



Locus of Control and Maladaptive Daydreaming among Young Adults: Examining the Mediating Role of Problem-Solving Ability

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Abstract: Maladaptive daydreaming (MD) is characterized by excessive, immersive fantasy engagement that interferes with daily functioning and psychological well-being. Although increasingly studied, the cognitive and dispositional mechanisms underlying this phenomenon remain insufficiently understood. The present study investigates the relationship between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming among young adults, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of problem-solving ability. Locus of control reflects individuals' beliefs regarding whether life outcomes are determined by personal actions or external forces. An external locus of control may reduce perceived agency and promote avoidant coping strategies, including maladaptive daydreaming as a form of emotional escape. Problem-solving ability, involving cognitive and behavioural processes used to manage everyday challenges, is proposed as a key mediating mechanism. Using a quantitative design and standardized measures, the study aims to clarify how control beliefs influence maladaptive coping patterns, with implications for interventions targeting problem-solving skills and enhancing perceived personal control.

Keywords: *Maladaptive Daydreaming, Locus Of Control, Problem-Solving Ability, Young Adults, Coping Strategies, Emotional Regulation, Avoidance Behavior.*

1. Introduction

Locus of control refers to generalized beliefs about whether life outcomes are determined mainly by one's own actions or by external forces such as fate, chance, or powerful others (Rotter, 1966). Within Rotter's social learning theory, these control beliefs emerge from repeated experiences of reinforcement and guide how individuals interpret situations, evaluate their ability to influence events, and choose behavioral responses. An internal locus of control is typically associated with greater perceived agency, motivation, and persistence, whereas an external orientation is linked to feelings of helplessness and reduced responsibility for outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Nowicki et al., 2021; Smith, 2021).

Empirical work shows that individuals with more internal control beliefs often display higher problem-focused coping, better academic and occupational functioning, and more adaptive psychological adjustment. In contrast, a predominantly external locus of control has been associated with heightened stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and a tendency to rely on others or on circumstances rather than active self-management (Sharan & Singh, 2025; Smith, 2021). Rotter conceptualized locus of control as a learned, context dependent continuum rather than a fixed typology, and contemporary research continues to examine its role in stress, coping, mental health, and decision making (Nowicki et al., 2021).

Daydreaming is a common cognitive experience in which attention shifts inward to self-generated thoughts, images, and scenarios, and it can support functions such as planning, creativity, and emotional processing (Raichle, 2015; Singer, 1975, 2024). However, recent research has identified maladaptive daydreaming as a distinct and impairing pattern of excessive, immersive fantasy activity that interferes with social, academic, or occupational functioning (Somer, 2002). Individuals with maladaptive daydreaming often spend many hours in vivid, story-like inner worlds, sometimes accompanied by repetitive movements and difficulty disengaging, which can contribute to concentration problems, social withdrawal, and reduced real-life engagement (Schimmenti et al., 2019; Somer et al., 2016, 2025). Maladaptive daydreaming has been described as a dysfunctional coping strategy, closely tied to emotional distress, avoidance, and comorbidity with other psychological difficulties (Chefet et al., 2023; Mansuklal et al., 2025; Ögüt et al., 2025).

Problem-solving ability is defined as a self-directed cognitive and behavioural process through which individuals identify, generate, and implement effective solutions to personal and

interpersonal difficulties (Krause et al., 2022). It includes how people perceive and approach problems, their confidence in handling them, and the strategies they use in challenging situations (Pretorius et al., 2023). A large body of research links adaptive problem-solving patterns, characterized by viewing problems as manageable and using systematic, goal-oriented strategies, with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and social dysfunction, whereas negative or avoidant problem orientations predict poorer psychological outcomes (Karyotaki et al., 2020; Mancinelli et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2023). Within a social learning framework, problem-solving ability can be understood as a key mechanism through which generalized control beliefs translate into coping behaviour. Individuals with an external locus of control may feel that efforts are unlikely to change outcomes, which can undermine their motivation to engage actively with difficulties and promote avoidant, ineffective problem-solving styles. This combination of diminished perceived control and poor problem-solving may increase reliance on escapist strategies, including excessive and compulsive fantasy engagement in the form of maladaptive daydreaming (Mancinelli et al., 2024). Recent findings that problem-solving ability mediates the impact of stressors and dispositional factors on well-being further support its role as an explanatory pathway rather than a simple correlate (Peker et al., 2024;).

Guided by this literature, the present study conceptualizes problem-solving ability as a central mediating variable in the relationship between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming among young adults. It proposes that a more external locus of control is associated with less confident and less effective problem-solving, which in turn increases vulnerability to maladaptive daydreaming as an avoidant coping strategy. By testing this mediational model, the study aims to clarify how dispositional control beliefs and cognitive-behavioral skills interact in the development of maladaptive fantasy-based coping and to inform interventions that strengthen perceived control and problem-focused problem-solving in this population.

2. Methodology

2.1 Aim

To examine whether problem-solving ability mediates the relationship between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming in young adults.

2.2 Objectives

1. Test the association between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming.

2. Test the association between locus of control and problem-solving ability.
3. Test the association between problem-solving ability and maladaptive daydreaming.
4. Test whether problem-solving ability mediates the relationship between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming.

2.3 Hypotheses

H01: There will be no significant relationship between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming.

H02: There will be no significant relationship between locus of control and problem-solving ability.

H03: There will be no significant relationship between problem-solving ability and maladaptive daydreaming.

H04: Problem-solving ability will not significantly mediate the relationship between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming.

H1: Problem-solving ability will mediate the relationship between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming among college students.

H2: There will be a significant relationship between LoC and maladaptive day dreaming

H3: There will be a significant relationship between Locus of control and problem-solving ability.

H4: There will be a significant relationship between Problem-solving abilities and maladaptive daydreaming.

2.4 Variables

Independent variable: Locus of control (generalized belief regarding control over life outcomes).

Dependent variable: Maladaptive daydreaming (excessive, impairing fantasy activity).

Mediator: Problem-solving ability (self-perceived cognitive-behavioral competence in identifying and resolving problems).

2.5 Research Design

Cross-sectional, quantitative, correlational design using mediation analysis to test direct and indirect effects.

2.6 Population, sampling, and sample

Target population: Young adults aged 18–25 years.

Sampling: Non-probability convenience sampling through offline recruitment at colleges, universities, and community settings.

Sample size: 100 participants. Participants provided informed consent before participation.

2.7 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion: Age 18–25, current student or associated with educational institutions, ability to comprehend the questionnaire language, and voluntary informed consent.

Exclusion: Outside age range, self-reported severe psychiatric conditions that would impair responses, incomplete or invalid questionnaires, or refusal to consent.

2.8 Measures

1. **Locus of Control Scale (Rotter):** Standard forced-choice measure of internal versus external control orientation. Reliability typically acceptable; higher scores indicate a more external orientation.
2. **Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS; Somer):** Assesses frequency, intensity, and impairment of daydreaming. High internal consistency reported in validation studies; higher scores indicate greater maladaptive daydreaming.
3. **Problem-Solving Inventory (Form B; Heppner):** Measures perceived problem-solving competence and orientation; higher scores denote poorer perceived problem-solving ability. All instruments used have established reliability and validity in prior research.

2.9 Procedure

After obtaining institutional permissions, participants were approached in person and given a questionnaire booklet containing the three standardized scales and a demographic form. The researcher explained the study purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary nature, obtained written informed consent, and provided standard instructions. Participants completed the questionnaires on site and returned them immediately to reduce missing data.

2.10 Data management and analysis

Data were screened for completeness and assumptions for parametric testing. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were computed to examine bivariate relationships. Hierarchical regression and bootstrapped mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4 or equivalent) were used to test the indirect effect of locus of control on maladaptive daydreaming via problem-solving ability. Significance was determined using standard thresholds and bootstrapped 95 percent confidence intervals for indirect effects.

2.11 Ethics

Participation was voluntary and confidential. Written informed consent was obtained, and participants could withdraw at any time. Individuals who self-reported severe psychological difficulties were excluded and referred to appropriate services when necessary.

3. Result

Descriptive

Table 1. *Depicts the descriptive statistics of the variables: Locus of control, Maladaptive Daydreaming and Problem solving.*

	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION	N
LOC	11.68	2.523	95
MSD	42.29	14.560	95
PSI	128.72	14.055	95

Locus of control had a mean of 11.68 (SD = 2.52), maladaptive daydreaming had a mean of 42.29 (SD = 14.56), and problem-solving ability had a mean of 128.72 (SD = 14.06). Overall, locus of control showed the least variability, while maladaptive daydreaming and problem-solving showed moderate variation across the sample.

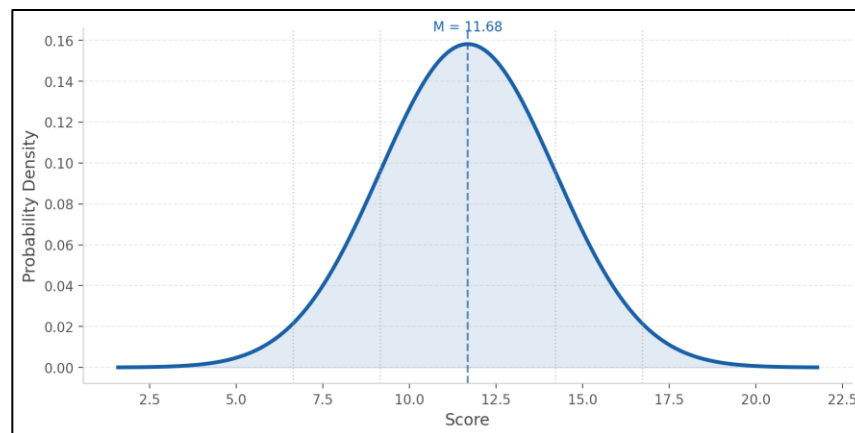


Figure 4: *Normal Distribution Curve for Locus of Control (LOC).*

Note. The curve represents the theoretical normal distribution of Locus of Control scores derived from sample descriptive statistics. The symmetrical bell shape indicates approximate normality of the LOC variable. LOC = Locus of Control. N = 95.

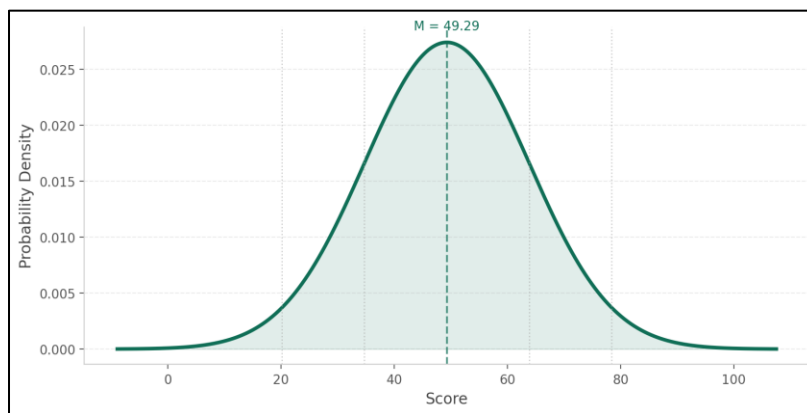
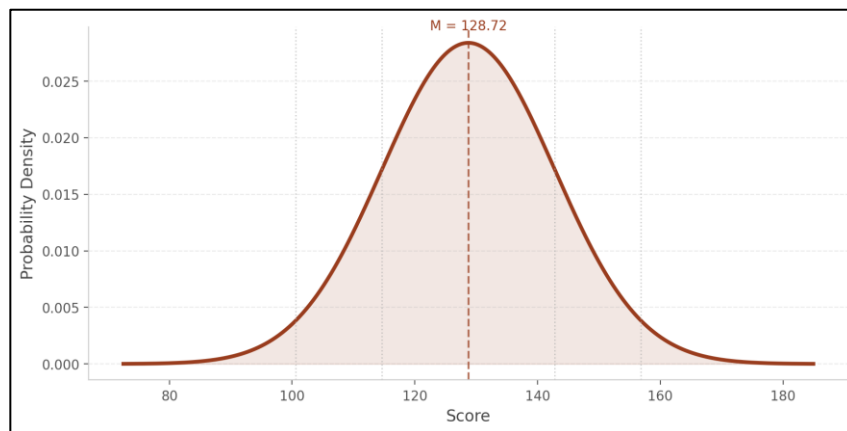


Figure 4: *Normal Distribution Curve for Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS)*

Note. The curve represents the theoretical normal distribution of Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale scores derived from sample descriptive statistics. The symmetrical bell shape indicates approximate normality of the MDS variable. MDS = Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale. N = 95.



Figur 6: *Normal Distribution Curve for Problem-Solving Inventory (PSI)*

Note. The curve represents the theoretical normal distribution of Problem-Solving Inventory scores derived from sample descriptive statistics. The symmetrical bell shape indicates approximate normality of the PSI variable. PSI = Problem-Solving Inventory. N = 95.

Correlation

Table 2. *Depicts the correlation between the variables: Locus of control, Maladaptive Daydreaming and Problem solving.*

		LOC	MSD	PSI
LOC	Pearson correlation	1	.062	.059

	Sig. (92-tailed) N	95	.554 95	.571 95
MSD	Pearson correlation	.062	1	-.388
	Sig. (92-tailed)	.554		.000
	N	95	95	95
PSI	Pearson correlation	.059	-.388**	1
	Sig. (92-tailed)	.571	.000	
	N	95	95	95

Locus of control was not significantly related to maladaptive daydreaming or problem-solving ability, but maladaptive daydreaming showed a significant negative relationship with problem-solving ability. In simple terms, higher maladaptive daydreaming was associated with poorer problem-solving in this sample.

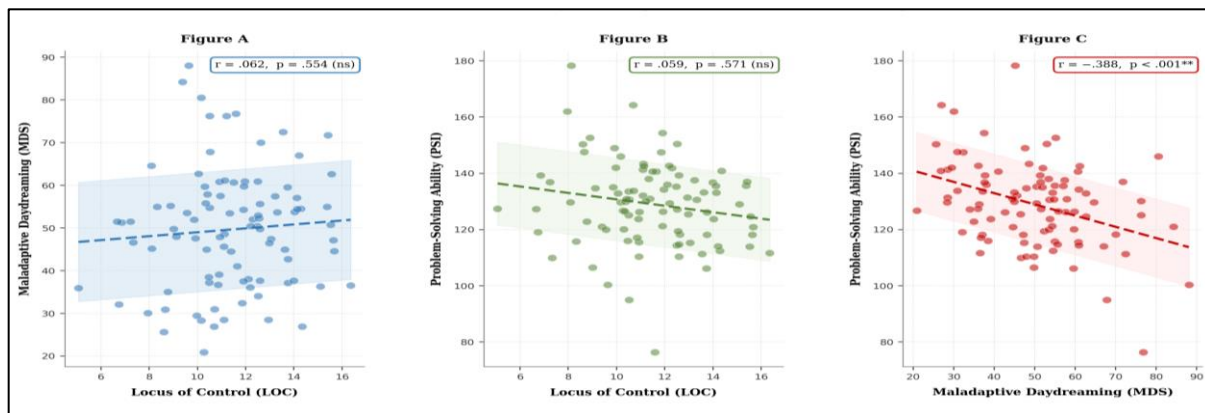


Figure 7: Scatter Plots Depicting the Correlational Relationships Among Locus of Control (LOC), Maladaptive Daydreaming (MDS), and Problem-Solving Ability (PSI)

Regression

Table 3. Depicts the model summary of the hierarchical regression analysis predicting Maladaptive Daydreaming from Locus of Control and Problem-Solving Ability among young adults. (This is for the Model Summary table showing R , R^2 , Adjusted R^2 , and Std. Error).

Model Summary

Model	R	R square	Adjusted r square	Std. Error of the estimate
1.	.062 ^a	.004	-.007	14.611
2.	.397 ^b	.157	.139	13.510

a. Predictors: (constant), LOC

b. Predictors:(constant), LOC, PSI

ANOVA

Table 4. *Depicts the ANOVA of the hierarchical regression analysis examining the overall significance of the model predicting Maladaptive Daydreaming from Locus of Control and Problem-Solving Ability among young adults. (This is for the ANOVA table showing Sum of Squares, df, Mean Square, F, and Sig.)*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1.	Regression	75.399	1	75.399	.353	.554 ^b
	Residual	19853.203	93	213.475		
	total	19928.602	94			
2.	Regression	3136.598	2	1568.299	8.592	.000 ^c
	Residual	16792.004	92	182.522		
	total	19928.602	94			

a. Dependent Variables: MDS

b. Predictors: (constant), LOC

c. Predictors: (constant), LOC, PSI

Table 5. *Depicts the coefficients of the hierarchical regression analysis examining the individual contribution of Locus of Control and Problem-Solving Ability in predicting Maladaptive Daydreaming among young adults. (This is for the Coefficients table showing B, Std. Error, Beta, t, and Sig.)*

Coefficient^A

Model		Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1.	(Constant)	45.142	7.137		6.325	.000
	LOC	.355	.597	.062	.594	.554

2.	(Constant)	95.935	14.049		6.829	.000
	LOC	.488	.553	.085	.883	.380
	PSI	-.407	.099	-.393	-.4.095	.000

a. Dependent Variable: MDS

Hierarchical regression showed that locus of control did not significantly predict maladaptive daydreaming or problem-solving ability. Problem-solving ability, however, significantly and negatively predicted maladaptive daydreaming, making it the strongest predictor in the model. When problem-solving ability was added, the regression model became significant and explained more variance in maladaptive daydreaming, but mediation was not supported because the locus of control to problem-solving path was non-significant.

Mediation

Table 6: Mediation Analysis of Problem-Solving Ability (PSI) in the Relationship Between Locus of Control (LOC) and Maladaptive Daydreaming (MDS) Using PROCESS Macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2022)

Variable	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Outcome Variable: PSI (Mediator)						
Constant	124.88	6.89	18.12	< .001	111.20	138.56
LOC	0.33	0.58	0.57	.571	-0.82	1.47
Outcome Variable: MDS (Dependent Variable)						
Constant	95.93	14.05	6.83	< .001	68.03	123.84
LOC	0.49	0.55	0.88	.380	-0.61	1.59
PSI	-0.41	0.10	-4.10	< .001	-0.60	-0.21
Direct and Indirect Effects						
Direct effect (LOC → MDS)	0.49	0.55	0.88	.380	-0.61	1.59
Indirect effect (LOC → PSI → MDS)	-0.13	0.28	—	—	-0.70	0.43
Model Summary						
LOC → PSI ($R^2 = .004$, $F(1,93) = 0.32$, $p = .571$)						
LOC + PSI → MDS ($R^2 = .157$, $F(2, 92) = 8.59$, $p < .001$)						

Problem-solving ability did not mediate the relationship between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming. Locus of control did not significantly predict either problem-solving

ability or maladaptive daydreaming, while problem-solving ability significantly and negatively predicted maladaptive daydreaming. The indirect effect was not significant, so the mediation hypothesis was not supported.

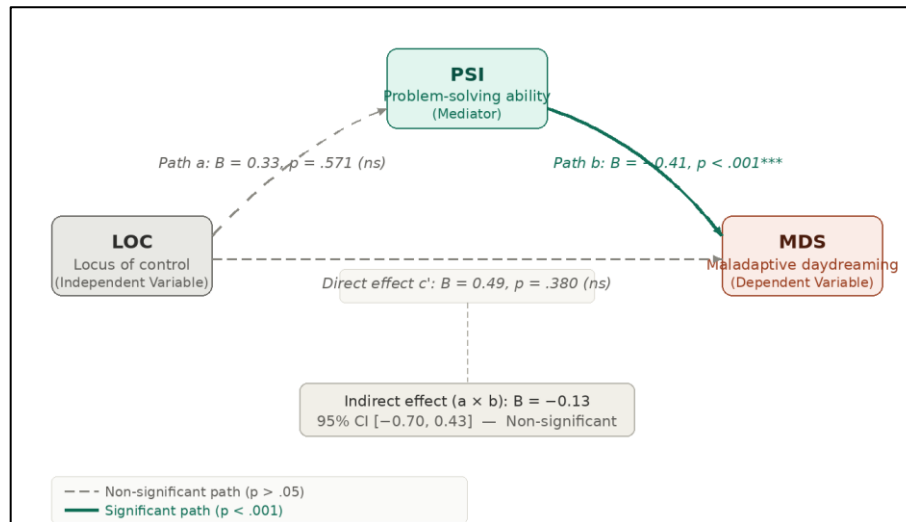


Figure 8: Path Diagram Depicting the Mediation Model: Locus of Control (LOC), Problem-Solving Ability (PSI), and Maladaptive Daydreaming (MDS).

Note. $N = 95$. Unstandardized coefficients (B) are reported. Solid lines indicate statistically significant paths; dashed lines indicate non-significant paths. Bootstrap 95% confidence intervals based on 5,000 samples (PROCESS Macro Model 4; Hayes, 2022). *** $p < .001$. ns = not significant.

The findings provided partial support for the study objectives. Locus of control was not significantly related to maladaptive daydreaming or problem-solving ability, so Objectives 1 and 2 were not supported. In contrast, problem-solving ability was significantly and negatively related to maladaptive daydreaming, supporting Objective 3. However, problem-solving ability did not mediate the relationship between locus of control and maladaptive daydreaming, so Objective 4 was not supported. Accordingly, H01 and H02 were retained, H03 was rejected, and H04 was retained. The alternative hypotheses for the non-significant paths were not supported, while the hypothesis for the problem-solving ability and maladaptive daydreaming association was supported. Overall, the results suggest that problem-solving ability is an important predictor of maladaptive daydreaming, whereas locus of control did not emerge as a significant predictor in this sample.

4. Discussion

The present study examined whether locus of control is related to maladaptive daydreaming and whether problem-solving ability mediates this relationship among young adults. Although the study was theoretically grounded in social learning and cognitive-behavioral perspectives, the findings offered only partial support for the proposed model. Locus of control was not significantly associated with either maladaptive daydreaming or problem-solving ability, and the proposed mediating pathway was not supported. This suggests that, in this sample, control beliefs did not directly shape maladaptive daydreaming or operate through problem-solving ability.

In contrast, problem-solving ability showed a clear and significant negative relationship with maladaptive daydreaming. Young adults with lower perceived problem-solving ability reported higher maladaptive daydreaming, indicating that problem-solving may function as an important cognitive protective factor. This finding is consistent with the view that poor problem-solving can contribute to avoidance-based coping, emotional escape, and greater reliance on immersive fantasy when faced with stress or everyday difficulties.

The absence of significant associations involving locus of control may suggest that its influence on maladaptive daydreaming is indirect, context dependent, or too weak to emerge in a small convenience sample. It is also possible that other variables such as emotional regulation, self-efficacy, or perceived stress may explain this relationship more effectively. Thus, while locus of control did not emerge as a significant predictor in the present study, the broader theoretical relevance of control beliefs should not be dismissed.

Several limitations should be noted. The cross-sectional design prevents causal interpretation, and the use of self-report measures may have introduced response bias. In addition, the convenience sample and modest sample size limit generalizability. Future studies should use larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and broader models including additional mediators or moderators.

Overall, the study suggests that problem-solving ability is more directly relevant to maladaptive daydreaming than locus of control in this sample. The findings highlight the value of focusing on modifiable cognitive skills when understanding and addressing maladaptive daydreaming among young adults.

5. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationships among locus of control, problem-solving ability, and maladaptive daydreaming in young adults, with a specific focus on whether problem-solving ability explains how control beliefs relate to maladaptive daydreaming. Within a cognitive-behavioral framework, the model was expected to show that an external locus of control reduces problem-solving ability, which in turn increases vulnerability to maladaptive daydreaming.

The most consistent finding was a robust negative association between problem-solving ability and maladaptive daydreaming, indicating that individuals who perceive themselves as less able to manage everyday challenges are more likely to engage in excessive, immersive fantasy as an avoidant coping strategy. This supports the view of maladaptive daydreaming as a form of cognitive escape and identifies problem-solving ability as a potential protective factor and intervention target. In contrast, locus of control did not significantly predict either maladaptive daydreaming or problem-solving ability, and the indirect effect through problem-solving was non-significant, suggesting that the influence of control beliefs on maladaptive daydreaming is more complex than the proposed simple mediation model.

These findings imply that models of maladaptive daydreaming should place greater emphasis on modifiable cognitive processes, such as problem-solving, while considering locus of control as one part of a wider network that may include emotion regulation, perceived stress, and self-efficacy. Clinically, incorporating structured problem-solving training into interventions for young adults who struggle with maladaptive daydreaming may help reduce reliance on fantasy and strengthen adaptive coping. Future research should use larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and broader multivariate models to clarify the causal pathways linking control beliefs, cognitive skills, and maladaptive daydreaming.

5.1 Limitations and Future Implication

The present study is limited by its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-report measures, convenience sampling, and modest, culturally specific sample, which together restrict causal inference and generalizability of the findings. Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal and experimental designs, larger and more diverse samples, and broader models that incorporate additional mediators and moderators such as emotion regulation, self-efficacy, coping styles, and resilience, while also evaluating structured cognitive-behavioral

interventions that strengthen problem-solving skills and adaptive coping in young adults who experience maladaptive daydreaming.

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