IMPACT OF MALADAPTIVE DAYDREAMING ON STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH IN THE UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA

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Abstract

Maladaptive daydreaming is a psychological condition characterized by excessive, vivid, and immersive fantasy that interferes with daily life. It is becoming a growing concern, especially among students whose academic activities and mental health are often affected. Consequently, this study set out to empirically examine the impact of Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) on students' mental health in University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). Specifically, the study determined, among others, to investigate whether students of UNN experience MD and how it influences their academic activities. The study population was 35,908, while the sample size 200. Cross-sectional sample survey research design was adopted for the study. Employing both multistage and simple random sampling techniques, four (4) faculties and eight (8) departments were chosen for the study, while systematic random sampling technique was adopted to select respondents from the selected departments, who fielded the questionnaire, which was the only instrument for data collection. Descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests were engaged for data analysis. Findings revealed a significant relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and students' academic activities as well as their mental health. Therefore, MD affects both students' mental health and their academic activities. The study recommends, inter-alia, increased awareness, early intervention, and regular counseling services to help students manage the condition effectively.

Keywords: Emotional distress, maladaptive daydreaming, mental disorder, psychological wellbeing

Introduction

Daydreaming is a natural, human phenomenon. According to Singer (2014), it is a universal mental activity that allows individuals to temporarily disengage from their external environment and shift their attention inward, often exploring personal thoughts, fantasies, and imaginative scenarios. While this cognitive process is considered normal and is even linked to creativity and problem-solving, it can become problematic when it manifests as maladaptive daydreaming (MD). Maladaptive daydreaming is characterized by excessive, vivid, and immersive fantasies that consume significant amounts of time and interfere with daily functioning (Somer, 2002). Unlike normal daydreaming, which is short-lived and harmless, MD often involves complex storylines, repetitive movements, and triggers such as music, making it difficult for affected individuals to focus on real-life tasks (Somer, Somer, & Jopp, 2016). As Maffetone (2018) aptly described, maladaptive daydreaming is like a "daymare," trapping individuals in a cycle of fantasy that hinders their productivity and well-being.

Research has shown that maladaptive daydreaming can have far-reaching emotional, social, and behavioral consequences. Studies suggest that more than 50% of maladaptive daydreamers also suffer from diagnosable mental health conditions such as

anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Dudek, 2022). Students, in particular, are vulnerable to this phenomenon due to the unique challenges they face during university life, including academic pressures, social adjustments, and emotional transitions. A student might intend to complete an assignment but instead spend hours immersed in vivid fantasies, leading to procrastination, incomplete tasks, and declining academic performance (McVay & Kane, 2010; Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). Over time, this behavior not only affects academic achievement but also erodes self-confidence and worsens mental health outcomes such as stress and emotional exhaustion.

University life cum academics is generally demanding and cumbersome. Per Kausar (2010), it is often accompanied by high levels of stress and peer pressure. When students lack effective coping mechanisms, they may turn to maladaptive daydreaming as an escape from real-life challenges, which exacerbates the problem. Margherita et al. (2022) found that maladaptive daydreaming is particularly common among younger adults and university students, with prevalence rates estimated at 8.5% for student-age populations (Ewbank, 2024). Somer et al. (2016) further revealed that MD is strongly associated with poor time management, procrastination, and reduced concentration—all of which are detrimental to academic success. Additionally, maladaptive daydreaming often leads to social withdrawal, where students may isolate themselves to spend more time in their imagined worlds, further deepening feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Despite the negative impact of maladaptive daydreaming, it remains largely unrecognized in mainstream psychiatry, as it is not included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (Somer et al., 2017). This lack of official recognition has contributed to limited research and awareness, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. While studies conducted in Israel and Western countries estimate the prevalence of MD to range between 2.5% and 4.3% among adults and students (Soffer-Dudek & Katz, 2022), little is known about its presence or impact among Nigerian university students. Consequently, many students who struggle with maladaptive daydreaming may not even recognize it as a problem, and they often suffer in silence without access to proper support or interventions. At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), the challenges of academic workload, social expectations, and financial stress create a fertile ground for mental health issues, yet maladaptive daydreaming remains an overlooked concern. Reports from students indicate that MD leads to skipped classes, incomplete assignments, and diminished focus, which ultimately affect academic performance and emotional well-being (Bigelsen et al., 2016).

Given the limited awareness and lack of empirical research on this issue within the Nigerian context, it is essential to investigate the phenomenon and its implications for students' mental health, academic performance, and social relationships. This study is therefore significant as it seeks to fill the existing research gap by examining the prevalence and impact of maladaptive daydreaming among students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. By shedding light on this underexplored mental health challenge, the research aims to raise awareness among students, educators, and policymakers about the detrimental effects of MD. The findings will not only enhance understanding of the psychological and academic risks associated with maladaptive daydreaming but also contribute to the development of effective coping strategies, early interventions, and mental health support systems tailored to students' needs. Ultimately, this study

underscores the importance of addressing maladaptive daydreaming as part of the broader efforts to improve mental health and academic success in Nigerian universities.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate impact of maladaptive daydreaming on university students' mental health in University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Specifically, the study determined:

1. To investigate whether students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka experience maladaptive daydreaming
2. To investigate how maladaptive daydreaming influences students' academic activities.
3. To explore students' views on maladaptive daydreaming as a potential mental health concern, including their awareness, attitudes, and understanding of its implications for their psychological well-being.
4. To identify and understand the life experiences, personal factors, or circumstances that students believe contribute to the onset and persistence of maladaptive daydreaming.
5. To explore how students perceive the social impact of maladaptive daydreaming on their relationships with peers, and family members, including any changes in communication, connection, or social interactions.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study and were tested at 0.05 level of significance. That is, if the level of significance is less than or equal to ($\leq$) 0.05, then there is a significant relationship. The three hypotheses are:

Ho_1: There is a significant relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and the mental health status of university students.

Ho_2: University students who engage in maladaptive daydreaming report significantly higher levels of dissociative symptoms.

Ho_3: There is a significant association between maladaptive daydreaming and poor academic activities.

Methods

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey research design to investigate the impact of maladaptive daydreaming on the mental health of students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). This design is appropriate because it allows the collection of numerical data at a single point in time, which can be used to identify patterns, relationships, and prevalence rates among a large population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research was conducted at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, a prominent federal university located in Enugu State, southeastern Nigeria. Founded in 1955 by Nnamdi Azikiwe, UNN is the first autonomous university in Nigeria and one of the largest higher institutions in the country (Obiechina et al., 1986). The Nsukka campus, which spans approximately 871 hectares, accommodates 17 faculties and 102 academic departments, offering a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs (University of Nigeria, n.d.). Its diverse academic and social environment, with students drawn from various backgrounds and disciplines, makes it an ideal setting for exploring mental health challenges such as maladaptive daydreaming. The target population for the study consists of all undergraduate students currently enrolled at UNN during the 2024/2025 academic session, across all faculties and levels of study (100-level to final-year students). According to the University's Academic Planning

Unit, the undergraduate population is estimated at 35,908 students, ensuring a large and diverse pool from which to draw participants. A representative sample was determined using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations, with a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence level. The formula yielded a sample size of approximately 396 students, but due to financial and logistical constraints, this was adjusted to 200 students for practical implementation.

Multistage sampling and simple random sampling techniques were employed to select four (4) faculties and eight (8) departments, that is, two (2) departments from each of the selected faculties, thus ensuring that the sample accurately represents the student population. At the first stage, faculties within the university were treated as clusters, from which a random selection was made. The faculties selected are Agricultural Science, Social Sciences, Education, and Engineering, while the Departments are Soil Science, Crop Science, Psychology, and Sociology and Anthropology. Others are Departments of Mechanical Engineering, Computer Engineering, Art Education, and Science Education. Each of these departments were given equal number of respondents, that is, twenty-five (25) each. Finally, systematic random sampling method was used to select participants from the selected departments to ensure that every student across all levels has an equal chance of inclusion. Data collection was carried out using a structured questionnaire designed to assess the prevalence and effects of maladaptive daydreaming. The questionnaire, a list of pre-set questions both of closed-ended and open-ended, consisted of two (2) sections namely, socio-demographic and substantive issues. It was designed to collect relevant information on key variables related to the study's objectives. The questionnaires were administered either in person (paper-based) or electronically (online forms) depending on accessibility and convenience of the participants across the selected faculties and departments. Clear instructions were provided, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity before, during, and after the exercise. Using a standardized questionnaire ensures consistent responses, efficient data processing, and enables the statistical analysis of trends and relationships across the student population. Distribution occurred across lecture halls, hangouts, passages, corridors, and other strategic areas within the departments selected for the study, with small tokens (such as pens) offered to encourage participation. Data collection took approximately two weeks, and careful checks were done to ensure completeness and accuracy of responses. The research employed the quantitative method of data analysis. The data were coded and analyzed using statistical package for social science (SPSS). Descriptive statistics such as percentage and frequency table were used in characterizing the respondents. Correlation analyses were also done using chi square (x^2) to illustrate the relationships between certain socio-demographic variables and the students' perceptions on Maladaptive Daydreaming.

Results

Table 1 below represents the demographic characteristics of the respondents who completed the questionnaire used for the study. The information indicates that 45.5% of the respondents were male, while 54.5% were female. This shows that the study had more female participants than male participants in the study. On respondents' age, indicate that 7.5% of

Table 1: *Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondent*

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	91	45.5%
Female	109	54.5%
Total	**200**	**100.0%**
Age	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
16-20	15	7.5%
21-25	95	47.5%
26-30	81	40.5%
31and above	3	1.5%
Total	**200**	**100.0%**
Level of study	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
100 level	57	28.5%
200 level	7	3.5%
300 level	15	7.5%
400 level	86	43.0%
500 level and above	35	17.5%
Total	**200**	**100.0%**
Marital status	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Married	4	2.0%
Single	196	98.0%
Total	**200**	**100.0%**
Place of residence	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Off-campus	97	48.5%
On-campus	103	51.0%
Total	**200**	**100.0**

Source: Fieldwork 2024

Respondents were aged 16–20, 47.5% were aged 21–25, 40.5% were aged 26–30, and 1.5% were 31 years and above. The majority of respondents fell within the 21–25 age group. The result for the level of study of respondents indicate that 28.5% of respondents were in 100 level, 3.5% in 200 level, 7.5% in 300 level, 43.0% in 400 level, and 17.5% in 500 level and above. The majority of respondents were in 400 level. Marital status shows 98.0% of respondents were single, while only 2.0% were married. The vast majority of respondents were single Place of resident indicate that 48.5% of respondents resided off-campus, while 51.0% lived on-campus. The majority of respondents were on-campus residents. At this point, the three hypotheses formulated for this study were tested at 0.05 levels of significance. This implies that if the level of significance is <0.05, then there is a significant relationship.

Table 2: Daytime Daydreaming and Perception of Maladaptive Daydreaming as a Mental Health issue

Responses/Total	Category of Respondents on the occurrence of daydreaming	Whether daydreaming affects their mental health	Total
Yes	87 (43.5)	23 (11.5)	110 (55.0)
No	55 (27.5)	35 (17.5)	90 (45.0)
Total	**142 (71.0)**	**58 (29.0)**	**200 (100.0)**

χ^2 5.326^a, df = 1, p = 0.014 (p < 0.05)

Table 2 above reveals the chi-square test results, χ^2 = 5.326 with df = 1. The p-value (0.014) is less than the alpha value of 0.05, suggesting that there is a significant association between maladaptive daydreaming and the mental health status of university students. This leads to the acceptance of the substantive hypothesis, which states that there is a significant association between maladaptive daydreaming and the mental health status of university students.

Table 3: Occurrence of Maladaptive Daydreaming and its perceived impact on Memory Recall

Responses/Total	Category of Respondents on the occurrence of daydreaming	Respondents by the possibility of having troubles remembering things after daydreaming	Total
Yes	28 (14.0)	118 (59.0)	146 (73.0)
No	20 (10.0)	34 (17.0)	54 (27.0)
Total	48 (24.0)	152 (76.0)	200 (100.0)

$\chi2$ = 6.753^a, df = 3, p = 0.558 (p > 0.05)

Table 3 reveals the p-value (0.558) is greater than the alpha value of 0.05, indicating that university students who engage in MD do not significantly report higher levels of dissociative symptoms than their counterparts who do not engage in MD. Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the substantive hypothesis which states that university students who engage in maladaptive daydreaming report significantly higher levels of dissociative symptoms is hereby rejected.

Table 4: Association with maladaptive daydreaming and poor academic activities

Responses/Total	Association with maladaptive daydreaming	Presence of poor academic performance	Total
Yes	27 (13.5%)	13 (6.5%)	40 (20.0%)
No	134 (62.0%)	26 (13.0%)	160 (80.0%)
Total	161(81.5%)	39 (19.5%)	200(100.0%)

$\chi2$ = 4.168^a, df = 3, p = 0.002 (p > 0.05)

Table 4 above reveals the result from the chi square test, which shows that the p value (0.002) is less than the alpha value (0.05), thus the alternative hypothesis which states that there is a significant relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and poor academic activities is upheld, while the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between maladaptive daydreaming and poor academic performance is rejected.

Discussion

The study comprised slightly more female participants (54.5%) than males (45.5%), with most respondents falling within the 21–25 age range (47.5%), followed by those aged 26–30 (40.5%). Residential data showed a nearly even split, with 51.0% living on-campus and 48.5% residing off-campus. These figures provide useful context for understanding the perspectives and behaviors explored in the study. The findings from this study shed significant light on the experiences and perceptions surrounding maladaptive daydreaming among undergraduate students. Over half of the respondents

(51.5%) admitted to excessive daydreaming during the day, while nearly half (49.0%) reported that such episodes could last up to 40 minutes. This aligns with the findings of Somer (2002), who first coined the term maladaptive daydreaming to describe a condition where individuals spend a substantial amount of time in vivid, immersive fantasies that interfere with daily functioning. The results also suggest that many students struggle to manage their daydreaming, with only 49.5% believing it can be controlled, and a substantial 39.0% being unsure. This uncertainty highlights a general lack of awareness and coping strategies, as observed in the work of Bigelsen and Schupak (2011), who noted that individuals with maladaptive daydreaming often lack insight into how to regulate the behavior.

The academic implications of maladaptive daydreaming were also evident in this study. A total of 22.0% of respondents acknowledged skipping classes or social activities due to daydreaming, and 36.0% found it hard to complete academic tasks. Moreover, 48.0% reported that their academic performance had been negatively affected, while 49.5% admitted missing assignment deadlines. These findings support the conclusions drawn by Schimmenti, Sideli, and Gori (2020), who argued that maladaptive daydreaming is associated with impaired executive functioning, reduced academic focus, and poor time management. The data further shows that while only 22.0% believed daydreaming interfered with their ability to focus during lectures, a large number of students were unsure about its effects, suggesting the need for more awareness on how maladaptive behaviors may subtly disrupt academic engagement. In terms of mental health perception, 39.5% of respondents considered maladaptive daydreaming to be a mental health issue, while 43.5% were unsure. Interestingly, 64.0% said they had felt emotionally disturbed by it, suggesting that even if students do not formally recognize it as a mental disorder, many experience significant emotional consequences. These findings are consistent with those of Soffer-Dudek and Somer (2018), who found that maladaptive daydreaming is often accompanied by emotional distress, guilt, and psychological discomfort. Additionally, 50.5% of respondents were aware of the link between maladaptive daydreaming and psychological distress, confirming earlier studies that connected the phenomenon to anxiety, depression, and dissociative symptoms. When it comes to dissociative features, the results reflect classic signs of dissociation as theorized by the DSM-5 criteria. A notable 35.5% of respondents admitted to feeling detached from them during daydreaming, and 31.0% stated they had lost awareness of their real surroundings. Half of the respondents (50.5%) reported trouble remembering things after daydreaming, and an overwhelming 77.0% said their daydreams felt more real than actual events. These experiences resonate with the dissociative absorption component of dissociation, as discussed in studies by Soffer-Dudek (2020), which suggested that individuals with maladaptive daydreaming often lose touch with external reality during immersive fantasizing.

On contributing factors, the data reveals that 58.0% of respondents believe stress contributes to their daydreaming, and 61.5% had experienced traumatic events that they believe triggered it. Furthermore, 58.0% said they daydream more when they feel lonely or isolated, and 49.5% attributed the onset of their daydreaming to a lack of social support. These insights are consistent with the trauma model of maladaptive daydreaming (Somer, 2002), which proposes that intense fantasizing can develop as a coping mechanism for dealing with emotional pain, trauma, or loneliness. The findings also support the conclusions of studies like those by Somer and Herscu (2017), which identified early-life adversity, neglect, and emotional disconnection as key predictors of

maladaptive daydreaming. The social impact of maladaptive daydreaming was also considerable. About 47.0% of respondents reported that their relationships with family members had been affected by their frequent daydreaming, and 43.0% said they avoided social gatherings because they preferred to daydream. These responses align with literature that describes social withdrawal and emotional detachment as common behavioral consequences of maladaptive daydreaming (Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011). Furthermore, only 22.0% of respondents were aware of the term "maladaptive daydreaming" before the questionnaire, indicating a general lack of public knowledge and diagnostic recognition. This supports recent calls in psychological research for maladaptive daydreaming to be included in formal diagnostic manuals like the ICD or DSM. Finally, respondents were asked to suggest possible solutions for controlling maladaptive daydreaming. An overwhelming 88.5% selected therapy or counseling as the most effective strategy, with far fewer choosing alternatives like limiting exposure to fantasy-triggering media (5.5%), maintaining a structured routine (4.5%), or practicing mindfulness (1.5%). This strong preference for professional intervention reflects findings by Pietkiewicz et al. (2018), who emphasized the role of psychotherapeutic approaches particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and trauma-focused therapies in managing maladaptive daydreaming and its underlying causes.

Conclusion
The findings of this study point to the reality that maladaptive daydreaming is more than a harmless habit; it is a mental and emotional experience that can significantly interfere with daily life, relationships, and emotional well-being. Many individuals reported feeling disconnected from their environment, emotionally unsettled, or socially withdrawn as a result of their daydreaming patterns. Factors such as stress, trauma, loneliness, and lack of social support were identified as key contributors to MD. While maladaptive daydreaming affects a significant number of people, awareness of the condition remains low. Most participants had never heard of the term before, indicating a gap in mental health education and support. However, there is a strong belief among respondents that therapeutic interventions, especially counseling, could be effective in helping manage the condition. Individuals should also be encouraged to adopt healthy coping mechanisms such as mindfulness, journaling, physical activities, and maintaining structured routines. Support groups, both online and offline, can serve as an additional resource for those seeking to manage their daydreaming tendencies in a supportive community environment.

Recommendations
Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:
1. Awareness campaigns and programs on mental health in schools, universities, and communities to educate students and young adult about maladaptive daydreaming, its symptoms, and potential psychological effects.
2. Schools, universities, and community health centers should organize workshops, seminars, and group discussions to inform cum educate people on MD and create safe spaces for individuals to share their experiences without fear of judgment or stigma.
3. Institutions should incorporate mental health topics, including maladaptive daydreaming, into school curricula and extracurricular activities.

4. Expand the availability of professional counselling services in educational and community milieus. Trained mental health professionals should be readily accessible and their services made affordable.
5. Encourage individuals to adopt practical coping mechanism such as mindful journaling, regular physical activities, and structured daily routine. Support groups both physical and virtual should be created to provide safe, nonjudgmental environment for individuals to share and manage their experiences.

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