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Mapping the Digital Visibility of Maladaptive Daydreaming: A Quantitative Analysis of YouTube Videos (2020–2025)

ABSTRACT

Background: Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) is a psychological phenomenon characterized by extensive fantasy activity that interferes with daily functioning. With the growing use of digital media for sharing personal experiences, YouTube has emerged as a major platform where individuals discuss mental health–related topics. However, the quantitative characteristics and visibility dynamics of MD-related content have not been systematically examined. This study aimed to analyze the trends, geographic distribution, and engagement metrics of YouTube videos related to Maladaptive Daydreaming between 2020 and 2025.

Methods: Publicly available metadata of YouTube videos containing the keyword "Maladaptive Daydreaming" were collected using the YouTube Data API (v3) via a custom Python-based script. After removing duplicate or incomplete entries, 525 videos were included in the final dataset. Descriptive statistics were computed, and non-normally distributed data were summarized as medians and interquartile ranges. Interaction Index and Viewing Rate were compared across years using Kruskal–Wallis tests, with statistical significance set at $p<0.05$.

Results: The number of MD-related videos increased substantially over the five-year period, from 35 in 2020 to 224 in 2025. Nearly half of the videos had undefined geographic origins (45.0%), while the United States (16.4%), the United Kingdom (9.3%), and India (6.9%) accounted for most identifiable content. Both Interaction Index ($H=26.65$, $p<0.001$) and Viewing Rate ($H=30.36$, p<0.001) significantly differed by year, peaking in 2024–2025.

Conclusion: The growing volume and engagement of MD-related content indicate an increasing public awareness and online discourse surrounding this psychological phenomenon. Future research should explore the thematic quality and emotional tone of such content to better understand its role in digital mental health narratives.

Keywords: Maladaptive Daydreaming, YouTube, Digital Mental Health, User Engagement, Online Awareness

Introduction

Maladaptive daydreaming (MD) was first conceptualized by Somer (2002) as a clinical construct describing a phenomenon characterized by repetitive, immersive, and hard-to-control fantasy episodes that significantly impair an individual's daily functioning (1, 2). These episodes typically involve lengthy and detailed internal narrative flows, which, although voluntarily initiated, may progressively lead to a loss of control. During MD episodes, individuals often exhibit reduced responsiveness to external stimuli and enter a highly absorptive attentional state; rhythmic movements, walking, fidgeting, or auditory cues such as music can trigger or sustain the experience (3). Unlike normative daydreaming, MD is associated with marked functional impairments, including pronounced discontinuity, withdrawal from interpersonal relationships, disruption of academic and occupational duties, disturbed sleep patterns, and neglect of daily responsibilities (4). Some individuals report experiencing restlessness, irritability, and craving when attempting to suppress MD episodes, suggesting that the phenomenon may exhibit characteristics akin to behavioral addiction (5).

The developmental underpinnings of Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) point to a multidimensional psychosocial framework. It has been suggested that the natural imaginative tendencies observed in early childhood may evolve into a pathological dependency on fantasy in certain individuals (4). Moreover, MD may function as an avoidance-oriented coping strategy that emerges in contexts of heightened interpersonal stress, loneliness, emotional deprivation, internal conflict, and anxiety (5). Interestingly, the absence of childhood trauma in a subset of individuals challenges strictly trauma-centered explanations of the phenomenon, underscoring the need to integrate psychodynamic, cognitive, and dissociative perspectives (6). The recurrent themes of idealization, empowerment, relational compensation, and emotional soothing within the fantasy narratives appear closely linked to the individual's unmet psychosocial needs (3).

From a clinical perspective, Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) is characterized by a high comorbidity profile. Structured clinical interviews indicate that MD frequently co-occurs with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive–compulsive symptoms, anxiety disorders, depression, and dissociative experiences (2). In some cases, a diversity of internal characters, alternative self-representations, and dissociative phenomena have been observed, suggesting a potential associative link between MD and dissociative disorders (6). The absence of MD from major diagnostic systems such as the DSM and ICD continues to fuel debate regarding its nosological classification (3). This omission not only contributes to diagnostic ambiguity but also limits clinical recognition and the development of standardized assessment tools.

In recent years, public awareness of Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) has rapidly increased across online platforms. Individuals experiencing MD have begun sharing their personal narratives through forums, social media communities, and particularly video-based content platforms (4). These digital narratives provide novel qualitative insights into fantasy themes, triggering stimuli, and individualized coping mechanisms. However, the accuracy, informational quality, and clinical applicability of user-generated content remain highly heterogeneous (3). Due to its user-driven production model, YouTube carries inherent risks of misinformation and popular misconceptions; nonetheless, the scholarly literature on systematic, quantitative, and metadata-based analyses of MD-related YouTube content remains extremely limited. Therefore, examining the temporal growth, user-engagement metrics, and geographic distribution of MD-related videos is crucial for understanding the phenomenon's digital visibility and evolving online representation.

Materials And Methods

This study is a quantitative analysis examining the development and characteristics of YouTube content related to Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) between 2020 and 2025. The primary data source consisted of publicly available metadata from videos on the YouTube platform containing the keyword "Maladaptive Daydreaming" within the specified time frame. This period was selected to provide a comprehensive and up-to-date analytical perspective, as it represents a critical phase during which public awareness of the topic markedly increased.

Data collection was conducted systematically using the YouTube Data API (v3). For this purpose, a custom Python script was developed and implemented. The main function of the script was to utilize the search and video detail services provided by the API to identify videos containing the keyword and extract relevant metadata. The data collection methodology was designed in accordance with the technical principles and best practices associated with the "YouTube Pneumothorax Scraper" framework (7). This technical infrastructure ensured compliance with API quota limits while guaranteeing that data retrieval was performed comprehensively, consistently, and in adherence to ethical standards. The retrieved metadata included key engagement metrics such as Video ID, Title, Description, Upload Date, Channel Information, View Count, Like Count, and Comment Count.

The raw dataset underwent extensive preprocessing to prepare it for analysis. Initially, the dataset was screened based on Video ID, and all duplicate records were removed to maintain data integrity. In addition, entries deemed irrelevant or insufficient for analysis—particularly those missing essential metadata such as video titles—were excluded. Subsequently, upload dates were converted into time-series compatible formats, and engagement metrics (views, likes, comments) were transformed into numerical data types suitable for statistical computation. Quantitative analyses focused on the annual distribution of videos between 2020 and 2025, as well as temporal trends in engagement metrics across years. Furthermore, content analysis of video titles and descriptions was conducted through frequency analysis to identify the main thematic trends and commonly used sub-keywords associated with Maladaptive Daydreaming.

Ethical Issues

The ethical framework of this research is based exclusively on the use of publicly accessible, aggregated, and anonymized metadata obtained through the YouTube Data API. No personally identifiable information (PII) belonging to any user was collected, analyzed, or stored at any stage of the research process. All procedures related to data collection and processing were conducted in full compliance with YouTube's Terms of Service and API Policies, ensuring that the study adhered to both ethical research standards and platform-specific data governance requirements.

Statistical Analysis

The data identified in the study were collected in a data form, analysed using SPSS version 27 (IBM Corp.) and plotted using GraphPad Prism. The data were classified. Categorical data were defined as percentages and frequencies. Numerical data were defined, and a distribution analysis was performed. Data that followed a normal distribution were defined as mean ± standard deviation (SD). For data that did not follow a normal distribution, the median and interquartile range (IQR) were used. Non-parametric tests were used to analyse non-normally distributed numerical data and to evaluate the relationship between groups using a post hoc test. Findings with a p-value below 0.05 were considered significant.

RESULTS

The total number of videos identified in 2020 was 35, which progressively increased over the years, reaching 224 videos by 2025 (Figure 1). Examination of the 525 videos included in the dataset revealed that a substantial portion lacked identifiable geographic information, categorized as undefined (Un). This group accounted for approximately half of the dataset (n = 236, 45.0%). Among the videos with identifiable origins, the United States (US) ranked first with 86 videos (16.4%), followed by the United Kingdom (GB) with 49 videos (9.3%) and India (IN) with 36 videos (6.9%). These three countries represented the dominant contributors among those with defined locations. Other notable contributors included Italy (IT) with 17 videos (3.2%), Canada (CA) with 16 videos (3.0%), and the Philippines (PH) with 10 videos (1.9%). The remaining countries exhibited low frequencies (ranging from 1 to 8 videos), indicating that while the dataset had a global scope, it also demonstrated considerable heterogeneity. Cumulative percentages showed that approximately two-thirds (69.5%) of all videos—including the undefined group—originated from the United States, the United Kingdom, India, or the undefined category (Figure 2).

The median video duration was 347.50 seconds (IQR = 1009.0). Descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 1.

A Kruskal–Wallis test revealed a significant difference in Interaction Index values across years ($H = 26.65$, $p < 0.001$). Median (IQR) Interaction Index scores were 4.6 (4.02) in 2020, 4.52 (1.70) in 2021, 3.99 (1.85) in 2022, 4.47 (4.32) in 2023, 6.58 (4.49) in 2024, and 4.7 (5.91) in 2025 (Figure 3a).

Similarly, the Viewing Rate differed significantly across years ($H = 30.36$, $p < 0.001$). Median (IQR) values were 203.2 (307) in 2020, 129.6 (630) in 2021, 102.6 (979) in 2022, 65.04 (1019) in 2023, 330 (2127) in 2024, and 485.2 (3156) in 2025 (Figure 3b).

Table 1: Descriptive information

Description	
Duration (Seconds) Median, IQR	347,50 (1009,0)
Like Count Median, IQR	24 (215,25)
Comment Count Median, IQR	4 (33,25)
Days since upload Median, IQR	469,5 (1009,5)
View count Median, IQR	609,5 (4628,25)
Interaction index (%)Median, IQR	4,7 (4,4)
Viewing rate (%)Median, IQR	225,42 (1778,06)

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to examine the quantitative characteristics and temporal evolution of YouTube content related to Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) between 2020 and 2025. As mental health themes have become increasingly visible in digital environments, a systematic investigation of MD-related online content contributes to a deeper understanding of how this phenomenon manifests in terms of individual awareness, self-help practices, and online community formation. The findings demonstrated a substantial increase in the number of MD-related videos over the five-year period, with a marked rise in engagement levels (views and likes) particularly during 2024–2025. Furthermore, the majority of content originated from Anglophone countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and India, while a notable portion lacked identifiable geographic information. This pattern indicates that awareness of MD has achieved a form of global yet culturally diverse digital visibility. The significance of this study lies in its position as one of the first quantitative attempts to document how MD has transitioned from a clinical concept to a circulating discourse within the digital media ecosystem, where user-generated experiential narratives collectively construct a form of psychological community discourse.

The marked increase in Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD)–related videos observed between 2020 and 2025 reflects not only a rise in content production but also the growth of digital awareness and user engagement surrounding this phenomenon. Recent scholarship highlights that video-based platforms addressing mental health topics have evolved from being mere informational tools into interactive spaces where individuals share personal experiences and form communities within frameworks of self-diagnosis and self-help (e.g., 8). In this context, the increasing volume of MD-related videos suggests that users are transforming from passive viewers into active content creators, disseminating their experiences through algorithmically amplified recommendation systems to reach broader audiences. This trend also signals the expansion of mental health discourse into digital arenas, where user-driven and experiential forms of knowledge production are increasingly emerging beyond traditional academic or clinical domains. Thus, the growing number of videos represents not merely a quantitative increase but a broader cultural elevation of MD's online visibility, indicating its integration into the evolving landscape of digital mental health narratives.

The distribution of videos across countries indicates that MD-related content production demonstrates a predominantly Anglophone visibility, with a substantial portion of videos lacking identifiable geographic information. This pattern aligns with the historical conceptualization of MD within English-speaking contexts and the predominance of measurement equivalence studies conducted in these ecosystems. Cross-cultural research on the measurement invariance and meaning structures of MD suggests that while the disorder's core functional impairments appear consistent across cultures, its experiential interpretations and modes of expression are context-dependent—a finding that supports the notion of a partial language-mediated selection bias (9).

Moreover, recent studies have demonstrated that health-related content on YouTube suffers from representational limitations in terms of language and inclusivity, while the platform's algorithmic recommendation systems can generate structural biases that shape content diversity and visibility. Such mechanisms likely explain the relative prominence of English-language content, the high proportion of videos with undefined geographic origin, and the uneven regional distribution patterns (10). In addition, the dominance of English in health research and the presence of multilevel linguistic barriers systematically restrict the visibility of non-English content and creators, providing a structural explanation for the strong representation of the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as the large "undefined" category observed in this dataset (11). Finally, viewing and engagement patterns for online mental health content often intersect with geographic and linguistic inequalities; disparities in digital health access, connectivity, and media literacy across regions may shape both content production and consumption. Collectively, these findings suggest that the concentration and indeterminacy patterns identified in our results reflect the combined influence of platform-level (algorithmic), domain-level (linguistic and academic hegemony), and societal-level (digital inclusivity) factors.

Our analyses revealed a notable increase in the median Viewing Rate and Interaction Index in 2024 compared to all other years, suggesting not only an expansion in content volume but also a heightened level of user attention and engagement with MD-related videos. This finding aligns with the emerging literature on the attention economy, which posits that attention functions as an increasingly scarce resource within social media environments, while algorithmically structured content flows employ both psychological and technical mechanisms to enhance viewer engagement (12). Previous research has further shown that within health and mental health–related content, personal narratives and experiential sharing significantly increase user engagement (13).

In this context, the relatively higher engagement observed for MD-related content during 2024–2025 may indicate that both content creators and audiences developed a more sophisticated narrative strategy during this period, while platform algorithms potentially began favoring long-form or experience-centered videos in terms of visibility and recommendation. However, metrics such as views and likes capture only quantitative indicators of engagement and may not adequately reflect the quality or depth of user experience, as within the logic of the attention economy, "capturing attention" does not necessarily equate to "creating value" (14). Overall, these findings suggest that MD-related YouTube content has become increasingly appealing to viewers, yet this appeal is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including content quality, algorithmic amplification, and user motivations.

The findings of this study indicate that YouTube functions not only as a platform for information exchange but also as a space for the expression and interpretation of psychological experiences. Interpreted through the lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (15), this pattern suggests that individuals use the platform to attain both cognitive and emotional gratifications. The increase in viewership and engagement with MD-related videos implies that users derive forms of emotional support, informational validation, and identification from such content. Similarly, within the framework of Parasocial Interaction Theory, the one-sided yet psychologically meaningful relationships established between viewers and content creators play a pivotal role in fostering social validation and visibility of MD experiences (16).

The personal narrative format that YouTube enables allows individuals to externalize their internal experiences into the public domain, thereby reinforcing self-representation processes (17). This trend aligns with recent findings showing that mental health themes are increasingly manifested as digital self-narratives in online spaces (18). Consequently, the quantitative growth of MD-related content reflects not only users' pursuit of knowledge but also a broader digital transformation in how individuals construct identity, seek social belonging, and cultivate psychological resilience through mediated interaction.

This study entails several methodological and conceptual limitations. First, it relies exclusively on publicly available and anonymized metadata accessed through the YouTube Data API; therefore, the content quality, narrative style, and emotional tone of the videos could not be directly analyzed. Consequently, engagement metrics (e.g., views, likes, comments) were evaluated solely as quantitative indicators, leaving the emotional and interpretive dimensions of user experience unexplored. Second, data collection was conducted using English-language keywords, introducing potential linguistic bias and limitations in cultural representation. The exclusion of non-English content may have restricted the ability to capture the full global diversity of the MD phenomenon.

Additionally, YouTube's algorithmic visibility policies may have influenced which videos were recommended more frequently and, thus, which were included in the dataset. Such algorithmic selection biases are increasingly recognized as a systematic limitation in digital media research (19). Future studies could address these issues through multi-platform comparisons (e.g., TikTok, Reddit, Instagram), emotional content analysis, comment-based sentiment mining, and time-series modeling, to explore the qualitative aspects of MD's digital visibility in greater depth. Moreover, future research should examine how users identify with these contents, construct digital identity narratives, and engage in online support communities through mixed-method designs. Such approaches would illuminate not only the quantity but also the meaningful dimensions of digital experience, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the psychosocial context surrounding the online representation of MD.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations that arise from the methodological and data collection processes. Firstly, the research findings are based exclusively on publicly available, anonymous metadata accessed via the YouTube Data API. This approach meant that qualitative aspects such as the quality of the video content, narrative style and emotional tone could not be analysed directly. Consequently, interaction metrics such as views and likes could only be evaluated as quantitative indicators, and it was not possible to explore the emotional and interpretative dimensions of the user experience. Secondly, using only English keywords in the data collection process created a potential linguistic bias, limiting the ability to reflect the global diversity of the Maladaptive Daydreaming (MD) phenomenon fully. Thirdly, YouTube's algorithmic visibility policies may have influenced which videos were recommended more frequently and thus included in the dataset, pointing to algorithmic selection bias, a recognised systematic limitation in digital media research.

Conclusion

The increasing volume and level of interaction clearly demonstrate growing public awareness and online discourse regarding MD. Future research should analyse the themes and emotional tone of this content to better understand its role in digital mental health narratives.

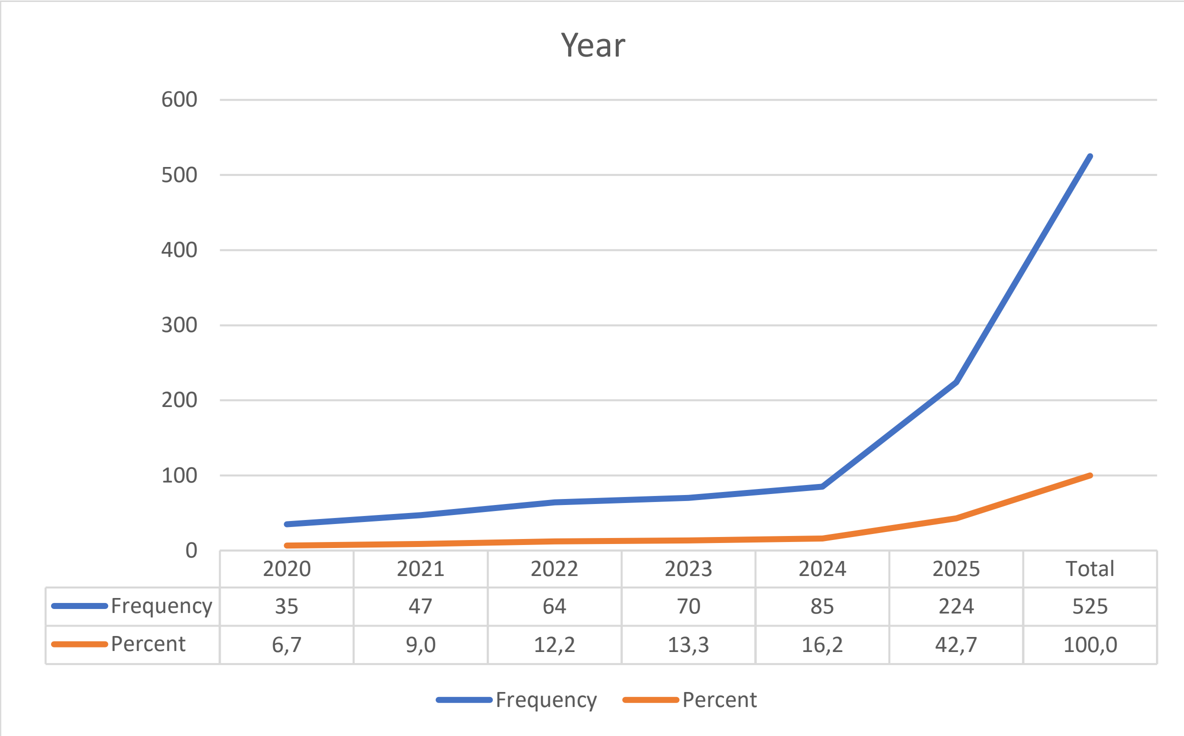

Figure 1: Number of videos by year

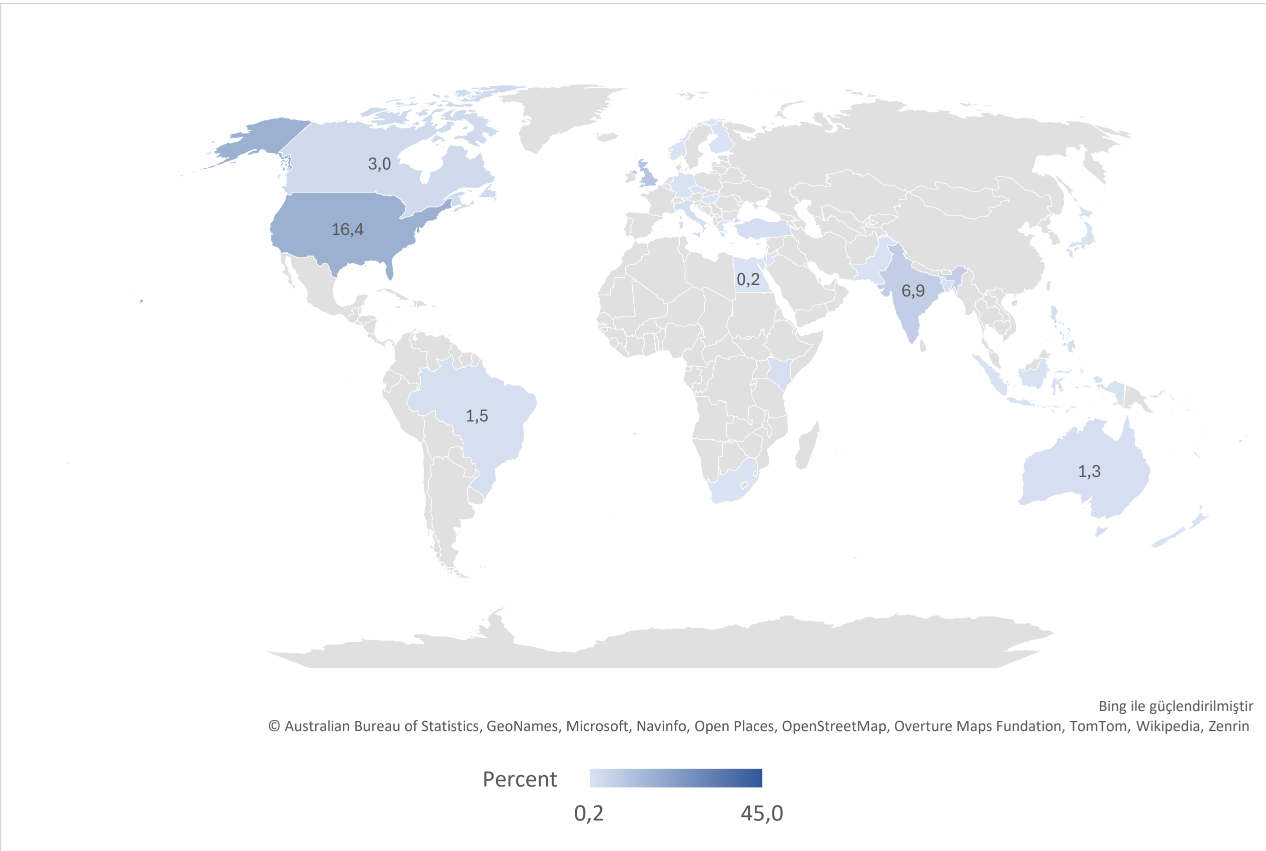

Figure 2: Number of videos by country

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