged and thanked for their participation in the study. The data were analysed using SPSS (v.25), and to assess the relationship between the personality traits and maladaptive daydreaming Spearman bivariate correlation test was used.

Maladaptive Daydreaming

To measure maladaptive daydreaming, the maladaptive daydreaming scale (MDS-SF5) developed by Soffer-Dudek and Oh (2023) was used. The MDS-SF5 is the short form of the maladaptive daydreaming scale 16 (MDS-16) which had 16 items. The MDS-SF5 contains the 5 items numbered 4,5,8,9 and 14, in the original scale. Participants can rate their experience regarding the given statements in a scale ranging from 1 to 100, divided as 11-point Likert scale. The items of MDS-SF5 concerns with aspects such as daydreaming interfering with tasks, hindering goals, distress caused by daydreaming, difficulty in control and physical activities accompanying daydreaming. The MDS-SF can help researchers, as well as, clinicians to screen the presence of maladaptive daydreaming among individuals,

Maladaptive Daydreaming and Big Five Personality Traits Among Emerging Adults

which can further aid in understanding psychological distress associated with it. The reliability and validity of the scale was established and found to be satisfactory.

Big Five Personality Traits

The Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10) developed by Rammstedt and John (2007) was used to measure the five personality traits of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. The BFI-10 is a brief version of the Big Five Inventory-44. The participants rate the statements about their personality using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from disagree strongly to agree strongly. The BFI 10 is a time efficient tool making it very useful in large surveys and studies with a large sample. The psychometric properties of the BFI-10 have been established and found to be satisfactory.

Research Design

A correlational research design was employed to study the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and big five personality traits among emerging adults.

RESULTS

The results of the data analysis are shown in table 1.

Table 1 Spearman bivariate correlation between Maladaptive Daydreaming and Big Five Personality traits among emerging adults.

		Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism	Openness to experience
Maladaptive	r value	-.07	-.25**	-.155	-.003	.224**
Daydreaming	p value	.49	.012	.123	.975	.025

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results of the data analysis show a significant positive correlation between maladaptive daydreaming and the personality trait of openness to experiences ($r = 0.224$, $p = 0.025$). The findings from the correlational analysis also indicate a significant negative correlation between maladaptive daydreaming and agreeableness ($r = -0.25$, $p = 0.012$). No significant correlations were found between any other Big Five personality traits and maladaptive daydreaming.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming (MD) and Big Five personality traits. Maladaptive Daydreaming is a psychological phenomenon or a tendency to have vivid and elaborate dreams that could cause significant psychological distress. Although MD alone is not considered harmful till now, various researches indicate that MD can have correlations with other distressful conditions and can be treated as a syndrome. Therefore, we need to have a better understanding of MD to equip mental health professionals. The results show that there exists a significant level of correlation between MD and openness to experience and MD and agreeableness.

Maladaptive Daydreaming and Openness to experience

The analysis found that there is a moderate positive correlation between maladaptive daydreaming (MD) and openness to experience. Hence, the hypothesis “there is no significant relationship between openness to experience and maladaptive daydreaming” is rejected. Openness to experience trait is often associated with seeking new experiences, being imaginative, curious and embracing change. This result suggests that those who are more likely to have an openness to experience trait could experience a higher frequency of

Maladaptive Daydreaming and Big Five Personality Traits Among Emerging Adults

maladaptive daydreaming experiences, whereas people who are less open are less likely to do so.

Maladaptive Daydreaming and Agreeableness

A moderate negative correlation was found between MD and agreeableness ($r = -0.125$, $p = 0.012$). Hence, the hypothesis “there is no significant relationship between agreeableness and maladaptive daydreaming” is rejected. Agreeableness trait helps us understand how individuals interact with each other and the adjacent aspects such as how they employ cooperation, empathy and resolve conflicts. The present finding suggests that people who have higher levels of agreeableness are less likely to experience increased levels of maladaptive daydreaming. Whereas individuals with lower levels of agreeableness are more likely to report maladaptive daydreaming experiences.

The results show statistically insignificant correlations between the traits of extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism and MD. Therefore, the hypotheses H2, H3 and H5 are accepted. Overall, the results indicate that both traits of openness to experience and agreeableness are significantly associated with MD, emphasizing the role of personality traits in the experience of maladaptive daydreaming. The research on maladaptive daydreaming is currently less in volume and we are unable to draw meaningful conclusions from this study alone. Further studies exploring the links between MD and personality traits in different populations could be pursued by researchers to ensure a detailed understanding of this tendency.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of the research was to explore the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and big five personality traits among emerging adults. Based on the research outcomes, it can be concluded that a relationship between certain personality traits and maladaptive daydreaming do exist. A significant positive correlation was found between openness to experience and maladaptive daydreaming, while a significant negative correlation was observed between agreeableness and maladaptive daydreaming. The traits of extraversion, neuroticism and conscientiousness don't show significant relationship with maladaptive daydreaming. As maladaptive daydreaming is a topic that requires further research attention the underlying nature of these variables and their connections can be further explored in the future. By addressing these possibilities researchers can evolve a better understanding of maladaptive daydreaming and how it is linked to other psychological conditions.

REFERENCES

- Allport, G. W. (1937). *Personality: A psychological interpretation*. Henry Holt & Co.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>
- Arnett, J. J. (2007). Socialization in Emerging Adulthood: From the Family to the Wider World, from Socialization to Self-Socialization. In J. E. Grusec & P. D. Hastings (Eds.), *Handbook of socialization: Theory and research* (pp. 208–231). The Guilford Press.
- Chaudhary S., Jain K., Agarwal M. & Bajaj V. (2022). Maladaptive Daydreaming Among the Indian Youth: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 10(1), 301-329. DIP:18.01.027.20221001, DOI:10.25215/1001.027

Maladaptive Daydreaming and Big Five Personality Traits Among Emerging Adults

- Herscu, O., Somer, E., Federman, A., & Soffer-Dudek, N. (2023). Mindfulness meditation and self-monitoring reduced maladaptive daydreaming symptoms: A randomized controlled trial of a brief self-guided web-based program. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 91*(5), 285–300. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000790>
- Maffetone, P. (2020, May 15). *The interpretation of daydreams*. Dr. Phil Maffetone. Retrieved 10 July 2025, from <https://philmaffetone.com/the-interpretation-of-daydreams/>
- Rammstedt, B., & John, O. P. (2007). Measuring personality in one minute or less: A 10-item short version of the Big Five Inventory in English and German. *Journal of Research in Personality, 41*(1), 203–212. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2006.02.001>
- Shanbhag, T., & Pothiyil, D. I. (2024). A Cognitive Approach to Maladaptive Daydreaming: a case report. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine, 46*(6), 585–588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02537176241236898>
- Soffer-Dudek, N., & Oh, H. (2023). Maladaptive daydreaming: A shortened assessment measure and its mental health correlates in a large United States sample. *Comprehensive Psychiatry, 129*, 152441. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2023.152441>
- Vs, A. V. A., & Roneena, A. (2022). Maladaptive daydreaming in Individuals with Disorganized Attachment Style: A Case Report. *Journal of Research in Social Science and Humanities, 3*(2), 31–34. <https://doi.org/10.47679/jrssh.v3i2.42>

Acknowledgment

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who supported and contributed to the completion of this research study. First and foremost, we are grateful to our institution for providing the necessary resources and support. We express our gratitude to the participants, whose contributions were essential to the successful completion of this research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Reji, M., Vadakan, A.M., Mathew, E.S. & Amal, A. (2025). Maladaptive Daydreaming and Big Five Personality Traits Among Emerging Adults. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 13*(4), 1850-1855. DIP:18.01.169.20251304, DOI:10.25215/1304.169