

The Impact of Social Media Addiction on The Severity of Maladaptive Daydreaming

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ABSTRACT

Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) is characterized by excessive, immersive daydreaming that involves elaborate plots, repetitive movements, and emotional absorption, hence interfering with daily functioning. This study investigates the relationship between MD and social media exposure, specifically on MD severity among individuals who engage with social media addictively. As media usage has become an integral part of life, understanding its impact on MD can provide critical insights. Using a quantitative design, data was collected from 113 participants through an online survey, utilizing the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16) and the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale [BSMAS] to assess media usage patterns and MD severity. Linear regression was utilized to determine the relationship between social media addiction and MD. Findings revealed a small but noticeable positive relationship between the two variables [$R=0.287$]. This research addresses a significant gap in literature, offering insights into social media's association with daydreaming tendencies.

Keywords: *Maladaptive Daydreaming, MD, media use, social media, media usage*

Maladaptive Daydreaming [MD] is a recently identified and proposed disorder where individuals indulge in intense and addictive daydreaming, consisting of complex plots, movements and emotional involvement, usually lasting for hours on end, and hence affects social, occupational, academic, and overall performance in day-to-day activities. MD causes distress and impairment that affects functioning, to those affected. (Somer, 2002). It also often leads to detachment from reality.

The term was introduced by Eli Somer, of the University of Haifa, Israel, in 2002. MD consists of creating extreme plots and stories, that are usually very different from the daydreamer's actual life. Maladaptive daydreamers feel forced to continue with these stories, and to add onto them. Some individuals state that their daydreams include ideal versions of themselves, with characters aging over the years. (Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2018) Their daydream episodes are often accompanied by bodily movements such as circular pacing, rocking etc, which Somer termed as kinesthetic activity, which also include facial expressions, enacting dialogues and/or movements that represent the daydream episodes. (Somer, 2023). While daydreaming is often used as a tactic for escapism, in MD, it becomes

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The Impact of Social Media Addiction on The Severity of Maladaptive Daydreaming

chronic and includes dissociative symptoms, with a significant impact on day-to-day functions. (Somer, 2002)

Since MD is addictive, chronic and takes hours on end, maladaptive daydreamers often avoid their responsibilities and social relationships. Daydreamers are hence known to have feelings of guilt and shame, along with loneliness etc. (Somer et al., 2016b). (Somer et al., 2021) theorized that MD may have developed as a coping strategy after suffering from emotional abuse and neglect. MD also co-relates to high comorbidity rates with other psychiatric disorders. For example, a study which utilized psychiatric clinical interviews for maladaptive daydreamers, revealed that every participant fulfilled the criteria for at least one diagnosis outlined in the DSM-5.

Individuals suffering from this phenomenon have abbreviated it as MD online, and enthusiastically participate in discussions surrounding their experiences, ongoing research, ways to deal with it etc. Maladaptive daydreamers can be seen supporting budding researchers in this field, actively participating in studies, and hence contributing to research. Research in this domain is still scarce since it's a relatively new field, and researchers are working actively to get MD recognized as a distinct disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM]. Despite its extreme impact, MD does not get enough recognition, which leads sufferers to not get adequate treatment for their condition. (Somer et al., 2016a).

While studies have looked at multiple media and mental health-related topics, there is still a tremendous knowledge gap regarding the relationship between media usage and functions like daydreaming. Furthermore, there is little research about the possible link between these media use patterns and Maladaptive Daydreaming, a lesser researched topic.

This research hence aims to investigate the relationship between Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) and impact of social media addiction on the severity of MD. Media consumption has increased in today's digital world, and has become a crucial part of life. For this study, it was hypothesized that there is a significant relationship between social media addiction [BSMAS scores] and maladaptive daydreaming severity [MDS scores]. Specifically, participants with higher levels of social media addiction were expected to have higher levels of maladaptive daydreaming tendencies.

Understanding how usage of various forms of media affects MD severity, can bridge the gap in existing research. Although research has focused on media multitasking and dissociation, there is less research on the impact of media exposure on MD severity, so there is a significant gap in our understanding of this topic.

Insights into this domain can help to develop effective therapeutic strategies and raise awareness about the role of media in mental health, especially in relevance to MD. Furthermore, understanding these patterns can help individuals affected by MD to become more mindful of their media habits and its influence on their daydreaming tendencies. The findings from this research will also contribute to the existing literature on the implications of media use, helping future research on media's impact on psychological well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many individuals with maladaptive daydreaming were told that daydreaming is a form of creativity and not something to be taken seriously. This has led them to feel that their mental

The Impact of Social Media Addiction on The Severity of Maladaptive Daydreaming

health providers did not understand their distress caused by their daydreaming. Their behaviour not being validated by professionals, combined with not being able to convince them that it is chronic and affective, has led them to be confused, even though it provides a source of comfort, almost comparable to an addiction. (Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011)

Research has also started to explore how media consumption impacts daydreaming tendencies, as findings suggest that exposure to music is often a trigger of MD. (Soffer-Dudek & Theodor-Katz, 2022). Maladaptive daydreaming, interfering with daily functioning, can hence also be linked to problematic social media use. (Costanzo et al., 2021a)

Additionally, social media has shown to have both positive and negative impacts on mental health, with excessive use leading to increased anxiety, depression, and loneliness. (Oluwatosin Esther Ajewumi et al., 2024a) Excessive use is associated with loneliness and poorer mental health outcomes, particularly on platforms like Facebook. Comparison of oneself socially, fear of missing out and online bullying, can further enhance these negative implications. (Ikbal, 2023) (Oluwatosin Esther Ajewumi et al., 2024b).

Media multi-tasking, i.e. indulging with multiple forms of media at the same time, has become prevalent in modern society. Research indicates that heavy media multi-tasking is associated with symptoms of depression and social anxiety, even after controlling media use. (Becker et al., 2013a)

These phenomena can also be explained through psychological theories. The compensatory internet use theory, proposed by Kardefelt-Winther in 2014, states that excessive online engagement, particularly gaming, can act as a coping mechanism for psychosocial issues, rather than of a mental disorder. This theory hence emphasizes on the role of motivations, in the relationship between psychological well-being and internet use. (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014)

In the context of MD, this theory is relevant as it can help us to understand how and why individuals might resort to using the internet as a coping mechanism to deal with stressors and psychosocial issues, and daydream maladaptively. The internet and online platforms etc., can hence act as a medium or catalyst to enhance or trigger MD, helping individuals to escape their real-life problems and stressors. Hence this theory can help us explore how the internet can act as a coping mechanism for MD.

(Mishra & Kewalramani, 2023) investigated the relationships between social media use, MD, and imposter phenomenon among younger adults aged 18 to 25. The results revealed a positive correlation between social media use and MD; and participants who reported spending more time on social media platforms also showcased higher levels of MD tendencies. Additionally, a positive relation was found between social media use and the imposter phenomenon, hinting that intense engagement with social media can contribute to feelings of self-doubt in young adults.

(Costanzo et al., 2021b) conducted a study, consisting of a sample of 877 adults aged 18 to 68, which explored the relationships among attachment styles, Maladaptive Daydreaming, and problematic social media use (PSMU). Individuals with insecure attachment styles (preoccupied or fearful) were more likely to have MD, which was ultimately associated with higher levels of problematic social media use.

The Impact of Social Media Addiction on The Severity of Maladaptive Daydreaming

Hence, past research examining the relationship between MD and media denotes that there is a significant impact of media usage on the intensity and severity of MD. This study aims to explore it further, focusing on social media addiction, hence contributing to the field.

METHOD

Participants

The study included a total of 113 participants, who were recruited from the social media platform Reddit through convenience sampling, and the questionnaire for the research was circulated on the community for maladaptive daydreamers, which consists of 136,000 members as of 1 December, 2025.

Participants had to be adults in the age range of 18 to 60 and experiencing MD, pertaining to any race, nationality, ethnicity, religious group, educational level, and sex. 68.9% participants identified as females, 21.3% identified as males, and 6.6% identified as non-binary. The exclusion criteria included incomplete responses, falling outside the age range or failure to provide consent.

Materials

The study utilized two standardized instruments to measure the variables. The Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16), consists of 16 items that assess the frequency and severity of MD. This scale is the primary MD measure, rated on a 10-point Likert scale. Scores may range from 0 to 100. The MDS-16 total score is the average of its items i.e. its mean. A mean score of 40 or higher indicates suspected clinical-level/probable MD.

The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale [BSMAS] was utilized to assess problematic social media use; by measuring six core addiction elements: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict and relapse, using 6 items. Answers are evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 6 to 30; higher scores indicating greater risk of social media addiction.

Procedure

Participants were invited to complete an online survey via Google forms, which was disseminated through Reddit. Participants were informed of the eligibility criteria to participate in the survey, which included individuals in the age range of 18 to 60 experiencing MD. They were informed that no identifiable information would be collected and their participation would be completely voluntary. They were also informed of the questions that would be asked in the questionnaire, which was concerned with their social media usage patterns and levels of MD.

The survey was designed to be anonymous and had voluntary participation as well as withdrawal, ensuring informed consent was obtained prior to participation. The questionnaire included demographic information, which included age, nationality, race, and their gender, followed by the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16) and the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale [BSMAS) to assess MD severity and social media usage patterns, respectively. The data collection period lasted for two days, during which 113 valid responses were recorded.

RESULTS

The initial data set included 114 responses. One response was identified as invalid and excluded from the data set as one participant was 17 years old, hence falling outside the

The Impact of Social Media Addiction on The Severity of Maladaptive Daydreaming

intended age range of 18 to 60 for this study. Before conducting the test, assumptions of normality were tested. Shapiro-Wilk test revealed that data was normally distributed.

Linear regression analysis was utilised to explore the relationship between social media addiction and the severity of maladaptive daydreaming. The $r=0.287$, reveals a small yet significant positive relationship between the two variables; with social media addiction accounting for a variance of 8.23% in MD severity.

Table 1 Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R ²
1	0.287	0.0823

Note. Models estimated using sample size of $N=113$

The results indicated that there is a statistically significant impact of social media addiction on MD scores [p value=0.002], with a $r=0.287$, indicating a small relationship between the variables. These findings suggest that the quantity or usage of media may be a significant predictive factor for MD. Other psychological factors, such as personality, stress etc., may play a crucial role, which future research can explore.

DISCUSSION

The objective of the research study was to analyse the relationship between Maladaptive Daydreaming and social media addiction. Linear regression analysis revealed that there is a small but significant relationship between social media addiction and its effect on the severity of MD, with r value of 0.287. The outcomes indicate that media addiction might have a significant contribution towards the severity and that the intensity of MD could be a reliable predictor of MD.

This supports the assumption that exposure to a wider variety of media inherently leads to escapism or increased risk of MD. It is expected that the intensity and content of media engagement, duration of use etc are additional critical factors. These findings suggest that for individuals struggling with MD, reducing exposure to certain platforms might not be enough if their need for escapism, as a coping mechanism, continues to be fulfilled through other forms of media. This might be the case because of several other reasons, which can include the underexplored state of MD itself.

These results can be interpreted in relation to past studies. Some studies have associated the use of media with psychological outcomes like anxiety, depression, stress, etc and have discussed how media multitasking could result in greater psychological distress. (Becker et al., 2013b)

Despite its contributions, this study has its limitations, which should be considered while interpreting these findings. Firstly, the age range of participants might limit the generalizability of the results to adolescents and older adults, since media habits can vary across age groups. Secondly, the diverse range of the study spanning various countries and cultures, also introduces limitations as cultural differences in media access, cultural norms etc were not taken into account. Therefore, the findings might not be applicable across all cultures across the globe.

Thirdly, the sample of 113 participants might have been insufficient to detect effects and variations, as it is possible that a smaller sample could carry different results. In terms of

The Impact of Social Media Addiction on The Severity of Maladaptive Daydreaming

methodology, self-report measures can lead to potential biases such as social desirability bias, where participants may under-report behaviours.

Despite these limitations, this research study provides a valuable contribution in understanding the relationship between media use patterns and MD. Based on the findings and limitations of this study; there are several recommendations for future research in this area. Future research can aim to broaden the age range of participants to allow adolescents and older adults to participate, given that media use habits differ across lifespans. Secondly, to address cultural influences, studies can focus on specific cultural factors influencing the phenomenon; to examine how they might affect the relationship between the variables. Thirdly, future research with larger samples could be beneficial to explore possibility of very small effects that were not detected during the analysis.

Additionally, longitudinal designs could explore causal relationships between media usage and MD over a period of time.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the relationship between social media addiction and Maladaptive Daydreaming among an adult population. An online survey consisting of 113 participants, utilizing the MDS-16 and BSMAS scales was used to analyse the data through linear regression model.

The results indicated that there is a statistically significant impact of social media addiction on MD scores [p value=0.002], with a r value of 0.287, indicating a small/negligible relationship between the variables. These findings suggest that the usage of social media or social media addiction, may be a significant predictive factor for MD. Other psychological factors, such as personality, stress etc., may play a crucial role, which future research can explore.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on media use and maladaptive daydreaming tendencies, emphasizing the importance of approaches when examining psychological phenomena.

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The Impact of Social Media Addiction on The Severity of Maladaptive Daydreaming

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The Impact of Social Media Addiction on The Severity of Maladaptive Daydreaming

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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