



The Association Between Autism Traits and Maladaptive Daydreaming

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Background and Objectives

“Maladaptive daydreaming” is excessive daydreaming that interferes with functioning. Key features associated with maladaptive daydreaming are also features of ASD, including loneliness and emotion regulation difficulties^{1,2}. However, associations between these conditions have not been explored.

This study tested whether sub-clinical ASD traits predicted maladaptive daydreaming symptoms, and whether loneliness and emotion regulation difficulties mediated this relationship. Further, exploratory items probed whether daydream content varied with ASD traits.

Method

609 adults were recruited from online maladaptive daydreaming communities. Participants completed an online survey which included the following measures:

- Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS)¹
- Autism-spectrum Quotient (AQ)³
- UCLA Loneliness Scale⁴
- Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale-Short Form (DERS-SF)⁵
- Exploratory questions about daydreams

References

1.Somer, Lehrfeld, Bigelsen & Jopp (2016); 2.West & Somer (2019); 3.Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright & Skinner (2001); 4.Jobse & White (2007); 5. Kaufman, Xia, Fosco, Yaptangco, Skidmore, & Crowell (2015)

Results

Table 1. Raw-score descriptive information for key measures.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Possible range
Age	24.90	8.30	18 – 66	>18
AQ	126	20	64 – 185	50 – 200
MDS	60.62	17.77	4 – 100	0 – 100
Loneliness	59.01	10.33	26 – 80	20 – 80
DERS-SF	53.95	13.35	23 – 88	18 – 90

All measures were positively correlated.

Table 2. Correlation statistics (r-values) between key measures, controlling for age, gender, education, and psychiatric diagnosis.

	AQ	MDS	Loneliness	DERS-SF
AQ		0.16***	0.42***	0.44***
MDS			0.32***	0.35***
Loneliness				0.43***
DERS-SF				

*** = $p < .001$

AQ score positively predicted MDS score. However, after accounting for the effects of loneliness and DERS-SF (both positive predictors of MDS), AQ had a *negative* but nonsignificant association with MDS.

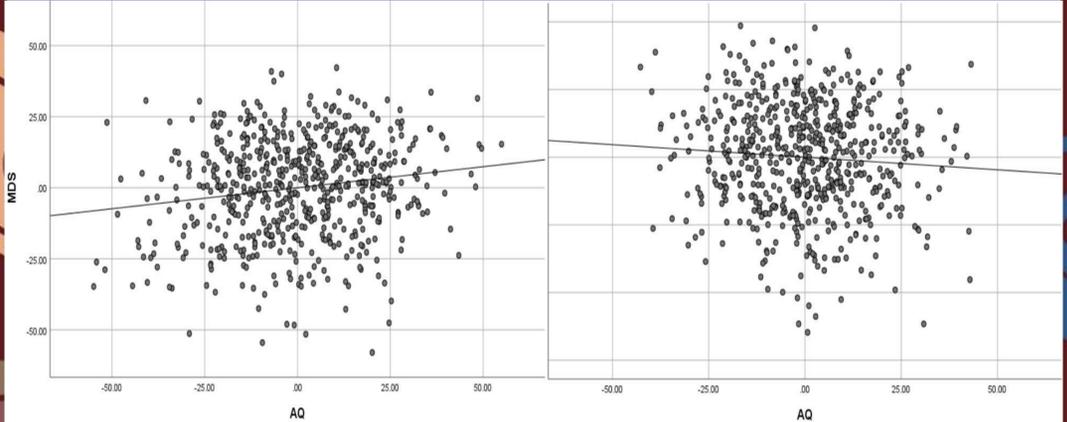
Table 3. Standardized coefficients from hierarchical multiple regression analysis testing AQ as a predictor of MDS, showing AQ as sole predictor (step 1) and with loneliness and DERS-SF entered into the model (step 2). Model controls for age, gender, education level, and psychiatric diagnosis.

	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Step 1			
AQ	.162	4.00	< .001
Step 2			
AQ	-.081	1.80	.072
Loneliness	.241	5.43	< .001
DERS-SF	.284	6.50	< .001

Dependent variable: MDS

Results

Relationship between AQ and MDS before (left) and after (right) adding loneliness and DERS-SF to the model:



Regarding daydream content, higher AQ score was related to a higher tendency to adopt made-up identities in daydreams, less daydreaming about the self, and more daydreams with violent or tragic themes, even when controlling for MDS.

Conclusions

Higher ASD traits are related to higher maladaptive daydreaming **via** loneliness and emotion regulation difficulties. After accounting for these factors, ASD traits no longer predict maladaptive daydreaming. Some aspects of daydream content differ with ASD traits.

This research warrants further exploration of maladaptive daydreaming in those with a diagnosis of ASD. Incidence of maladaptive daydreaming in ASD and treatments targeting loneliness and emotion regulation may be important to consider.