

New study delves into COVID-19 dreams

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A new study from student researchers reveals how the pandemic is changing our dreams. Credit: Bruce Christianson/ Unsplash

How are you sleeping? If you've been having strange dreams or lingering nightmares during the pandemic, you're not alone.

New research from U of T Mississauga delves into our unconscious minds, seeking to better understand the relationship between dreams and waking life. The results reveal intriguing insights about what might be happening in our nocturnal minds.

Leela McKinnon, Erica Kilius and Noor Abbas (BSc 2020) are graduate students in the lab of UTM anthropologist David Samson, who studies how evolution influences human and primate sleep behavior. Samson's current research investigates the theory that humans have evolved to have dreams and nightmares as a way to rehearse for real threats in the daytime.

With that in mind, the student researchers sought to understand how the pandemic might be influencing the dreams of fellow students.

"Never before have we had an overarching global

experience where everyone is feeling some sort of effect," says McKinnon. "We thought it would be interesting to understand what the U of T community is feeling."

With [financial support](#) from U of T's S COVID-19 Student Engagement award, the trio collected data from 84 U of T students from 22 countries around the globe. Respondents answered survey and interview questions about the content and themes of their dreams, providing short descriptions of specific dreams that occurred during the early lockdown phase of the pandemic. They also reported whether they felt their cultural background influenced the content or interpretation of their dreams.

The researchers then analyzed the responses according to what Abbas terms "the big five" themes that researchers track in dream analysis: characters, social interaction, settings, emotions and misfortunes.

Anxiety, fear and confusion were the top-reported emotions experienced by dreamers. Respondents also reported that their dreams were more vivid, and that they were having more nightmares than good dreams.

About a third of respondents recalled dreams specifically related to COVID-19, including details like PPE and social distancing that could be linked to the pandemic. One student reported dreaming of a restaurant meal and receiving a bill for the same amount as their tuition fees.

"That's exactly what we would expect if outside anxieties and fears come into dreams, because that's what people are experiencing in real life," McKinnon says. "It seems that dreams are related to outside stressors, and that they might have a sort of function. Further analysis may support this idea of threat simulation."



Researcher Noor Abbas illustrated a selection of dreams recounted by study respondents. Credit: Noor Abbas

Abbas notes that female respondents reported higher incidents of finding themselves in negative situations and on the receiving end of physical aggression in their dreams. Male respondents reported "significantly less" [dream](#) incidents of this kind.

According to Abbas, this could be interpreted as evidence that there is a difference between how women and men perceive threats. "That we see more in females than in males could indicate a difference in how they rationalize an external threat in their dreams," she says.

The researchers were also interested in the relationship between culture and pandemic dreams.

"Culture can influence whether the dreamer naps during the day or stays out late," Kilius says. "In dreams, culture may also influence the appearance of ancestors, or whether dreams can help to make decisions."

Nearly a quarter of respondents reported that their cultural background had played a role in how they interpreted their pandemic dreams. One respondent reported dreaming of snakes—usually a good sign in their Hindu culture. Another dreamer reported seeking safety, even when danger had passed, which they attributed to their cultural background.

"Threat perception is dependent on your culture," adds Abbas, who illustrated some of the reported dreams for the team's report. "The way you understand external threats would be perceived the same way."

The student study is related to a larger research project headed up by Samson, whose current research explores the idea that dreams may prime us for next-day behavior. Samson was recently awarded \$458,660 from the John Evans Leadership Fund infrastructure (JELF) grant from the Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI) to build a unique sleep laboratory that is specifically focused on testing evolutionary hypotheses about the function of dreams.

"If we rehearse an event in the alternate state of consciousness we call dreaming—usually manifesting as a social or physical challenge in our environment—we are biologically priming our success if we happen to face those threats in the future while awake," says Samson.

"There is the tantalizing possibility that the way our Paleolithic ancestors dreamed may have enhanced their likelihood of survival and reproduction," he continues. "In other words, from the vantage point of natural history, dreams may be part of the human success story."

There is some comfort in the knowledge that people everywhere are sharing these common experiences, even while asleep.

"Talking about your dreams or thinking it through can sometimes help make these connections," Kilius says. "We would reassure people that this appears to be normal, and that they aren't alone."

More information: COVID-19 and Sleep: Preliminary Report: create.piktochart.com/output/4...34008-COVID19-dreams

Provided by University of Toronto Mississauga

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