

## THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN TRAUMATIC LIFE EXPERIENCES AND MALADAPTIVE DAYDREAMING IN EMERGING ADULTS

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Objectives:** The current study set out to look into the relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and traumatic life experiences in emerging adult

**Design of the Study:** Correlational Survey design/comparative study

**Place and Duration of the Study:** Karachi from November 2023 to February 2024 at Bahria University Karachi Campus.

**Sample and Method:** The sample consisted of 310 Emerging adults ages 18 – 25 (Female =222 & Males = 88) selected through purposive convenient sampling from various universities and other settings. A demographic form, Traumatic Experiences Checklist (TEC), and Maladaptive daydreaming scale (MDS) were administered. The data was collected in-person and was analyzed through IBM SPSS version 22.

**Results and Conclusion:** The results of the analysis revealed that there is a significant positive relationship of Traumatic life experiences with maladaptive daydreaming in emerging adults. These findings highlight the need for customized therapies and support programs that concentrate on awareness and processing of traumatic memories by providing a platform to confront repressed pain. The main implication of the study is to add to the body of knowledge about the mechanism of maladaptive daydreaming which is a growing construct at an alarming rate in Pakistan.

**Keywords** Maladaptive daydreaming; Traumatic life experiences; Emerging adult.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is mounting evidence that there is a clear link between various forms of psychopathology and exposure to difficult life events (Brown, et al, 1998, Van Der Kolk, et al, 1996), this includes both corroborated and uncorroborated exposure. An emotional reaction to a dreadful incident, such as an accident, rape, or natural disaster, is called trauma. Following an incident, shock and denial are common reactions. Unpredictable feelings, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea are examples of longer-term effects. These emotions are common; however, some people find it difficult to move on from them (American Psychological Associations). It has been reported that almost 51% women and 60% men experience at least one traumatic experience in their lifetime of which 20% and 8% eventually develop PTSD (Davidson, 2000) on the other hand a number of them may also develop borderline personality disorder (Herman et al., 1989).

In one study investigating the impact of exposure to lifetime trauma on the development of identity in emerging adulthood, it was concluded that although there was no clear connection found between trauma and identity status but it was found that severe traumatic experiences can have an impact on sexual identity (Truskauskaite-Kuneviciene et al., 2020). Consistently, a study aimed at investigating the association between adverse childhood experiences and substance use patterns among adolescents and emerging adulthood, concluded that adverse childhood experiences continue to have an impact on substance use patterns in adolescence through emerging adulthood. It further revealed that these childhood traumas have a graded impact during and beyond adolescence (Rogers et al., 2021).

It has been reported that maladaptive daydreaming, which is defined as "Persistent and recurrent fantasy activity that is vivid and fanciful" along with "intense absorption/immersion that includes visual, auditory, or affective properties" (Somer et al., 2017, p. 180). It is seen and used by individuals more so, youth as a coping mechanism against distressful memories of trauma. Data on a sample of 539 adults reveal that 69% of maladaptive daydreamers use fantasy to avoid or shield painful memories whereas 87% use fantasy to regulate their emotions (Somer et al., 2020). Interestingly, the theme of daydreaming used by individuals with childhood emotional abuse mostly included death, victim of violence, being captor or rescuer, being rescued or taking revenge. Theme of maladaptive daydreaming of individuals with childhood sexual abuse had been a

victim or captive. Whereas the themes of daydream of adults with history of physical abuse included being captive.

Furthermore, many people who consider themselves to be "maladaptive daydreamers" (MDers) participate in online forums where they actively seek out support for their daydreaming (Bershtling & Somer, 2018; Bigelsen et al., 2016). This illustrates a more practical clinical problem, as people with MD are said to spend up to 69% of their waking hours experiencing complex and vivid fantasies that are usually accompanied by stereotypical movements, which interferes with their ability to function and participate in daily life (Bigelsen et al., 2016). In fact, these individuals might wind up developing a highly detailed, structured internal universe with characters that converse with one another similar to those in a movie or book. They tend possess all qualities, skills and success that the individual lacks in real world. (Somer, 2017) in a way they are more coping mechanisms to deal with reality.

There are several studies that have revealed links between trauma and maladaptive day dreaming. Somer (2002) found in one of his initial studies on maladaptive daydreaming that there are three issues that lead people to use maladaptive daydreaming: (a) trying to manage distress and regulate affect; (b) themes like violence, sexuality, and power/control dynamics; and (c) using sensory and kinaesthetic trigger phenomena to start daydreaming. Based on these findings, the author postulated that trauma survivors may turn to maladaptive daydreaming as a coping mechanism for unpleasant experiences and environments.

Interestingly, studies have also revealed a negative correlation between traumatic events and maladaptive daydreaming, for example in an investigation by Abu-Rayya et al. (2020) it was revealed that individuals with childhood sexual trauma had high levels of maladaptive daydreaming noteworthy here is the fact that only 27% of the daydreamers had a significant childhood trauma (Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011). These finding clearly indicate that traumatic events can be risk factors but not necessary in the development of maladaptive daydreaming. Another study revealed the mediating role of shame and dissociation doing mediating functions in connecting emotional trauma and maladaptive daydreaming, further shedding light on the fact that trauma of any kind if not processed may progress to maladaptive daydreaming (Ferrante et al., 2022). Overuse of dissociation as a strong innate defense against distress

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resulting from traumatic memories may lead to a strong development of maladaptive daydreaming (Somer et al., 2016b).

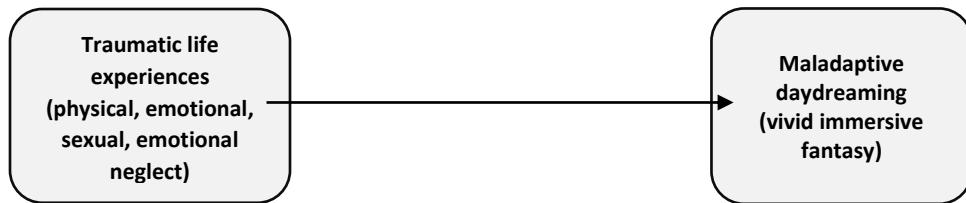
Research has also revealed recovering substance use disorder patients excessively engage in immersive form of daydreaming to a level that it may get pathological. Findings on a sample of 100 out of 180 participants who were recovering substance abuse patients revealed that SUD patients mostly have histories of childhood abuse and neglect and they are therefore vulnerable not just only to several traumatic dissociative disorders but also at risk of developing maladaptive daydreaming (Somer et al., 2019). Further building on dissociation, a key defense related to maladaptive daydreaming, it was revealed in a study by (Somer et al., 2017) on a sample of 100 highly traumatized and dissociative disorder inpatients out of whom 93 had reported severe sexual/physical trauma in childhood, reporting high levels of maladaptive daydreaming as a comorbidity. It also stated a further notion that perhaps maladaptive daydreaming could be an under recognized aspect of dissociative disorders, an area that needs more attention in terms of research.

Emerging Adults are an important part of the population of Pakistan. It was initially defined as an age of transition from adolescence to adulthood (Jaffery Jansen Arnett, 2012b) particularly a period defined by low self-esteem, high responsibility demands, lack of confidence and identity development. Arnett has done a great deal of research on this twenty-something age group, with an emphasis on comprehending the occurrence and effects of transitional events. Based on this research, emerging adults, being the main population of our study, it was highly important to understand if this particular age phase may endure a psychological impact as a result of exposure to negative experiences in childhood or adolescence. In one such study investigating the impact of exposure to lifetime trauma on the development of identity in emerging adulthood, it was concluded that although there was no clear connection found between trauma and identity status but it was found that severe traumatic experiences can have an impact on sexual identity (Truskauskaite-Kuneviciene et al., 2020).

Consistently, a study aimed at investigating the association between adverse childhood experiences and substance use patterns among adolescents and emerging adulthood, concluded that adverse childhood experiences continue to have an impact on substance use patterns in adolescence through emerging adulthood. It further revealed that these childhood traumas have a graded impact during and beyond adolescence (Rogers et al., 2021). Furthermore, it has been

put forth that maladaptive daydreaming can play a role of negative reinforcement for adults who had childhood trauma who want some kind of shield against emotional distress elicited by memories. Somer and Herscu (2017) revealed on 315 young students predominantly emerging adults that absorption plays an important mediating role between childhood trauma and maladaptive daydreaming.

Traumatic childhood experiences are common in both rural and urban areas according to research whether emotional or physical and an exposure to painful material and incidents. Abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, neglect etc. common reactions to painful memories than becomes sadness, anger, anxiety, social isolation, lack of confidence and various psychopathologies that can completely affect social, occupational and other important areas of functioning if not processed correctly (Carliner et al., 2016). This may cause serious effects through the adolescents leading up to adulthood contributing to additional distress along with the emotional setbacks of this age. To cater the anxiety the emerging adult may indulge in excessive vivid fantasy to escape reality which poses distress threat. Therefore, it is instrumental to understand if traumatic life events (Physical, Sexual and Emotional) in childhood and adolescents can predict Maladaptive daydreaming in Emerging adulthood in Pakistan.



*Figure 1 Framework of the study, showing all study variables and possible interaction.*

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) “Psychological stress is basically a relationship between an individual and his environment which is appraised by this individual as its exceeding his resources or posing a danger to their wellbeing”. According to the transactional model of stress and coping, in the face of a stressful event, there are two pivotal functions that copings serve

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- (a) Regulating the emotions and distress which accompanies a stressful event – Emotion Focused Coping.
- (b) Managing the problem itself by changing the facets of the stressful event itself – Problem Focused Coping

Emotion Focused Coping includes a broad range of strategies used by individuals to cope in the face of a stressful event. One of those strategies is avoidance or denial. Maladaptive daydreaming is by definition an avoidance coping as it poses a barrier for an individual to feel the stress of the painful memories of trauma. Following is the theoretical framework of our study variables based on Lazarus and Folkman's Model (1984). The objective of the current investigation is to identify how in the face of trauma, maladaptive copings such as a dissociative daydreaming can occur.

In the light of the above literature and conceptual framework following research hypothesis was formulated:

H1: There would be a significant predictive relationship of traumatic life experiences and maladaptive day dreaming among emerging adults.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a quantitative approach, with a correlational survey serving as the primary research design to investigate the association between traumatic life experiences and maladaptive daydreaming.

### *Participants*

Participants were a sample of N= 310 Emerging Adults (Arnett, 2000) (for the purpose of this study emerging adulthood is defined by age bracket of 18-25 with Males (n=88, 28.4%) and Females (n=222, 71.6%). 89.4% of the participants were single, 6.1% were married, 0.3% were divorced and 4.2% were Engaged. Purposive convenience sampling was employed and the sample was drawn from different universities as there were a higher number of target participants there. All participants were provided informed consent to ensure voluntary participation, confidentiality and right to withdraw at any point.

Inclusion criteria

- Individuals in the age range 18-25.
- Individuals who have had traumatic life events. as they reported.
- Literate, at least to be enrolled in an under-graduation course.
- Individuals who are cognitively sound, and are currently not on any medication

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals who are not literate.
- Individuals who never faced a trauma, as they reported.
- Individuals who are seeking any type of Psychotherapy.
- Individuals who have any cognitive or neurological disease.

*Measures*

Demographic form

The demographic form included information regarded name (optional), gender, age, marital status, education level, socioeconomic class and if they are on any medication or had any trauma history.

History of Traumatic experiences (Nieuwhees et al., 2002)

To evaluate the participant's past traumatic experiences, the Traumatic Experiences Checklist (TEC) was administered. A self-report questionnaire called the TEC (Nieuwhees et al., 2002) and it has statements regarding traumatic events that have occurred during one's life. It has proven psychometric qualities and has been utilized widely in clinical treatment. People answer the 29 questions, which reflect various forms of trauma (Emotional, physical & sexual), if they have ever encountered any of the 29 assertions. If the response is "yes" they then rate the severity of the impact it had on them on a Likert scale of 1 (none) to 5(an extreme amount). Some examples of statements include "having to look after your parents and/ or brothers and sisters when you were a child"; and "Serious bodily injury (e.g., loss of a limb, mutilation, burns)". It has (Cronbach's alpha=0.73). For the purpose of this study, we have only used the total score i.e., 0-29.

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### **The Maladaptive daydreaming scale MDS-16 (Somer, 2016)**

The maladaptive daydreaming of the individuals are assessed through MDS-16 scale. Designed and developed by Somer, 2016, the maladaptive daydreaming scale is a 16-item questionnaire that assesses abnormalities (clinical levels) in an individual's daydreaming. The purpose of developing the tool was to provide a valid and reliable measure, to assess the existence of proposed condition in patients and to bring in focus the potential detrimental effects of the phenomenon. It consists of 16 items that can be rated on a 10-point Likert scale. Scores range from 0 to 10. A mean score of 40 or higher indicates suspected high clinical levels of Maladaptive Day dreaming. The scale has been translated in over 39 languages including Turkish, Arabic and Hindi. There are no reverse items. The scale is available free for use in researches. The scale has excellent reliability and convergent validity. The value of the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient used to examine the internal consistency of the scale (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.957$ ) indicates that the questionnaire is highly reliable. It has (Cronbach's alpha = 0.890) calculated for the current study.

### *Procedure*

Permissions were sought from the principal authors of the scales to be used in the study. This sample was recruited mainly from 3-4 universities and other relevant areas, through purposive/convenient sampling. Prior to the questionnaire being administered, a consent form was read and signed by the participants. They received a brief explanation of the study's objectives as well as their free withdrawal policy at any moment. They also received assurances on the confidentiality of all of their personal information and data was collected. The forms were employed in-person only and the average time to complete the forms was between 20 – 25 minutes. They were then thanked for their participation.

### *Statistical Analysis*

The scores in the obtained data were then entered and analyzed through statistical procedure SPSS 2021, analysis included descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis and to investigate the gender difference t test for independence means was calculated.

## RESULTS

**Table1**

*Descriptive Statistics of the demographic variables*

Demographics	f	%
Gender		
Female	222	71.6
Male	88	28.4
Age		
18-20	85	27.4
21-23	170	54.8
24-25	55	17.7
Education		
Graduate	21	6.8
Undergraduate	273	88.1
Post Graduate	16	5.2
Marital status		
Single	277	89.4
Married	19	6.1
Divorce	1	0.3
Engaged	3	4.2
Birth Order		
First Born	102	32.9
Middle born	80	25.8
Last born	114	36.8

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**Table 2**

*Descriptive statistics and alpha reliability coefficients, univariate normality of study variables (N=310)*

Variables	Items	$\alpha$	$M$ $SD$	SK	$K$		Range	
					$K$		Min	Max
					Min	Max		
TE	29	0.730	7.74	0.50	0.47	1	23	
MD	16	0.89	3.87	0.48	0.110	16		
			62.1					
			24.0					125

Note: TE = Traumatic Experiences, and MD = Maladaptive daydreaming, A = Alpha reliability coefficient, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

The above mentioned table 1 shows the alpha reliabilities of both the scales which are ranging from .73 to .89 which shows that both of them fall in the acceptable range. The values of mean, standard deviation, Skewness and Kurtosis indicated that the data KS is normally distributed.

**Table 3**

*Simple linear regression showing Traumatic life experiences as a predictor of Maladaptive daydreaming (N=310)*

MD	$\beta$	$R^2$	Adj $R^2$	F	p	$si_i$
	0.26	.69	.69	22.29	.00	
TL						
P<.05						

TL=Traumatic Life Experiences; MD=Maladaptive Day dreaming

Table 2 indicates that that a unit changes in the predictor variable of traumatic life experiences will result in significant change in the criterion variable of Maladaptive daydreaming with a predictor change Of 69%

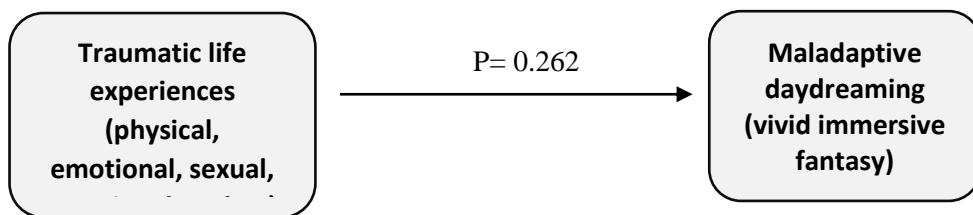
**Table 4**

*Independent Sample t-test to compare Traumatic Life Experiences, and Maladaptive Daydreaming among Males and Females Emerging adults.*

Variables	Male (n=88)		Female (n=222)		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
TLE	9.00	3.47	7.25	3.92	-3.58	302	0.00
MD	72.3	19.9	58.1	24.4	-4.84	194.5	0.00

Note: TLE = Traumatic Life Experiences, MD = Maladaptive daydreaming.

Table 3 shows the results of independent t-test analysis of Traumatic life experiences, and Maladaptive daydreaming with respect to gender i.e. male (n= 88) and females (n=222). The results indicate that there are significant differences in all the three variables among Males and females



*Figure 2 Correlation among independent and dependent variable.*

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## DISCUSSION

The findings of the investigation revealed that Traumatic life experiences strongly predicted Maladaptive Daydreaming as hypothesized. The results of the correlation are further supported by another resent study which investigated the link between Traumas and Maladaptive daydreaming (Musetti et al., 2022)..

The findings further add to the body of literature on the understanding on the association between Traumatic Life experiences and Maladaptive daydreaming. The likelihood of engaging in vivid fantasy is dependent on a range of defense mechanisms which can be many and not just dissociative types. This is also reflected in psychoanalytic theory and various previous researches that people who have had a history of traumatic events will eventually develop both conscious and unconscious copings to fight of the painful memories and flashbacks, basically to reduce awareness of them (Fang et al., 2020). Furthermore, many individuals who use one dominant defense such as dissociation far more often than any other defense and are dependent on it become part of an unwanted vicious cycle in which those painful memories specifically of childhood neglect are not processed completely causing immense emotional dysregulation and emotional lability (Schimmenti, 2017).

Females also reported more levels of trauma than males but this difference isn't significant enough which is in contrast to a study (Nijenhuis et al., 2002), which cofirmed that women tend to have more impact of Taumaticce eexperiences than males. Another investigation in contrast further confirmed that women develop more Trauma related stress than males (Breslau et al., 1999; Pratchett., 2010).

Age was a critical variable in this study. The age of emerging adulthood poses alot of pressures in life as its a phase of transition from adolescense to first phase of adulthood and accounts to identity formation, if they have traumatic experiences in their childhood they often use day dreaming as a defensive coping mechanism. Earlier Somer et al.(2021) investigated on a sample of 539 that trauma adults survivors reported to utilize maladaptive day dreaming as coping to distant the painful memories. They found the association of childhood exposure to all type of trauma for instance physical, emotional, sexual and neglect also to maladaptive day dreaming. The content of the day dreaming

involve morbid images, trauma related reenacting behaviors, death, day dreaming about taking revenge etc.

Though some strong relationships were discovered in the study, it is worth mentioning the potential confounding variables that might have affected the results, such as the participant's already genetic disposition to intense anxiety related to events and their general coping being avoidance. Also, in collectivistic societies, people live close together and a lack of space may contribute to daydreaming.

*Conclusion:*

The current study set out to investigate the association between maladaptive daydreaming and traumatic life experiences. The findings showed a statistically significant positive link between maladaptive daydreaming and traumatic life experiences, demonstrating that as trauma increases, so does maladaptive daydreaming among emerging adults. These findings highlight the need for customized therapies and support programs that concentrate on awareness and processing of traumatic memories by providing a platform to confront repressed pain.

The main implication of the study is to add to the body of knowledge about the mechanism of maladaptive daydreaming which is a growing construct at an alarming rate in Pakistan. Furthermore, awareness can be made of the risk factors of developing this almost psychopathology in this particular sensitive age phase. Additionally, the mechanism discovered can perhaps help to devise therapeutic plans to cater MD such mindfulness and may also help in customizing the trauma informed Cognitive Behavioral therapy approaches.

An important cultural aspect with respect to Pakistan which can influence the said relationships amongst main variables is that it is a more collectivistic society, with joint family systems comes the struggle of increased emotional abuse and lack of opportunity to escape, leading to increased distress which can be traumatic. Therefore, Individuals may have a high chance of indulging in immersive copings to escape the reality.

*Limitations and Recommendations:*

Though the study met most of its objectives perfectly a few limitations of this investigation still need important consideration. First being the

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generalizability of the results, as the sample size wasn't big enough (N=310) which may not be representing entirely a growing emerging adulthood in Pakistan. Another weakness, grows from the same root, is the unequal proportion of the two main genders i.e., Males and females, with females representing 71.6% of the entire sample and males 28.4% which is less than half of the former, further weakening the generalizability to Males posing as a very clear limitation to current research. Another factor that can be counted as a potential weakness is the method employed of purposive and convenient sampling may reduce its external validity. Furthermore, since the study is largely cross sectional, and reports data of one point in time, causal inferences cannot be drawn.

In the view of the present pros and cons of the research, it is highly recommended for the future researchers to apply the study on a larger sample to increase generalizability which is an integral part of any research. Furthermore, the data should have a near equal representation of the two genders for the same former reason. Since, the current study design is cross sectional, future researchers can widen the horizon by designing it in longitudinal study or experimental design, allowing more in-depth causal relationships to be discovered.

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