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Parentification, Experiential Avoidance And Maladaptive Daydreaming Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The current research aimed at discovering how parentification, experiential avoidance, and maladaptive daydreaming are related to each other among young adults. Quantitative correlational research design was used, and 339 participants aged 18-25 years were selected through purposive sampling methods. Statistical analysis was carried out with standardized measurement tools such as the Parentification Inventory (PI), Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ), and Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16). Initially, the study examined the interrelations of parentification, experiential avoidance, and maladaptive daydreaming and later it also reminisced whether parentification and experiential avoidance can predict maladaptive daydreaming significantly or not. The results were considered by running descriptive statistics, spearman correlation, and multiple linear regression analysis with the help of SPSS. According to the results, all parentification, experiential avoidance, and maladaptive daydreaming were significantly positively associated with each other. Findings based on multiple regression indicated that experiential avoidance was a significant predictor of maladaptive daydreaming while parentification was not significantly predicting maladaptive daydreaming after the control of experiential avoidance. The results may point towards the fact that experiential avoidance can be one of the main psychological processes which may mediate the relationship between early role reversal in caregiving and engagement in maladaptive fantasy. This research helps in understanding the phenomenon of maladaptive daydreaming in the Pakistani setting and emphasizes the significance of modifying avoidance coping strategies in individuals who have a history of parentification

Keywords: Parentification, Experiential Avoidance, Maladaptive Daydreaming, Young Adults

INTRODUCTION

Emerging into young adulthood comes with greater independence, the development of



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identity and emotional adjustment processes. This is sometimes complicated with continued childhood experiences that have impacted the way an individual thinks, feels and copes in feeling upset. An experience such as parentification where an individual has taken on duties they are too young for and have often learnt to put others needs before their own. Although this adjustment can aid them in adulthood into taking responsibility and becoming mature it has been linked to emotional difficulties throughout adult life.

One such process is experiential avoidance: by burying themselves into suppressing and escaping their thoughts and feelings, they are not confronted head-on by the individual. With consistent reliance on maladaptive coping during childhood, it exposes individuals to problematic daydreaming, a pattern of escapist fantasy with short term relief but interfered with academic, social or occupational functions (Somer, 2002). Although all construct have received increasing attention, little is known about how these constructs operate together. Examination of their relationship parentification, experiential avoidance and problematic daydreaming will allow clearer insight into how early family experiences maladaptive coping patterns. Little research is focused on collectivist, non-Western cultures, thus this study aims to examine these relationships among Pakistani young adults.

Parentification

Parentification has increasingly been recognized in psychology as an adverse childhood experience that can affect long-term emotional development and self-regulation in adulthood. It occurs when children take on caregiving roles beyond their developmental capacity, prioritizing their parents' needs over their own emotional and psychological needs (Jurkovic, 1997). These responsibilities may be emotional, such as providing comfort or psychological support to parents, or instrumental, including household tasks and caring for siblings. Parentification commonly occurs in families affected by parental mental illness, substance abuse, chronic illness, divorce, or other forms of family stress (Hooper, 2007). It may involve sibling-focused or parent-focused caregiving, and some children may perceive benefits or meaning from these experiences. Over time, these experiences may teach children to suppress their own emotional needs while becoming increasingly attentive to those of others, often leading to self-neglect in adulthood.

Parentification includes emotional and instrumental caregiving, with emotional parentification generally associated with more severe psychological outcomes (Borchet et al., 2020). Although parentified individuals are often viewed as responsible, competent, and reliable, they frequently experience significant emotional strain (Mijl & Vingerhoets, 2017). Parentification has also been associated with anxiety, depression, identity confusion, and insecure attachment (Kelley et al., 2020). Early parentification has further been linked to difficulties in emotional expression and regulation, increasing reliance on avoidance-based coping strategies later in life (Seo & Choi, 2025). Therefore, understanding parentification is important for identifying developmental experiences that contribute to emotional vulnerability and psychological distress in young adulthood.

Experiential Avoidance

A mental process that changes how people react to hard thoughts and feelings is called experiential avoidance. Many observers believe that experiential avoidance describes the habit where a person tries to hide or stop internal feelings that are not liked, which includes painful feelings, sad memories, bad thoughts, and physical feelings that bring discomfort to the body (Hayes et al., 1996). Experiential avoidance acts as a filter through which a person views their life experiences. The behavior of hiding feelings is often grown in places where showing emotions is not allowed. Many researchers claim



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that the person learns to hide their own emotions because the person must help others with their needs. As avoiding pain becomes a routine way of managing instead of facing the pain or discomfort directly, the chance of having mental struggles grows larger.

Previous works have shown that experiential avoidance connects strongly with nervous conditions, extreme sadness, mental tension, and a decrease in healthy psychological states (Angelakis & Gooding, 2021). Internal feelings which are unwanted and restrained are often intensified by the mind, which causes emotional experiences to become harder for a human being to manage (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Because human beings seek a way to hide from pain, experiential avoidance causes these persons to choose a path of frequent imagination. Experts claim that experiential avoidance has a positive relationship with maladaptive daydreaming and helps this habit to continue existing (Nowacki & Pyszkowska, 2024). Experiential avoidance is significant for the work of recognizing mental paths that lead to emotional struggle and difficult coping methods among youthful persons.

Maladaptive Daydreaming

The interest of scholars in maladaptive daydreaming has been rising because of the significant impact it causes in daily functioning and psychological well-being. Hence, it is understood as a very deep and immersive fantasy activity which one finds hard to control and which goes against one's other important spheres of life including studying, being with others and one's daily chores (Somer, 2002). It has been known that unlike a normal daydream, this one entails a very detailed fantasy and a strong emotional involvement such that one is not able to let go of one's imagination and get back to reality. Most of the time, these fantasy worlds act as a medium through which one deals with emotional distress, stress or even unmet needs by providing temporary comfort and being a kind of a cushion (Musetti et al., 2023).

Research is always linking maladaptive daydreaming to lack of focus, decrease in academic achievements, practicing of negative emotions, and keeping oneself away from society (Soffer-Dudek & Somer, 2018). Besides, it has also been connected to coping mechanisms based on avoidance, in which fantasy is the means of getting away from unpleasant thoughts and emotions instead of meeting them head-on. Even though this may bring one a temporary respite, if one keeps turning to fantasy the result will be less contact with real-life experiences and a decline in overall psychological functioning. In this light, studying maladaptive daydreaming would allow us to identify maladaptive coping styles and also assist in promoting psychological well-being of young adults.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks. **Attachment Theory** (Bowlby, 1982) explains how early caregiving experiences shape emotional development and internal working models of the self and others. Consistent and responsive caregiving promotes secure emotional regulation, whereas parentification disrupts this process by requiring children to assume caregiving roles within the family. As a result, children's emotional needs are often suppressed, contributing to long-term difficulties in emotional awareness and regulation.

Acceptance and Commitment Theory (Hayes et al., 2004) explains the psychological mechanism underlying these experiences. According to ACT, experiential avoidance develops when individuals learn to suppress unwanted internal experiences because of early environmental conditioning. This aligns with parentification, where children learn to ignore their own emotions while prioritizing the needs of others. Over time, this



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coping style may persist into adulthood. Within this framework, maladaptive daydreaming can be understood as an avoidance-based strategy used to escape emotional distress. Together, these theories explain how parentification may contribute to experiential avoidance and maladaptive daydreaming in adulthood.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the proposed relationships among the study variables. Parentification and experiential avoidance are treated as independent variables, whereas maladaptive daydreaming is the dependent variable. The framework proposes that both parentification and experiential avoidance may independently predict maladaptive daydreaming.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study

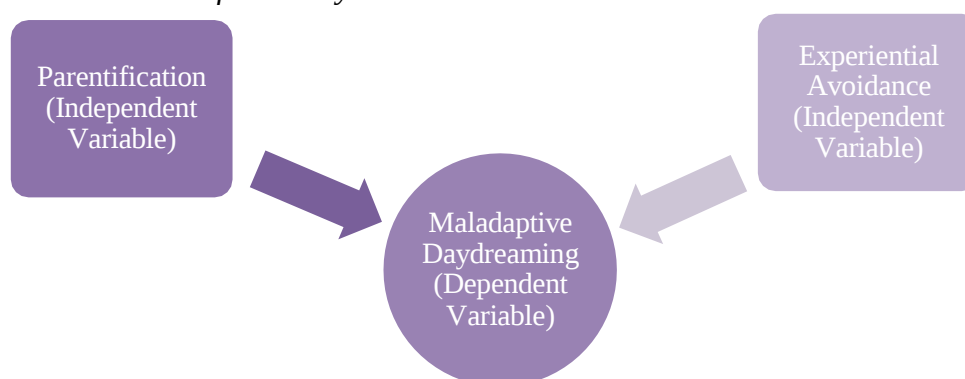


Figure 1: Conceptual framework showing parentification and experiential avoidance as predictors of maladaptive daydreaming.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is impactful in several ways. It combines parentification, experiential avoidance, and maladaptive daydreaming in one framework, looking at relationships that haven't been studied together much. The study fills a gap in the literature on maladaptive daydreaming by exploring how early family experiences may lead to later maladaptive coping, which hasn't been explored much. It's also one of the few studies on this topic in Pakistan, so it adds to the evidence base beyond Western populations and provides culturally relevant findings. The study may help identify experiential avoidance as a key pathway linking early caregiving burdens with maladaptive daydreaming. If this pathway is supported, the findings could inform interventions; for example, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) might be beneficial for individuals with histories of parentification who experience compulsive fantasy engagement or chronic emotional suppression, because it focuses on reducing experiential avoidance and increasing psychological flexibility.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The rationale of the present study is grounded in theoretical coherence, empirical gaps and clinical need. At the theoretical level, the developmental and regulatory connections among parentification, experiential avoidance and maladaptive daydreaming are conceptually well-supported yet have not been tested as an integrated sequence. At the empirical level, research on parentification has primarily examined its direct associations



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with emotional dysregulation and attachment, with limited attention to internal regulatory mechanisms (Hooper & Wallace, 2025); research on experiential avoidance has established its transdiagnostic significance but has rarely examined its developmental origins in early family dynamics and research on maladaptive daydreaming has not yet examined parentification as a specific predictor or experiential avoidance as a potential explanatory mechanism. The present study addresses each of these gaps within a single integrated investigation, situated in a Pakistani cultural context where such research remains substantially limited.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research

The current study used a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between parentification, experiential avoidance, and maladaptive daydreaming among young adults. A correlational design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to identify relationships among variables without manipulating any conditions. The quantitative approach enabled the collection of numerical data and allowed statistical analysis of psychological patterns. This design was suitable for understanding associations between developmental experiences and behavioral outcomes in young adulthood.

Design

Population of the Study

The population of the study consisted of young adults from universities and community settings in Sialkot. Both male and female participants between the ages of 18 to 25 years were included. This age range was selected because young adulthood is a developmental stage characterized by emotional, cognitive, and identity-related changes (Arnett, 2015). The population was considered appropriate as this group is more likely to report variations in early family experiences and psychological coping patterns.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 339 participants was selected using purposive sampling to reach individuals relevant to the study variables. Both male and female participants voluntarily took part in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and confidentiality was assured. Their responses were used strictly for academic purposes.

Inclusion Criteria

The following participants were included in the study: Young adults between 18 to 25 years of age. Individuals who could understand English. Participants willing to participate voluntarily. Both male and female participants.

Exclusion Criteria

The following participants were excluded from the study: Individuals below 18 or above 25 years of age. Participants with severe cognitive difficulties and diagnosed psychiatric disorders. Questionnaires with incomplete responses.

Research

Instruments

Data were collected using standardized self-report measures. The questionnaire consisted of different sections related to the study variables.



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Section A: Demographic Information

This section included demographic characteristics such as age, gender, educational level, and other relevant background information.

Section B: Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16)

The Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale (MDS-16) was used to assess maladaptive daydreaming. It measured the frequency, intensity, emotional involvement, and functional impact of daydreaming. The scale consisted of 16 items rated on a Likert-type response format, with higher scores indicating greater maladaptive daydreaming.

Section C: Parentification Inventory (PI)

The Parentification Inventory was used to measure childhood parentification experiences. It assessed emotional and instrumental caregiving roles within the family system. The scale included three subscales: Parent-Focused Parentification, Sibling-Focused Parentification, and Perceived Benefits of Parentification. It consisted of 22 items rated on a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of parentification.

Section D: Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ)

The Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ) was used to assess experiential avoidance. It measured the tendency to avoid or suppress unwanted internal experiences such as thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. The scale consisted of 15 items rated on a Likert-type response format, with higher scores indicating greater experiential avoidance. All instruments were administered in English using standardized Likert-type scales.

Validity and Reliability

The research instruments used in the study were standardized scales with established validity and reliability. Cronbach's alpha was computed to assess internal consistency using the final dataset. A value of .70 or above was considered acceptable for reliability; however, slightly lower values were observed for some exploratory subscales.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through both online and physical methods. Online responses were gathered using Google Forms, while physical data collection was conducted in universities. Permission was obtained from relevant institutions before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained. They were requested to respond honestly, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the process.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to examine relationships among study variables. Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive role of parentification and experiential avoidance in maladaptive daydreaming. Independent samples t-tests were used to examine gender differences. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.



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Ethical

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that personal information was not recorded or shared. All data were kept secure and used only for academic purposes. The study was conducted with honesty, respect, and adherence to ethical research standards.

Considerations

RESULTS

Sample Description

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Gender (N = 339)

Gender	n	%
Female	191	56
Male	148	44
Total	339	100

Table 1 presents that among 339 participants, 191 (56%) were female and 148 (44%) were male.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentages of Age (N = 339)

Age (in years)	n	%
18–19	87	25.7
20–21	134	39.5
22–23	89	26.3
24–25	29	8.6
Total	339	100

Table 2 presents that most participants (39.5%) were aged 20–21 years.

Psychometric Properties of Scales

Table 3: Psychometric Properties of Study Scales (N = 339)

Measures	M	SD	Range	α
MDS-Total	89.38	24.98	22–176	.84
PI-Total	68.51	13.95	24–137	.82
PI1: PFP	37.24	8.14	14–59	.75
PI2: SFP	20.80	5.79	7–71	.62
PI3: PBP	10.45	3.01	3–15	.68
BEAQ-Total	57.65	10.76	23–90	.74

Psychometric evaluation of the measurement tools for 339 university students showed that Maladaptive Daydreaming had the highest mean ($M = 89.38$, $SD = 24.98$, $\alpha = .84$), followed by Parentification ($M = 68.51$, $SD = 13.95$, $\alpha = .82$) and Experiential Avoidance ($M = 57.65$, $SD = 10.76$, $\alpha = .74$). The reliabilities for all instruments were in the acceptable range. MDS = Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale; PI = Parentification



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Inventory; PFP = Parent-Focused Parentification; SFP = Sibling-Focused Parentification; PBP = Perceived Benefits of Parentification; BEAQ = Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire.

Testing Primary Hypothesis

Table 4: Correlation Analysis Among Study Variables (N = 339)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. BEAQ-Total	57.65	10.76	—	.35	.22	.33	.27	.20
2. PI-Total	68.51	13.95	.35	—	.20	.91	.79	.53
3. MDS-Total	89.38	24.98	.22	.20	—	.16	.16	.10
4. PI1: PFP	37.24	8.14	.33	.91	.16	—	.56	.34
5. PI2: SFP	20.80	5.79	.27	.79	.16	.56	—	.29
6. PI3: PBP	10.45	3.01	.20	.53	.10	.34	.29	—

Table 4 presents that Experiential Avoidance showed a significant positive correlation with Parentification ($r = .35, p < .01$). Maladaptive Daydreaming was significantly correlated with both Experiential Avoidance ($r = .22, p < .01$) and Parentification ($r = .20, p < .01$). Among parentification subscales, Parent-Focused Parentification showed the strongest association with Experiential Avoidance ($r = .33, p < .01$). MDS = Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale; PI = Parentification Inventory; PFP = Parent-Focused Parentification; SFP = Sibling-Focused Parentification; PBP = Perceived Benefits of Parentification; BEAQ = Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire.

Table 5: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Maladaptive Daydreaming from Parentification and Experiential Avoidance (N = 339)

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	51.20	8.22	—	6.23	< .001	—	—
PI-Total	0.16	0.10	.09	1.50	.134	.84	1.19
BEAQ-Total	0.48	0.13	.21	3.59	< .001	.84	1.19

Table 5 presents the regression analysis results. Experiential Avoidance was a significant predictor of Maladaptive Daydreaming ($\beta = .21, p < .001$), whereas Parentification was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .09, p = .134$). The model accounted for 6.4% of variance in Maladaptive Daydreaming, $R^2 = .064$, Adjusted $R^2 = .058$, $F(2, 336) = 11.50, p < .001$. Collinearity statistics indicated no multicollinearity (all VIF < 10, Tolerance > .10). MDS = Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale; PI = Parentification Inventory; BEAQ = Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire.

Testing Secondary Hypothesis

Table 6: Mean Differences in Study Variables Between Male and Female Participants (N = 339)

Variables	Male (n = 148)		Female (n = 191)		t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
MDS-Total	90.93	24.93	88.17	25.01	1.01	.314	.11



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PI-Total	69.80	15.22	67.51	12.82	1.50	.134	.16
PI1: PFP	37.76	8.16	36.85	8.13	1.02	.309	.11
PI2: SFP	21.25	6.66	20.46	4.99	1.26	.210	.14
PI3: PBP	10.68	2.94	10.28	3.06	1.21	.228	.13
BEAQ-Total	55.82	11.29	59.06	10.13	-2.78	.006	.30

Table 6 presents that there was one variable that was significantly different between male and female participants: Females scored higher on Experiential Avoidance ($M = 59.06$, $SD = 10.13$) than males ($M = 55.82$, $SD = 11.29$); $t(337) = -2.78$, $p = .006$, $d = .30$, indicating a small effect. No significant gender differences were found for Maladaptive Daydreaming, Parentification, or any of its subscales. MDS = Maladaptive Daydreaming Scale; PI = Parentification Inventory; PFP = Parent-Focused Parentification; SFP = Sibling-Focused Parentification; PBP = Perceived Benefits of Parentification; BEAQ = Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between parentification, experiential avoidance, and maladaptive daydreaming among young adults. Consistent with the hypotheses, higher levels of childhood parentification were associated with greater experiential avoidance and maladaptive daydreaming. Parent-focused parentification showed the strongest association with experiential avoidance, suggesting that early emotional role reversal with caregivers may have lasting implications for emotional regulation. From a developmental perspective, parentification requires children to prioritize others' emotional needs while neglecting their own, potentially fostering avoidance-based coping in adulthood. Contemporary research suggests that chronic or emotionally demanding caregiving may contribute to long-term difficulties in emotional regulation (Dariotis et al., 2023). Consistent with this view, experiential avoidance was positively associated with maladaptive daydreaming, supporting the notion that immersive fantasy may serve as an internal escape from emotional distress (Musetti et al., 2023).

Although parentification was significantly associated with maladaptive daydreaming, the relationship was modest. When both predictors were examined simultaneously, experiential avoidance emerged as the only significant predictor, suggesting that emotional regulation processes may better explain maladaptive daydreaming than parentification alone. This finding is consistent with transdiagnostic models identifying experiential avoidance as a core mechanism underlying diverse psychological difficulties (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). It also suggests that maladaptive daydreaming is a multifactorial phenomenon influenced by developmental, emotional, and contextual factors rather than a single childhood experience. No significant gender differences were found in parentification or maladaptive daydreaming; however, females reported higher levels of experiential avoidance, possibly reflecting greater reliance on internalizing coping strategies. Overall, the findings suggest that maladaptive daydreaming is better understood as one manifestation of broader emotional regulation difficulties shaped by early caregiving experiences and maintained through avoidance-based coping. The findings also have important clinical implications. Because experiential avoidance emerged as the strongest predictor of maladaptive daydreaming, interventions targeting psychological flexibility and emotional acceptance may help reduce reliance on maladaptive fantasy. Early identification of inappropriate caregiving roles may also



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facilitate healthier emotional development among individuals with histories of parentification.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relationship between parentification, experiential avoidance, and maladaptive daydreaming among young adults. The findings indicated that childhood parentification was positively associated with both experiential avoidance and maladaptive daydreaming, while experiential avoidance emerged as the strongest predictor of maladaptive daydreaming. These results suggest that early caregiving experiences may influence later emotional functioning by fostering avoidance-based coping strategies that contribute to maladaptive fantasy engagement. Overall, the study highlights the importance of understanding maladaptive daydreaming within the broader context of childhood family experiences and emotional regulation processes.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study had several limitations. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions among parentification, experiential avoidance, and maladaptive daydreaming, even though directional relationships were suggested by the findings. Second, the use of purposive sampling from university and college students within a specific cultural and educational context may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader or clinical populations. Third, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases, including social desirability and recall bias, particularly in reporting childhood parentification experiences. Finally, the study examined a limited number of psychological variables and did not include other relevant factors such as attachment patterns, trauma history, personality traits, or broader emotion regulation processes that may also influence maladaptive daydreaming.

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