

IMPACT OF DAYDREAMING, ESCAPISM AND PARTNER FANTASIES ON MENTAL WELL-BEING AMONG YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

In this advanced and stressful world, most young adults use imagination and fantasies as a coping mechanism to deal with their negative emotions. However, the impact of these subjective experiences on the mental well-being of youth varies. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship and predictive effect of daydreaming, escapism and partner fantasies on the mental well-being of youth. A quantitative cross-sectional survey method was used in the current study. A sample of 311 participants, aged between 18-24 years was selected by using a probability sampling method, from two faculties of the University of Gujrat. Scales used in this study to collect data were: Dysfunctional Daydreaming Scale (DDS), Escapism Motivation Scale, Ideal Partner and Ideal Relationship Scales and The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS). First, the reliability of all these scales was measured, and then data was analyzed by using descriptive statistics, correlational analysis and hierarchical multiple regression. Results showed that dysfunctional daydreaming was negatively related to mental well-being while self-expansion and all ideal perception traits related to partner, self and relationship were positively related to mental well-being. The complete regression model explained 21.5% variance in mental well-being, which showed that these variables had significantly predicted change, with dysfunctional daydreaming, partner status and self-warmth being negative predictors, while escapism, self-attractiveness and relationship intimacy were positive predictors of mental well-being of youth. The findings can be helpful for educators and clinicians to guide youth by encouraging them to engage in constructive imaginations that are goal-oriented and emotionally enriching.

Key words: Daydreaming, Escapism, Partner Fantasies, Mental Well-Being, Youth

INTRODUCTION

Human cognition is a complex mental process that includes thoughts, emotions, perception, planning and decision making that shapes a person's knowledge and experiences for better mental well-being, which is very much important for an

individual's psychological health. It influences an individual's emotions, thoughts, behaviors and way of thinking for coping with different conditions such as managing stress or anxiety, maintaining relationships and engaging in various productive activities. Adolescence and early adulthood are critical periods of social, emotional and psychological development. During this phase, individuals may face many issues and challenges related to studies, career, social expectations, self-growth in terms of identity development and future uncertainties. The young people are in the stage where they mostly focus on self-development, future possibilities with a high level of optimism, identity exploration, and instability and have feelings in between while making decisions (Arnett, 2014).

The psychological landscape of young adults especially university students, has increasingly drawn attention to the complex interaction between internal cognitive processes like daydreaming, escapism, partner fantasies and overall mental well-being. Daydreaming, escapism, and partner fantasies are distinct cognitive phenomena but interrelated cognitive processes. In a more difficult and demanding modern higher education environment, many students find themselves creating internal worlds that serve both as a refuge from academic and social pressures and as a means to explore self-identities and relational expectations. While escapism provides a means of mental detachment from reality, often through media, gaming, fiction and fantasies or partner fantasies involve idealized romantic thoughts that influence relationship expectations, whereas daydreaming allows individuals to imagine possibilities and reflects on past experiences, reduces stress and anxiety and enhances creativity. Escapism and daydreaming are the mental activities that detach person from external realities by engaging in imaginative scenarios (Klinger, 2009), act as two sides to the coin; on one hand, it can enhance creativity, help in problem-solving and encourage self-reflection, while on the other hand, it may lead to avoidance, distancing individuals from tangible experiences and practical solutions to their challenges and other maladaptive behaviors (Smallwood & Schooler, 2015; Barnett & Kaufman, 2020). Whereas, partner fantasies are a specific form of daydreaming that express individuals' desires for closeness, acceptance, and emotional security, which are a highly idealized and romanticized construction of possible or imagined relationships. Although these cognitive processes can serve positive functions and provide momentary respite but excessive engagement has been associated with negative psychological outcomes, including loneliness, life dissatisfaction, and emotional distress (Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011).

Several studies have shown that these cognitive phenomena are interconnected and significantly influence mental health among youth when they are in excess. For instance, Maladaptive daydreaming (MD) is extensive imaginative activity that replaces human interactions and interferes with academic, interpersonal or vocational functioning (Somer, 2002). Maladaptive daydreaming occurs when someone involves in an extended period of daydreaming, frequently for hours at a time, as a coping strategy, but it causes significant distress and impairment (Fisher, 2024). Similarly, research on escapism shows that balanced involvement in escapist activities can be beneficial, but excessive escapist behaviors like binge-watching or gaming addiction can result in avoidance behaviors and poor emotional regulation (Stenseng et al., 2021). Unrealistic fantasies about partner can affect mental and emotional well-being

that contributing to dissatisfaction in real-life relationships (Murray et al., 1996).

These partner fantasies are not only internal schemas which are frequently influenced by personal experiences and cultural narratives, but also influence expectations regarding future interpersonal interactions that sets a high standards which are difficult for relationships to meet in the real world (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The relationship between these internal escapist activities and mental well-being becomes particularly relevant as the students in university are at crossroads of self-discovery and personal growth, the creation of alternative internal realities provides momentary relief from stressors like academic pressure, loneliness, and the uncertainties that inherent in emerging adulthood but obsessions with these strategies can lead to many psychological problems like increased levels of anxiety, depression, and severe dissatisfaction with one's real life situations (Higgins, 1987). Psychological research explained the effects of internally generated thoughts on mental health, while some theories suggest that fantasy and imagination foster creativity, personal growth and emotional resilience; others show that excessive engagement in these processes can influence psychological well-being (Klinger, 2009).

Daydreaming is universal and common, and almost everyone does it at any point of the day or life, but when daydreaming becomes an addictive behavior and it controls your thoughts to avoid real-life relationships and responsibilities, it will be problematic. As daydreaming is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, it has been linked to its adaptive and maladaptive effects (McMillan et al., 2013). The adaptiveness depends on thoughts' content and one of its adaptive effects is, increase in creativity when the individual's mind is wandering or off-task (Zedelius & Schooler, 2016). Maladaptive daydreaming is a psychological construct that was first introduced by a professor of clinical psychology Eli Somer, in the School of Social Work at the University of Hafia, in 2002 (Witkin, 2019). In this condition, the person excessively gets involved in fantasizing activities, binge watching films, gaming and extensive book reading that hinders the individual's daily life functioning which leads to emotional distress. Dysfunctional daydreaming, or maladaptive daydreaming, is compulsive and extensive absorption of immersive fantasies for several hours that hinders academic, interpersonal or vocational functioning by replacing human interactions (Somer, 2002, 2025).

Escapism is a process, in psychology, when a person often uses an activity or behavior to escape from the realities of life (Olivine, 2023). Additionally, the mind uses escapism as a survival tool to cope with memories of painful events. While escapism is also mostly seen as an unhealthy way but it can be a useful strategy for dealing with challenging situations, stress management, and healthily balancing emotions. Escapism has both favorable outcomes, like relaxation and mood repair and unfavorable outcomes like withdrawal and excessive media use (Rössler, Hoffner, & van Zoonen, 2017).

Partner Fantasies

Like daydreaming, partner fantasies are the mental rehearsals of imaginative scenarios. It is a specific type of hypothetical thinking, often involves sexual or romantic fantasies. If these partner fantasies are positive and constructive, they will help individuals in maintaining and building confidence in practical social interactions

and expressing emotions, but if these fantasies become too excessive and the person idealizes too much, they may lead to real-life dissatisfaction by increasing unrealistic expectations that are far from reality (Murray et al., 1996). However, these detailed and long-term romantic fantasies are due to maladaptive daydreaming, which makes it difficult to build a strong emotional connection with their real partners (Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011). With time, continuously engaging in such fantasies makes it harder for the person to build meaningful and authentic relationships, as the perfect imaginary palace in his mind does not match the reality, as real-life relationships come with imperfections and challenges, but fantasy partners seem ideal and perfect without any flaw (Somer et al., 2017).

Well-Being

Well-being is the combination of feeling good and functioning well, the development of one's potential and experiencing positive emotions. Mental well-being is the multifaceted concept that includes psychological, emotional and social dimensions of health. It is a positive aspect of mental health which is more than just the absence of disease. Those individuals with mental well-being feel optimistic and function well. The WHO defines mental well-being as a state in which a person realizes their ability to manage stress, work effectively or productively, maintain healthy relationships and contribute to their community or society. Mental well-being is influenced by both the external environment and how we respond to it. As the external circumstances change all the time, so mental well-being also changes from time to time depending on the situation. The two components of mental well-being; hedonic well-being is subjective well-being that focuses on pleasure and happiness which includes positive emotions such as joy and life satisfaction, whereas eudaimonic well-being is psychological well-being that emphasizes meaning and personal growth which includes psychological functioning such as self-acceptance and personal growth and having purpose in life (Ryff, Boylan & Kirsch, 2021). Mental well-being is very important for normal functioning as high mental well-being enhances cognitive functioning, increases productivity and improves relationships, whereas poor mental well-being has been associated with anxiety, depression and low life satisfaction (Diener et al. 2017). So, it is crucial to understand psychological mechanisms that influence mental well-being, as mental health has a significant influence on physical health (Ohrnberger, Fichera, & Sutton, 2017), learning and quality of interpersonal relationships (Radzilani, 2024).

As daydreaming is a spontaneous imaginative mental activity, used to escape from reality, which can be adaptive or maladaptive depending on frequency and function. The constructive daydreaming can enhance creativity, problem-solving and self-reflection. The positive daydreaming helps individuals to regulate their emotions, set personal goals, rehearse future scenarios that provide temporary relief from stress and improve mood. On the other hand, maladaptive daydreaming, in excessive and immersive state, interferes with real-life functioning, social interactions and academic or work productivity (Somer, 2002).

Problem Statement

Mental well-being is a very crucial aspect of normal functioning and development. In

today's world, youth are increasingly engaging in cognitive activities like daydreaming, escapism and partner fantasies to deal with stress, emotional dis-regulation, relationship dissatisfaction and social anxiety. Moderate engagement in such activities can be constructive, but excessive involvement may result in psychological distress and social withdrawal. Existing studies showed that if these cognitive phenomena occur at a moderate level, they can increase creativity, relief stress and shape romantic expectations but if they are in maladaptive form, they can interfere with real-life functioning that leads to avoiding behaviors and influencing life satisfaction.

Although, daydreaming, escapism and partner fantasies are very prevalent among youth but there is lack of empirical evidence on how these cognitive processes collectively impact mental well-being among youth. The relationship between daydreaming, escapism and partner fantasies and their specific impact on mental well-being, particularly among youth in Pakistan is under-researched. The findings will provide knowledge that whether these cognitive processes cause psychological distress or emotional resilience, to develop such interventions and awareness programs that promote healthier coping strategies.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of the study is to explore the relationship between daydreaming, escapism and partner fantasies and their impact on mental well-being among youth.

Research Hypotheses

H1: There are significant relationships among daydreaming, escapism, partner fantasies and mental well-being among youth.

H2: There is a significant predictive effect of daydreaming, escapism and partner fantasies for the mental well-being among youth.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it addresses the psychological research gap in Pakistani youth context by exploring the impact of daydreaming, escapism and partner fantasies on mental well-being of university students. By examining how these cognitive activities influence coping mechanisms, emotional regulation and relationship satisfaction, the findings of the study will provide valuable insights for mental health professionals, counselors and educators in designing the culturally relevant therapeutic approaches and interventions. Additionally, the understanding of adaptive and maladaptive effects of these cognitive activities will be helpful in promoting healthier cognitive engagement, enhancing emotional resilience and making reality-based relationship expectations, which contributes to improvement of overall well-being among youth. Moreover, this study has the potential to give evidence-based practices to support mental well-being of youth.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational survey design was used to investigate the impact of daydreaming, escapism and partner fantasies on mental well-being among

youth. This research design was appropriate for measuring the strength of relationship between these psychological processes and their predictive effect on mental well-being simultaneously.

Sample

A probability sampling technique, particularly simple random sampling was used for derivation of sample for data collection. Stratified proportionate random sampling was used to make strata on basis of social sciences and natural sciences departments with sub-strata of four academic semesters of BS (Hons), 2nd, 4th, 6th and 8th and two semesters of MPhil, 2nd and 4th, as these semesters enrolled in summer semester and participants are selected randomly from each stratum which reduces selection biases and ensure representative sample. Only those students were selected, whose age range was in between 18-24 years. The sample was drawn from the two departments of social sciences that include, political sciences and international relations and two natural sciences departments including biochemistry and biotechnology. The sample includes both male and female students in each department.

The sample size was determined by using Taro Yamane formula (1967), which was:

$$n = N / 1 + N(e)^2$$

The final sample size was consisted of 311 students. Further proportionate sampling was determined from total sample size of each department.

Measures and Instruments

The present research study used following standardized and valid measures to assess the variables:

The consent form was used to ensure the willingness of participants to participate in the research voluntary by signing the consent form of the current study. This consent form explained the topic of study, purpose of study and informed the participants about their voluntary participation in the study.

The demographic form was developed by following social and literature characteristics. It was used to collect the participant's basic personal information relevant to my research topic to analyze how these demographic factors influence the research findings. The demographic sheet included age, gender, family system, program of study, department, semester, relationship status, current residence and primary source of ideal partner fantasies.

Dysfunctional Daydreaming Scale (DDS) is a recently developed scale by Shafiq, Zafar and Khalid in 2023, which is reliable and valid psychometric test, used to assess dysfunctional daydreaming and maladaptive thinking patterns that may be risk factors for other mental disorders and their impact on daily life. It is 45 items scale in which item 5, 7 and 8 were discarded and now DDS scale is of 42 items, rated on 5-point Likert scale and responses range from 0-4. The reliability coefficient of $\alpha = .94$ and concurrent validity with MDS is of $r = .75$, $p < .01$.

The Escapism Motivational Scale (EMS) was originally developed by Stenseng et al., in 2012 that has been applied across different domains, such as gaming, sports and social media engagement. This scale is theoretically based on the dualistic concept of escapism (Hussain et al., 2021) derived from Regulatory focus theory (Higgins,

1998); self-expansion escapism and self-suppression escapism. The self-expansion form of escapism is based on promotion focus and self-suppression form of escapism is based on prevention motives. The EMS is 14 items scale.

The Ideal Partner and Relationship Scale (IPRS) was originally developed by Fletcher et al., in 1999, used to assess participant's perception and expectations related to ideal partners. The used scale was the short form of Ideal Partner and Relationship Scales. These scales analyzed the importance of different traits in ideal romantic partner and perceived consistency between ideal and actual potential partner. They had strong reliability and validity across different relationship context. This scale measured three primary dimensions of ideal partner; Partner Warmth/Trustworthiness, Partner Attractiveness/Validity and Partner Status/Resources with various characteristics of each dimension. The participant's rated each trait on a 7-point Likert scale.

The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) was originally developed by Tennant et al., in 2007. This 14-item scale with all positively worded items was used to assess psychological functioning and subjective well-being. These items were rated on 5-point Likert scale.

Procedure

Before data collection, permission for data collection was sought from the original authors of DDS, EMS, IPRS, and WEMWBS through email.

The original scales of 'Ideal Partner and Relationship Scale' and 'The Escapism Motivational Scale' were in English, with the authors' permission, the scales were translated into Urdu for linguistic and conceptual accuracy and understanding, using forward-backward translation method (de Groot et al., 1994). This forward and backward method was used to validate the accuracy of translations. The expert panel for this translation technique consisted of 2 PhD and 3 MPhil scholars from Department of Psychology, University of Gujrat. This 5-step translation procedure included; forward translation, synthesis, backward translation, expert committee review and pre-testing. In forward method, original version of scale (in English) was translated into target language by five independent expert translators from Psychology department. In synthesis stage, it was ensured that culturally relevant terminologies were used without altering the meaning of the items. The synthesized version was then again independently translated into English by different translators. Then the expert committee based on two PhD scholars, discussed any discrepancies and modifications were made to ensure that final version was linguistically precise and maintain conceptual fidelity.

After that, the translated versions of scales were used for data collection. In order to collect data, formal permission was taken from heads of respective departments by writing permission letters. For data collection, paper-pencil questionnaires were used. A probability sampling technique was used to recruit university students from both social sciences and natural sciences department. The individuals were approached and questionnaires were administered in-person and purpose and procedure of research was briefly explained to them. The research participants were given the consent form to ensure their voluntary involvement in the study and informed about the confidentiality of their information and they had right to withdraw at any time. Participants were given clear instructions on how to fill the questionnaire to

encourage honest responses. It took almost 20-25 minutes to fill the scales. Responses were securely stored and incomplete responses were excluded. The data was collected from students within time period of almost two months during working hours due to shortage of time as spring semester in University was of almost four months.

Ethical Considerations

Research ethics were followed in the current study. Formal permission was taken from authors to use their scales and then from respective department to collect data. The participants of the study were fully informed about the purpose of the study and provided consent before participation. Participation was voluntary without negative consequences. Participants can withdraw at any time without penalty. All the data kept anonymous and stored securely. This methodology ensures scientific rigor while adhering to ethical standards in psychological research.

RESULTS

The data was analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. After entering data into SPSS, it is checked for errors and outliers. Firstly, the screening of data occurred as it is essential to examine the data before conducting analysis to check for any outliers, missing values or any error in the data through frequency checking including maximum and minimum values. After screening errors and correcting them, the scores of variables then computed for further analysis.

Cronbach's Alpha found in SPSS is used to measure the reliability and internal consistency of scales used in the study.

Table 1

Reliability Analysis of Scales

Variables	No. of Items	Alpha (α)
Daydreaming	42	.940
Partner Fantasies	46	.980
Escapism	14	.753
Mental Well-being	14	.879

Note: The Cronbach's alpha reliability is above 0.7 and 0.9, which means there is a good and excellent internal consistency (Kline, 2015).

To check reliability of the scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficient is calculated for each measure. The first scale is Dysfunctional Daydreaming Scale, consisting of 42 items with excellent internal consistency as $\alpha = .940$, which indicated that the items reliably measure this construct. Similarly, the second scale is Ideal Partner and Ideal Relationship Scale, comprising 46 items with exceptional internal consistency as $\alpha = .980$. The third scale is Escapism Motivation Scale, have 14 items showed acceptable internal consistency and reliability as $\alpha = .753$ and lastly, the fourth scale is Mental Well-being Scale, also have 14 items that demonstrates excellent reliability as $\alpha = .879$ that indicates strong internal consistency. Hence, all the scales used in the study have acceptable to exceptional level of reliability.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Sample (N=311)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
DDS_Escapism	47.19	14.59
DDS_Emotional-Distress	38.04	13.80
Total_Dysfunctional Daydreaming	85.24	27.53
Self-Expansion Escapism	21.50	4.38
Self-Suppression Escapism	23.66	5.15
P_Attractiveness	27.80	10.09
P_Warmth	31.46	10.14
P_Status	24.40	9.16
S_Attractiveness	27.94	10.32
S_Warmth	31.12	10.42
S_Status	23.93	8.81
R_Passion	28.91	10.55
R_Intimacy	33.49	11.08
Total Mental Well-being	47.09	10.34

Note: *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard deviation, DDS = Dysfunctional Daydreaming Scale, P = Partner, S = Self and R = Relationship

This descriptive statistic table 2 indicates that the average score of DDS Escapism ($M = 47.20$, $SD = 14.59$) and DDS Emotional Distress ($M = 38.05$, $SD = 13.8$), resulting in total Dysfunctional Daydreaming Score ($M = 85.24$, $SD = 27.53$). In case of Escapism scores, participants responded on Self-Expansion dimension ($M = 21.5$, $SD = 4.38$) and Self-Suppression dimension ($M = 23.67$, $SD = 5.15$) of escapism. In terms of ideal partner perception, the scores for Partner-Warmth ($M = 31.46$, $SD = 10.14$) are relatively high, followed by Partner-Attractiveness ($M = 27.80$, $SD = 10.09$) and Partner-Status ($M = 24.41$, $SD = 9.16$). Similarly, in self-rated traits, participants rate themselves high in Warmth ($M = 31.12$, $SD = 10.42$), followed by Attractiveness ($M = 27.94$, $SD = 10.32$) and Status ($M = 23.93$, $SD = 8.81$). In case of relationship dynamics, the scores for Relationship Intimacy ($M = 33.49$, $SD = 11.08$) are higher than Relationship Passion ($M = 28.91$, $SD = 10.55$). Finally, participants recorded Mental Well-being scores ($M = 47.09$, $SD = 10.35$), which indicates that there is a balanced state of emotional and psychological functioning across the sample.

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Table 3

Correlation for Study Variables (N = 311)

Sr.no.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1	DDS_Escapism	-													
2	DDS_EmotionalDistr	.88**	-												
3	ess	.97**	.97**	-											
4	Dysfunctional														
5	Daydreaming														
6	Self_Expansion	-.01	-.11*	-.06	-										
7	Self_Suppression	.25**	.19**	.22**	.29**										
8	P_Attractiveness	.22**	.19**	.21**	.14*	.12*									
9	P_Warmth	.17**	.10	.14*	.27**	.19**	.61**								
10	P_Status	.19**	.12*	.17**	.19**	.18*	.59**	.76**							
11	S_Attractiveness	.15**	.08	.12*	.28**	.13*	.79**	.57**	.63**	-					
12	S_Warmth	.15**	.09	.12*	.28**	.16**	.59**	.79**	.70**	.64**					
13	S_Status	.11*	.05	.09	.22**	.09	.54**	.61**	.71**	.60**	.72**				
14	R_Passion	.21**	.16**	.19**	.25**	.25**	.64**	.67**	.66**	.67**	.72**	.65**			
15	R_Intimacy	.14*	.08	.12*	.34**	.18**	.63**	.80**	.72**	.66**	.83**	.64**	.73**		
16	Total Mental Well-being	-.13*	-.14*	-.14*	.35**	.02	.24**	.32**	.23**	.31**	.28**	.24**	.29**	.36**	-

Note: DDS = Dysfunctional Daydreaming Scale, P = Partner, S = Self and R = Relationship

Table 3 indicates, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test was used to investigate the relationship between all the study variables and their subscales.

There was a statistically strong positive correlation between DDS-escapism and DDS-emotional distress ($r = .88, p < .01$), showing that there was a close association within DDS dimensions. There was no statistically significant relationship between DDS-escapism and self-expansion ($r = -.01, p > .01$), but positively related to self-suppression ($r = .25, p < .01$), which suggesting that escapist daydreaming aligns with self-suppression dimension of escapism. DDS-escapism shows statistically significant positive relationship with all partner perception traits (Attractiveness; $r = .22$, Warmth; $r = .17$, Status; $r = .20, p < .01$), self-perception traits (Attractiveness; $r = .15$, Warmth; $r = .15, p < .01$ and Status; $r = .11, p < .05$) and relationship perception traits (Passion; $r = .21, p < .01$ and Intimacy; $r = .14, p < .05$). Overall, there was a significantly weak negative correlation between DDS-escapism and mental well-being ($r = -.13, p < .05$), which shows that higher level of DDS-escapism is associated with lower mental well-being.

Similarly, DDS-emotional distress also strong correlated with DDS-escapism ($r = .88, n = 311, p < .01$, two-tailed). There was a statistically negative correlation between DDS-emotional distress and self-expansion ($r = -.11, p < .05$), which indicates that emotional distress during daydreaming may hinder the personal growth. DDS-emotional distress was positively related to self-suppression ($r = .19, p < .01$), partner perception traits (Attractiveness; $r = .19$ and Status; $r = .12, p < .01$) and relationship passion ($r = .17, p < .01$). There was no statistically significant relationship of DDS-emotional distress with partner warmth trait ($r = .10, p > .01$), self-perception traits (Attractiveness; $r = .08$, Warmth; $r = .09$, Status; $r = .05, p > .05$) and relationship intimacy ($r = .08, p > .01$). Overall, DDS-emotional distress was negatively correlated with mental well-being ($r = -.14, p < .05$), which suggests that higher level of emotional distress from daydreaming is associated with lower mental well-being.

There was a statistically significant relationship between both dimensions; self-expansion and self-suppression ($r = .29, p < .01$). Self-expansion is positively related to all partner perceived traits (Attractiveness; $r = .14, p < .05$ and Warmth; $r = .27$, Status; $r = .19, p < .01$), self-perceived traits (Attractiveness; $r = .28$, Warmth; $r = .28$, Status; $r = .22, p < .01$) and relationship perceived characteristics (Passion; $r = .25$ and Intimacy; $r = .34, p < .01$). Overall, self-expansion was positively correlated with mental well-being ($r = .35, p < .01$), which shows that higher level of self-expansion from daydreaming is associated with higher mental well-being. It is suggesting that personal development is key to well-being.

Self-suppression was positively related to DDS subscales; DDS-escapism ($r = .25, p < .01$) and DDS-emotional distress ($r = .19, p < .01$). There was statistically significant relationship between partner perceived traits (Attractiveness; $r = .12, p < .05$ and Warmth; $r = .19$, Status; $r = .18, p < .01$), self-perceived traits (Attractiveness; $r = .13, p < .05$ and Warmth; $r = .16, p < .01$) and relationship traits (Passion; $r = .25$ and Intimacy; $r = .18, p < .01$), indicating that suppressed self leads to more fantasy-based connections. There was no statistically significant relationship of self-suppression with self-perceived status trait ($r = .09, p > .01$) and mental well-being ($r = .02, p > .01$), showing uncertain effects on mental well-being.

All partner perceived traits have positive relationship with mental well-being (Attractiveness; $r = .24$, Warmth; $r = .32$, Status; $r = .23, p < .01$). There was statistically significant relationship of partner attractiveness traits with all other

partner, self and relationship traits (P-Warmth; $r = .61$, P-Status; $r = .59$, S-Attractiveness; $r = .79$, S-Warmth; $r = .59$, S-Status; $r = .54$, R-Passion; $r = .64$ and R-Intimacy; $r = .63$, $p < .01$). Similarly, partner warmth traits are significantly related to other traits (P-Status; $r = .76$, S-Attractiveness; $r = .57$, S-Warmth; $r = .79$, S-Status; $r = .61$, R-Passion; $r = .67$ and R-Intimacy; $r = .80$, $p < .01$) and partner status traits also correlated with all other traits (S-Attractiveness; $r = .63$, S-Warmth; $r = .70$, S-Status; $r = .71$, R-Passion; $r = .66$ and R-Intimacy; $r = .72$, $p < .01$).

There was statistically significant relationship of self-perceived traits with DDS-escapism, self-expansion, self-suppression and all other traits. Self-Attractiveness strongly related to S-Warmth ($r = .64$, $p < .01$), S-Status ($r = .60$, $p < .01$), R-Passion ($r = .67$, $p < .01$) and R-Intimacy ($r = .66$, $p < .01$). Similarly, Self-Warmth is also strongly related to S-Status ($r = .72$, $p < .01$), R-Passion ($r = .72$, $p < .01$) and R-Intimacy ($r = .83$, $p < .01$). Self-Status trait has statistically significant relationship with relationship traits (Passion; $r = .65$ and Intimacy; $r = .64$, $p < .01$). Moreover, the relationship passion is also strongly correlated to relationship intimacy ($r = .73$, $p < .01$). Overall, all ideal partner and relationship traits are significantly correlated with mental well-being, highlighting that self-view is important for mental well-being.

Multiple Regression Analysis

This analysis is used to check the predictive impact of multiple independent variables such as daydreaming, escapism, partner fantasies on dependent variable i.e mental well-being.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Results for Well-being

Variables	B	95% CI for B		SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Step 1						.02	.02*
Constant	51.56	47.83	55.29	1.89			
Total	-.05	-.09	-.01	.02	-.14*		
Dysfunctional daydreaming							
Step 2						.10	.08***
Constant	35.27	28.14	42.41	3.62			
Total	-.06	-.10	-.02	.02	-.16**		
Dysfunctional Daydreaming							
Total	.29	.18	.41	.06	.28***		
Escapism							
Step 3						.18	.08***
Constant	31.86	24.89	38.82	3.54			
Total	-.08	-.12	-.04	.02	-.21***		
Dysfunctional Daydreaming							
Total	.20	.09	.32	.06	.19***		

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	Escapism							
	Partner	.12	-.02	.26	.07	.12		
	Attractiveness							
	Partner	.26	.09	.43	.09	.26**		
	Warmth							
	Partner Status	-.06	-.24	.12	.09	-.05		
Step 4							.20	.02*
	Constant	31.78	24.79	38.76	3.55			
	Total	-.07	-.11	-.03	.02	-.19***		
	Dysfunctional							
	Daydreaming							
	Total	.18	.07	.29	.06	.17**		
	Escapism							
	Partner	-.04	-.22	.14	.09	-.04		
	Attractiveness							
	Partner	.31	.10	.51	.10	.30**		
	Warmth							
	Partner Status	-.15	-.35	.06	.10	-.13		
	Self-	.24	.05	.42	.09	.24*		
	Attractiveness							
	Self-Warmth	-.05	-.25	.14	.10	-.05		
	Self-Status	.05	-.14	.24	.10	.04		
Step 5							.22	.02*
	Constant	32.49	25.47	39.52	3.57			
	Total	-.07	-.11	-.03	.02	-.19**		
	Dysfunctional							
	Daydreaming							
	Total	.15	.04	.27	.06	.15**		
	Escapism							
	Partner	-.07	-.25	.12	.09	-.06		
	Attractiveness							
	Partner	.23	.02	.44	.11	.23*		
	Warmth							
	Partner Status	-.18	-.39	.02	.10	-.16*		
	Self-	.21	-.02	.39	.10	.21*		
	Attractiveness							
	Self-Warmth	-.17	-.38	.05	.11	-.17		
	Self-Status	.05	-.15	.24	.10	.04		
	Relationship	.05	-.12	.22	.09	.05		
	Passion							
	Relationship	.23	.03	.43	.10	.25*		
	Intimacy							

Note: CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; B = Unstandardized Coefficient, β = Standardized Coefficient.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

A five-step hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with mental well-being as the dependent variable and multiple independent variables to examine how dysfunctional daydreaming, escapism, partner perceived traits, self-perceived traits and relationship belief characteristics predicted mental well-being among youth.

In Step 1 of regression, dysfunctional daydreaming was entered which found to be significantly negative predictor of mental well-being ($\beta = -.14$, $B = -.05$, $SE = .021$, $p = .02$). *This model accounted 1.9% of variance in mental well-being, $F(1,309) = 6.14$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .02$, which indicating that higher level of dysfunctional daydreaming is associated with lower mental well-being.*

In Step 2, escapism was added and significantly improved the model, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, $F \text{ change}(1, 308) = 26.99$, $p < .001$. Both dysfunctional daydreaming ($B = -.06$, $p = .003$) and escapism ($B = .29$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of mental well-being. The overall model explained approximately 9.8% of variance in mental well-being ($R^2 = .098$). Escapism is a significant positive predictor of mental well-being ($\beta = .28$) while DDS remained a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.16$).

In Step 3, the ideal partner traits (attractiveness, warmth and status) were entered. This model significantly improved prediction, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, $F \text{ change}(3, 305) = 10.16$, $p < .001$. *Partner warmth emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .26$, $B = .26$, $p = .003$), whereas partner attractiveness and status were non-significant while dysfunctional daydreaming and escapism remained significant. The model now explained 18.0% of variance in mental well-being ($R^2 = .18$).*

In Step 4, self-perceived traits (attractiveness, warmth and status) were added. The small but marginal increased in explained variance was statistically significant, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F \text{ change}(3, 302) = 2.33$, $p = .07$. *Only self-attractiveness was a significant predictor ($\beta = .24$, $B = .24$, $p = .01$), showing that perceived one-self as attractive contributes to better mental well-being. Self-warmth and self-status were non-significant while dysfunctional daydreaming, escapism and partner warmth remained significant. This model explained 19.9 % of variance ($R^2 = .199$).*

In Step 5, relationship traits (passion and intimacy) were added that marginally improved the model. This final model showed the modest but significant increase in variance, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F \text{ change}(2, 300) = 3.00$, $p = .052$. Only relationship intimacy significantly predicted mental well-being ($\beta = .25$, $p = .02$, whereas relationship passion was non-significant, showing that emotional closeness plays important role in mental well-being. It explained 21.5% variance in mental well-being ($R^2 = .215$). In final model, dysfunctional daydreaming ($\beta = -.19$, $p = .001$), escapism ($\beta = .15$, $p = .009$), partner warmth ($\beta = .23$, $p = .03$), self-attractiveness ($\beta = .21$, $p = .03$) and relationship intimacy ($\beta = .25$, $p = .02$) remained significant predictors.

DISCUSSION

Overall the study sample consisted of youth, age ranged from 18-24 years, a developmental phase of identity exploration and emotional reactivity (Arnett, 2000). Most of the participants in this study are undergraduate female students, as the prior studies give the significance of gender or sex differences in daydreaming, indicating that females are more likely to engage in romantic or self-related fantasies (Giambra, 1979) but in this study large sample of female students is due to their high percentage in both departments from which the data is gathered. However, these demographic

differences are not the central focus of analysis in this study due to small sample size as these demographics don't clearly show the significant differences but it should be explored more explicitly in future studies with large sample size with significant demographic differences in analysis. Before the analysis, the reliability analysis of scales is determined which shows high internal consistency as all the scales used in the study; Dysfunctional Daydreaming Scale, Escapism Motivation Scale, Ideal Partner and Ideal Relationship Scale and Mental Well-being Scale, reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient value above .70 which indicates high reliability with excellent or exceptional internal consistency (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

After screening of data, the two main analysis are conducted, including correlational analysis and regression analysis, depending on the objectives or hypothesis of the study. The first hypothesis was that all the variables are significantly related to each-other. To support this hypothesis, correlation analysis was performed, that revealed significant relationship between all the key variables. Maladaptive or dysfunctional daydreaming with its both dimensions; escapism and emotional distress, showed a strong negative correlation with mental well-being ($r = -.13$ to $-.14$, $p < .05$) which indicating that high level of dysfunctional daydreaming is associated with lower mental well-being, these results of current study aligns with prior study of many other researchers, who identified maladaptive daydreaming as a dissociative and compulsive experience that hinders daily life functioning and emotional regulation (Somer, 2002; Bigelsen & Schupak, 2011) and it was also found that maladaptive daydreaming is associated with depression, anxiety and distress (Soffer-Dudek, 2018). So, the relationship between dysfunctional daydreaming with mental well-being supports the H1 that higher level of daydreaming is associated with escapism and emotional distress which are related to lower mental well-being. In case of escapism, both dimensions show different results; self-expansion showed a strong positive or significant relationship with mental well-being ($r = .346$, $p < .001$) which suggested that youth who fantasize self-growth to become a better version of themselves, experience greater mental well-being. This is related to concept of possible selves that both involve thoughts about ideal version of self which reflects hopes, goals and personal growth (Markus & Nurius, 1986). On the other hand, self-suppression was not significantly correlated with mental well-being ($r = .023$, $p = .681$), indicating that the efforts to suppress various aspects of self may not directly impact overall well-being. Weinstein et al. (2011) highlighted that how individuals who have controlled motivation tend to distance themselves from negative aspects of their past-selves, reflecting the suppression of unwanted self-aspects, as suppression does not lower mental well-being unless it prevents emotional regulation which leads to psychological distress. If the act of self-suppression done habitually, it may not directly influence mental well-being. Although, many other studies revealed that escapist tendencies including emotionally avoidant or fantasy-based escape lead to emotional distress and withdrawal as a result of reduction in present-moment awareness (Zedelius & Schooler, 2016) but the current study showed no significant relation between self-suppression escapism and mental well-being. Moreover, the perception of partner and self with all their sub-dimensions of attractiveness, warmth and status; and relationship traits of passion and intimacy, all were positively correlated with mental well-being ($r \approx .23$ to $.36$, $p < .001$). It indicates the importance

of both imagined and real relationship experiences in determining youth mental well-being, which suggest that immersive fantasies about romantic connection based on partner and self traits with relationship characteristics may enhance mental and emotional well-being, as it supporting the idea that romantic fantasies may be sometimes serve adaptive emotional purposes like fiction reading promotes empathy, hope and identity development by imagining emotionally rich, idealized romantic scenarios which contributes to better mental health. So, these fantasies may not only for escapist pleasures but also act as psychologically meaningful exercises that leads to person's social and emotional development (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

The present study also aims to investigate the incremental predictive power of multiple variables on mental well-being of youth. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis is conducted to measure how well different variables such as dysfunctional daydreaming, escapism and fantasy-based traits like partner perceived traits, self-perceived traits or relationship belief characteristics, predicts mental well-being of youth. This analysis is based on 5 steps, depending on the variables entered. In the first step, dysfunctional daydreaming entered, which significantly predicted negative influence on mental well-being ($\beta = -.14$, $p = .014$), explaining 1.9% of variance. These results align with the findings of prior literature that maladaptive daydreaming as immersive and compulsive form causes emotional distress, hinder life functioning and need clinical attention (Bigelsen et al., 2016). The work of Soffer-Dudek (2024) also linked MD with suicide attempt even after controlling psychological distress. The persistent negative relationship of dysfunctional daydreaming with mental well-being across all 5-models, considered it as mental health risk. In the second step, escapism was added, which significantly increased the model's explanatory power ($\Delta R^2 = .08$, $p < .001$). *the escapism positively predicted mental well-being ($\beta = .28$). explained the 9.8% of additional variance in mental well-being. These findings align with previous researches that two type of escapism linked with subjective mental well-being, self-expansion (adaptive escapism) associated with higher mental well-being and self-suppression (maladaptive escapism) associated with lower mental well-being (Stenseng et al., 2023). Similarly, Zedelius and Schooler (2020) identified the difference between adaptive and maladaptive escapism; suggesting that when escapism involves future oriented thoughts, it enhances creativity, motivation and emotional regulation. In the third step of regression analysis, partner perceived traits entered, only partner warmth traits significantly predicted mental well-being ($\beta = .26$, $p = .003$) and other two partner traits; attractiveness and status are non-significant predictors. As emotional support and empathy are key predictors of psychological health, Fletcher et al. (1999) identified warmth as important trait of romantic ideals which strongly predicts real-life satisfaction in relationships. Similarly, Murray et al. (1996) found that perceiving partner as supportive, whether real or imagined, enhanced relationship security and mental well-being. The inclusion of self-perceived traits in the fourth step indicates that only self-attractiveness traits significantly predicts mental well-being ($\beta = .24$, $p = .013$) which specially aligns with findings from body image research for adolescents. This model explained 19.9% variance in mental well-being. Tiggemann (2005) explained that perceived physical attractiveness is a powerful component of self-esteem and overall well-being during identity formation, especially in youth or adolescents who are more exposed to social*

comparison. This also supports the idea that self-focused imaginations increase hope and resilience, and make person feel more confident, competent and loveable, which act as a motivational tool (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In final step, relationship characteristics added which indicates that only relationship intimacy emerged as a significant predictor of mental well-being ($\beta = .25$, $p = .025$) while relationship passion did not. These results align with Triangle Theory of Love, which explained three components of love; intimacy, passion and commitment, that determined the amount and kind of love experienced, and suggesting that intimacy contributes more to satisfaction in romantic relationship as compare to passion (Sternberg, 1986). Overall, the final model of regression analysis explained 21.5% of variance in mental well-being ($R^2 = .215$). The results of hierarchical multiple regression suggested that lower dysfunctional daydreaming, higher escapism and positive perception of partner warmth, self-attractiveness and relationship intimacy are significant predictors of increased mental well-being among youth. These findings revealed the important role of internal experiences and ideal perceptions in shaping mental well-being outcomes in youth.

Limitations

This study has several limitations:

First, the sample size is very small, predominantly composed of only university students and even only two departments, which limits the generalizability of the results to other youth populations.

Second, most of the participants were hesitant to fill the questionnaires since they were long specially scale for partner fantasies which include such characteristics that participants felt shy to respond.

Third, this study completely relied on self-report measures which may be include inaccurate responses from participants due to social desirability.

Fourth, only cross-sectional nature of study prevents causal inferences.

Fifth, although the study measures relationship and impact of these variables but it didn't differentiate all the studied variables on basis of gender, frequency, thematic context and vividness which may also contributes to mental well-being.

Recommendations

Future studies should include large sample size from different educational, cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds to increase generalizability.

Use mixed-method approach, incorporating qualitative interviews to get richer insight into personal experiences linked with different forms of daydreaming, escapist activities and fantasies.

For better understanding of these cognitive activities and developmental changes, future researchers should use longitudinal designs to track individuals over time.

Educational programs should be designed to educate youth about the difference between adaptive and maladaptive forms of these imaginations or cognitive tendencies and empowered them to engage in constructive fantasies.

The psychological interventions should be developed and tested to reduce the negative impact of maladaptive daydreaming and escapism tendencies.

Implications

The results of study give insights into practical or psychological implications of

daydreaming and idealized partner fantasies, especially within a developmental and relational context.

The interventions aimed at improving the emotional, psychological and mental health of youth, instead of only addressing maladaptive forms of these cognitive phenomena. As the data suggested the promoting positive self-image and perceived emotional support may improve mental well-being. This has powerful implication for school counseling, peer-based programs and social media literacy that enhance emotional intelligence and self-compassion.

The narrative and guided imagery techniques could be used to foster supportive relationships and enhance emotional regulation in individuals lacking imagined intimacy experiences in real life.

Conclusions

The findings showed that certain partner fantasies provide emotional benefits to individuals, especially those individuals involving in relationship and self-enhancing imagery, while maladaptive daydreaming have negative effect on youth mental well-being. The result provides a new perspective that fantasy engagement can have negative risks and potentials on emotional well-being of individuals. This study highlights that understanding the dual nature of these cognitive processes is important in developing interventions for improving mental health of youth. Instead of discouraging fantasies completely, educators and clinicians should help young individuals to engage in such forms of daydreaming, escapism and fantasies that are goal oriented and emotionally enriching. With the continuous evolution in the social and digital worlds these perceptions will become more and more pertinent to promote the psychological flexibility and welfare of the young adults.

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