



Dreaming to Cope: Exploring the Relationship Between Attachment Styles and Maladaptive Daydreaming

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between attachment styles and maladaptive daydreaming among Indian young adults aged 18 to 25. Data was collected from 158 participants using the MDS-16 and the Revised Adult Attachment Scale. Pearson correlation analysis indicated a significant negative association between maladaptive daydreaming and closeness, as well as a strong positive association between maladaptive daydreaming and attachment related anxiety. Dependence did not show any significant correlation. Multiple regression revealed that attachment dimensions significantly predicted maladaptive daydreaming, with anxiety being the strongest predictor, followed by closeness and dependence. These findings suggest that insecure attachment—especially high anxiety and low closeness—is linked to higher maladaptive daydreaming. The results underscore the potential effectiveness of attachment-based interventions in addressing maladaptive daydreaming among young adults.

Keywords: *Maladaptive Daydreaming, Attachment Styles, Closeness, Anxiety, Dependence, Young Adults*

1. Introduction

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, highlights how early encounters with caregivers affect people's internal working models of relationships, influencing emotional

regulation and interpersonal behaviors throughout their lives. These cognitive frameworks, developed through repeated interactions with caregivers, shape future expectations of trust, security, and closeness (Bowlby, 1982). Parent-child attachments are particularly enduring, playing a pivotal role in shaping personality development, psychological resilience and overall well-being (Bowlby, 1988; Cummings & Cummings, 2002; Salcuni, 2015).

Variations in caregiving behaviors significantly influence the formation of attachment patterns (Ainsworth, 1985). Consistent, supportive, and emotionally attuned care fosters adaptive personality development. Conversely, emotionally unavailable, inconsistent or abusive caregiving may lead to insecure attachment patterns—such as anxious or disorganized styles—which are linked to less favorable psychological outcomes (Bowlby, 1988).

These attachment patterns are often stable over time, shaping later relationships and emotional functioning (Bowlby, 1988). Adults who lacked a secure base early in life and received insufficient love or affirmation may develop lasting emotional and relational difficulties (Palitsky et al., 2013). They may perceive the world as unreliable and others as emotionally unavailable, untrustworthy or unsupportive (Ainsworth, 1985; Bowlby, 1973; 1982).

Building upon Bowlby's foundational work, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) proposed a four-category model of adult attachment, which classifies individuals as secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant (disorganized) based on their perceptions of self and others. Secure attachment emerges from caregiving that is consistently responsive, sensitive, and attuned to the child's needs (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Individuals with secure attachment tend to recognize the impact of early experiences on adult relationships and are more likely to employ effective emotion regulation strategies, such as seeking support during times of distress (Collins et al., 2006; Kobak & Sceery, 1988).

2. Review of Literature

Gemignani et al. (2025) explored the links between parental care, unresolved attachment, depression and anxiety, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and maladaptive daydreaming (MD). Their findings revealed that unresolved attachment was strongly linked to higher levels of MD, which in turn mediated the connection between unresolved attachment and various psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety. The authors suggested that MD functions as a dissociative coping strategy for individuals having insecure attachment patterns, offering insight into the origins and continuation of psychological distress. The study

underscores the need to address attachment-related factors in therapeutic interventions for MD and its associated symptoms.

Thomson and Jaque (2025) explored the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming (MD), emotion regulation, and creativity in a non-clinical sample with 361 participants. Results showed that emotion regulation difficulties and creative processing (distinct experiences) accounted for 23% of MD variance. A sub-sample of 146 individuals found that creative personal identity positively predicted MD, but creative self-efficacy negatively predicted it. Emotional regulation challenges were linked to creative anxiety, while positive feelings (power and pleasure) throughout the creative process were associated with improved emotion control. The study emphasizes the significance of developing healthy emotional control and adaptive creative strategies for managing MD effectively.

A study by Chirico et al. (2024) examined the associations among maladaptive daydreaming (MD), psychopathological symptoms, emotion regulation, and problematic social networking site use (PSNSU) in young adults. The findings showed that individuals with MD exhibited notably elevated levels of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and interpersonal sensitivity compared to non-MDs. MDs also tended to use maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, especially expressive suppression. Furthermore, obsessive-compulsive symptoms were linked to the extent to which MD disrupted daily life, and PSNSU was similarly associated with MD-related interference. The study revealed notable structural differences in symptom networks between MDs and non-MDs, suggesting that MD is closely connected to heightened psychological distress and problematic social media use.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim

To explore the relationship between attachment styles and maladaptive daydreaming among Indian young adults aged 18–25.

3.2 Research Objectives

- 1) To examine the relationship between secure attachment style and maladaptive daydreaming.
- 2) To examine the relationship between preoccupied attachment style and maladaptive daydreaming.
- 3) To examine the relationship between dismissive avoidant attachment style and maladaptive daydreaming.

- 4) To examine the relationship between fearful avoidant attachment style and maladaptive daydreaming.
- 5) To examine if attachment styles predict maladaptive daydreaming.

3.3 Hypothesis

H1: There is a negative relationship between secure attachment style and maladaptive daydreaming.

H2: There is a positive relationship between preoccupied attachment style and maladaptive daydreaming.

H3: There is a positive relationship between dismissive avoidant attachment style and maladaptive daydreaming.

H4: There is a positive relationship between fearful avoidant attachment style and maladaptive daydreaming.

H5: Attachment styles significantly predict maladaptive daydreaming.

3.4 Variables

The independent variable in this study is attachment styles, which refer to distinct patterns of interpersonal bonding and relational behaviors. Based on Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) four-category model, attachment styles are classified as follows:

Secure Attachment Style: Defined by a positive perception of oneself and others, fostering trust, emotional stability, and ease in forming close relationships.

Preoccupied Attachment Style: Marked by a negative view of oneself and a positive view of others, leading to anxiety, dependency, and an overwhelming need for validation in relationships.

Dismissive Attachment Style: Marked by a positive view of self and critical view of others, often linked to emotional distancing, self-reliance, and avoidance of intimacy.

Fearful Attachment Style: Characterized by negative perception of oneself and others, frequently leading to fear of rejection, avoidance of intimacy, and interpersonal distress.

The dependent variable in this study is maladaptive daydreaming, defined as a condition involving excessive, immersive, and often uncontrollable daydreaming. It disrupts daily functioning and adversely affects social, academic, and occupational performance. Maladaptive daydreaming will be measured using the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale-16 (MDS-16).

3.5 Sample

The sample consisted of 158 Indian young adults aged between 18 and 25 years. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method

chosen for its practicality and efficiency in accessing individuals who were readily available and willing to participate. Recruitment took place via online platforms, such as social media groups and university networks, to specifically target Indian young adults within the 18–25 age range.

Of the total sample, 101 participants identified as female and 57 as male. In terms of relationship status, 115 reported being single, while 43 reported being in a romantic relationship. Regarding occupation, 139 participants were students and 19 were working professionals. All participants provided informed consent, and the data were collected anonymously.

Inclusion Criteria

- a) Participants must be within the age range of 18–25 years.
- b) Identified as Indian
- c) Participants must be fluent in English to comprehend and respond to the survey items.
- d) Participants must provide informed consent to participate in the study.

Exclusion Criteria

- a) Individuals outside the specified age range.
- b) Individuals with diagnosed psychiatric disorders that may significantly influence their attachment patterns or daydreaming behaviors.

3.6 Measures

Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS): The Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS), developed by Collins and Read (1996), is an 18-item self-report tool designed to measure adult attachment styles. It comprises three subscales: Closeness (comfort with emotional intimacy), Dependence (trust and reliance on others), and Anxiety (concerns about abandonment and rejection). Respondents rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (very characteristic of me), allowing for a continuous assessment of attachment styles. The RAAS has shown strong psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.82 for Closeness, 0.80 for Dependence, and 0.83 for Anxiety. Furthermore, a study in Iran reported a reliability coefficient of 0.89 and a convergent validity of 0.92 with the State Adult Attachment Scale (SAAS), confirming its reliability and validity (Collins & Read, 1996; Ravitz et al., 2010).

Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16): The Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16) is a 16-item self-report instrument designed to evaluate maladaptive daydreaming, a condition marked by excessive and immersive daydreaming that interferes with daily functioning. Participants rate each item on a scale from 0% (never) to 100% (always), with

10% intervals. The MDS-16 demonstrates strong psychometric properties, including good criterion-related validity ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), excellent test-retest reliability ($r = 0.92$), and high sensitivity (95%) and specificity (89%) for identifying maladaptive daydreaming. A score of 40 or above is recommended as the threshold for diagnosing maladaptive daydreaming. This scale has proven to be both reliable and valid in identifying and distinguishing individuals with maladaptive daydreaming across research and clinical settings (Somer, 2018; Somer, Soffer-Dudek, & Ross, 2017).

3.7 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, correlational, cross-sectional research design to explore the relationship between attachment styles and maladaptive daydreaming in Indian young adults aged 18–25. The independent variable is attachment style, assessed using the Adult Attachment Scale – Revised (AAS-R), while the dependent variable is maladaptive daydreaming, measured with the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale-16 (MDS-16). Data were gathered through self-report questionnaires distributed online.

3.8 Procedure

Data for the study were collected through a Google Form survey that was circulated via social media platforms, academic forums, and online community networks. The target population consisted of Indian young adults aged 18 to 25. The survey began with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, ensuring participants of the confidentiality of their responses, and emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation.

Following the consent form, participants completed two standardized self-report instruments: the Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16) and the Revised Adult Attachment Scale. Participants were instructed to answer each item truthfully. The entire survey took approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete, and all responses were collected anonymously to ensure participant privacy.

4. Results

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics for Maladaptive Daydreaming and Attachment Dimensions*

	Maladaptive daydreaming	Closeness	Dependence	Anxiety
N	158	158	158	158
Mean	38.539	3.105	2.758	2.990
Median	39.065	3.085	2.830	3.170
Mode	20.630	3	2.830	3

Std Deviation	20.146	0.694	0.662	0.996
Skewness	0.002	0.133	0.201	-0.287
Std. Error of Skewness	0.193	0.193	0.193	0.193
Kurtosis	-0.606	0.790	0.819	-0.676
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.384	0.384	0.384	0.384
Minimum	0	1	1	1
Maximum	98.130	5	4.83	5

Descriptive statistics were computed for maladaptive daydreaming, closeness, dependence, and anxiety. As shown in Table 1, the mean score for maladaptive daydreaming was 38.539 (SD = 20.146), with scores ranging from 0 to 98.130. The distributions of closeness, dependence, and anxiety had mean values of 3.105 (SD = 0.694), 2.758 (SD = 0.662), and 2.990 (SD = 0.996), respectively.

The skewness values for all variables were within acceptable limits (± 1), indicating approximate normality: maladaptive daydreaming (skewness = 0.002), closeness (skewness = 0.133), dependence (skewness = 0.201), and anxiety (skewness = -0.287). Similarly, kurtosis values did not indicate severe deviation from normality, with all variables falling within the range of ± 1 .

Table 2 : Correlation Matrix Between Maladaptive Daydreaming and Attachment Dimensions

	Maladaptive Daydreaming	Closeness	Dependence	Anxiety
Maladaptive Daydreaming	1			
Closeness	**-.0230	1		
Dependence	-0.134	**0.311	1	
Anxiety	**0.502	-0.117	**-.0437	1

Note. N = 158. **p < .01.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Predicting Maladaptive Daydreaming from Attachment Dimensions

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	10.12	10.27	–	0.99	0.326
Closeness	-6.38	2.05	-0.22	-3.11	.002
Dependence	5.35	2.38	0.18	2.25	.026
Anxiety	11.20	1.51	0.55	7.41	<.001

Model summary:

$R = .552$, $R^2 = .305$, Adjusted $R^2 = .291$, $F(3, 154) = 22.50$

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; $SE B$ = standard error of B ; β = standardized beta coefficient

5. Conclusion

This study was designed to explore the relationship between attachment dimensions and maladaptive daydreaming (MD) among young adults. Findings revealed that secure attachment was associated with lower levels of MD, underscoring the protective role of emotional stability and healthy interpersonal relationships. Conversely, individuals with preoccupied and fearful-avoidant attachment styles—both characterized by high attachment anxiety and relational insecurity—tended to report higher levels of MD. This suggests that such individuals may turn to immersive fantasy as a coping strategy to manage unmet emotional needs or unresolved fears in relationships. Notably, dismissive-avoidant attachment, marked by emotional distancing and self-sufficiency, did not show a significant relationship with MD, indicating that avoidance of intimacy alone may not necessarily lead to fantasy-driven escapism. Regression analysis identified attachment anxiety as the strongest predictor of MD, with lower scores on closeness and dependence also contributing. These results imply that emotional insecurity and

discomfort with intimacy may push individuals toward fantasy as a form of emotional compensation. Overall, the findings emphasize the relevance of attachment processes in understanding maladaptive daydreaming and point to the potential value of attachment-focused interventions and early relational support in addressing excessive daydreaming tendencies.

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