

# Phenomenology of lucid dreaming, sleep paralysis, and false awakenings: Encounters with the Self

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**Summary.** Lucid dreaming (LD), sleep paralysis (SP), and false awakenings (FA) are liminal sleep phenomena that are often studied independently, despite evidence suggesting that they may arise from overlapping states of consciousness. Within Filipino cultural contexts, such experiences are frequently interpreted through folklore and superstition, such as bangungot, rather than through scientific or phenomenological frameworks. This paper presents a qualitative, phenomenological analysis of LD, SP, and FA through the first-person account of a Filipina dreamer, integrating personal experience with existing sleep research. Drawing on dream journaling and subjective interpretation, the study introduces the concept of the false awakening loop as a proposed theoretical framework describing consecutive false awakenings occurring within a single sleep episode. The findings suggest that LD, SP, and FA may form an interrelated sequence rather than isolated phenomena, particularly during intermediate states between REM sleep and wakefulness. By situating individual experience within both cultural and scientific contexts, this paper highlights the value of phenomenological approaches in understanding liminal dream states and underscores the need for further qualitative research on false awakening loops and culturally situated dream experiences..

**Keywords:** Sleep paralysis, lucid dreaming, false awakening

## Introduction

To date, there has been little documented in-depth scientific analysis of dreams within Filipino cultural contexts. While we have an abundance of myths and superstitions about dreams, there are few, if any, scientific studies. When sleep paralysis and false awakening are discussed within Filipino context, an abrupt conclusion would be *bangungot* (from Tagalog word *bangon* (to rise) and *ungol* (to moan). According to the article of Spike (2025), *bangungot* can be attributed to sleep paralysis — that apart from feeling immobilized, it is also accompanied by shadowy entities, demons and spirits of the culture and folklore. Additionally, being the only Christian nation in Asia, Filipinos might advise to pray before you sleep. These beliefs lack pragmatic findings and often lead to incorrect interpretations. For example, many Filipinos believe that dreaming about losing a tooth or teeth foretells a tragedy, while dreaming about snakes signifies an impending death. These interpretations have been passed down through generations, and even today, many Filipinos hold on to these beliefs.

The absence of a scientific foundation in these interpretations doesn't diminish the Filipinos' cultural significance. Instead, it enriches the tapestry of Filipino traditions. While publishing scientific findings about dreams might provide new perspectives, it's not about discrediting cultural beliefs

but rather understanding them in a broader context. After all, dream psychology itself remains a field of study that treads the fine line between science and speculation.

The purpose of this report is to share a part of the female dreamer with the world and to provide a deeper understanding of the oneiric sensations the dreamer experienced. This paper aims to explore the phenomenology of lucid dreaming (LD), sleep paralysis (SP), and false awakening (FA), and to introduce the dreamer's theoretical concept of the *false awakening loop*. Drawing on both personal experience and existing literature, the dreamer interprets these phenomena in order to address the questions of why LD, SP, and FA occur and how they are interrelated.

Keeping a dream journal since 2014 has helped the dreamer understand herself on a deeper level. Through self-interpretation and bringing the unconscious aspects of mind into awareness, the dreamer has become more self-aware. She often has a wide variety of dreams — ranging from adventures to moments with friends, family, and colleagues. However, this paper specifically explores the dreamer's experience on a sequence involving lucid dreaming, sleep paralysis, and multiple false awakenings.

## Lucid dreaming

Lucid dreaming occurs when a person becomes aware of dreaming and is able to control their actions within the dream (Raduga et al., 2020; Schredl et al., 2022). When lucid dreaming, the sleeper deliberately plans to accomplish actions such as flying, conversing with dream characters or engaging in intimate behaviors (Stumbrys et al., 2014). During lucid dreaming, the dreamer consistently chose movement — running at impossible speed or flying as high as she could. Since the dreamer was only able to lucid dream thrice in her life, two of them happened when she was 25 and 27 years old. Her experience contrasts with the findings

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of Stumbrys et al., (2014), that lucid dreams are infrequent when the dreamer reaches the age of 25 due to brain maturation. The dreamer's lucid dreams lasted only minutes, but they frequently transitioned into sleep paralysis.

### Sleep paralysis

Sleep paralysis (SP) involves wake-like awareness while being unable to move the body (Ableidinger & Holzinger, 2023). In SP, there is an occurrence of vivid hallucinations (Bhalerao et al., 2024) and SP has been interpreted in different cultural contexts from witchcraft, malevolent spirits and extraterrestrials (Sharpless & Barber, 2011).

After more than a decade of experiencing it, the dreamer has learned how to navigate and "break out" of it. While many report chest pressure, heavy weight on rib cage, shortness of breath, or a sense of impending death (Hinton et al., 2005; French & Santomauro, 2007; Stefani & Högl, 2021), the dreamer's personal experience differs. At first, the experience is terrifying for the dreamer; however, over time, it becomes exciting and empowering—a challenge she learns to consciously overcome. The dreamer does not intend to contradict empirical findings; rather, the dreamer highlights her own phenomenology and the diversity of lived experiences.

### False awakening

Following sleep paralysis, the dreamer often enters false awakenings—experiences in which one believes they have woken up and resumed ordinary activity, despite still being within the dream. Moreover, according to Mainieri et al., (2021), these two may be linked to each other, and later be associated with lucid dreaming (Picard-Deland et al., 2021). Similar to sleep paralysis, false awakenings are also perceiving being in a familiar environment (such as the room where the sleeper currently is). But, they differ as during sleep paralysis, the sleeper cannot control his actions; and a lucid dreamer could. (Sodré et al., 2023).

These often occur in "layers," forming a cycle that feels difficult to escape. Some call this *false awakening loop*. Unlike sleep paralysis, which the dreamer finds exhilarating, false awakenings feel like confinement. Each time the dreamer escapes, she feels like she has survived an ordeal.

### False awakening loop

In this paper, the *false awakening loop* is a proposed theoretical framework, not an established diagnosis. A false awakening is commonly described as a dream in which the dreamer believes they have awakened, while in fact they remain asleep. A false awakening loop, by contrast, involves repeated false awakenings occurring consecutively, creating a dream-within-a-dream sequence. Currently, there is little-to-no research specifically focused on false awakening loops. Although many studies define false awakening, there is a lack of in-depth analysis regarding the looping nature or the multiple levels of this phenomenon.

The non-peer reviewed article of Pacheco (2025) suggests that false awakenings may occur multiple times in succession, potentially leading to false memories before the dreamer eventually realizes that the experiences were entirely dream-based. Such loops can be highly distressing, as the dreamer must repeatedly overcome successive layers of dreaming in order to finally reach genuine wakefulness. This

process can be understood as navigating through multiple dream states to exit sleep.

Furthermore, Pacheco (2025) notes that sleep paralysis and false awakening occur in similar intermediate states between sleep and wakefulness. A false awakening loop may be likened metaphorically to an adventure game in which each level must be completed to reach the final goal of wakefulness. This experience can be particularly unsettling, as the dreamer repeatedly believes they have awakened, only to later discover they are still dreaming. While a single false awakening involves assuming one has already awakened and continuing daily activities, a false awakening loop consists of repeatedly resuming normal activities and subsequently realizing—again and again—that awakening has not yet occurred.

### The dream details

In the dreamer's latest lucid dream, she witnessed what appeared to be an "other self" working at a highly advanced computer covered in binary code. The environment blended familiar and unfamiliar elements, as if two worlds overlapped in slow motion. She sensed that her time in this space was limited. Acting quickly, she interacted with the computer and attempted to "download" the consciousness of this alternate version of herself. Whether she succeeded remains unclear. Leong and Zinych (2023) describe dreams as potential symbolic portals to alternate universes, suggesting that the self might encounter other manifestations across dimensions. This oneiric experience resonated with this perspective that the self is not just singular and linear in this universe but can actively engage with other versions of reality.

The dream then shifted to an uncanny scene: a two-dimensional cartoon woman moving within our three-dimensional world. The dreamer only saw her in profile, dressed in a shiny black gown reminiscent of descriptions from Jane Austen's *Netherfield* ball. Her tiptoeing gait was unsettling. Curious, she flew above and attempted to view her from the front, but as a two-dimensional figure, she had no "front" to reveal. There was an abrupt change in dimensionality which may suggest that this imagery could be from a deeper layer of the psyche. This aligns with Jungian interpretations of dreams as expressions of the collective unconscious populated by archetypal symbols (Leigh, 2011).

The lucid dream collapsed into sleep paralysis, followed by a series of false awakenings. Each time, the dreamer struggled to open her eyes. She even dreamed that she spoke to her partner and turned on the lights, only to realize that she was still dreaming and immobilized. After overcoming three successive layers, the dreamer was finally awake.

### Dream Interpretation

Whenever the dreamer attempts to interpret her dreams, she systematically dissects their oneiric content into several categories, such as characters, setting, and emotions. She has long believed that dreams are a blend of automatic thoughts and suppressed memories that resurface in altered forms, which is why they are often perceived as strange or insignificant. However, even the smallest and most unusual dreams can be meaningfully interpreted, as there are often identifiable psychological or experiential reasons behind their appearance.

(A) *The other self.* The dreamer has always been fascinated by the idea of parallel universes and has frequently wondered what her alternate self might be doing in another reality. While she does not intend to explore the scientific foundations of this concept, nor to elaborate on theoretical possibilities such as those proposed in string theory, the notion itself has consistently captured her imagination.

(B) *Computer covered in binary codes.* She associates this imagery with her belief that we are living in an emerging, increasingly technological society. If parallel universes do exist, she imagines them as possessing forms of advanced technology that surpass the limits of human comprehension.

(C) *Downloading consciousness.* Given that the human mind may be incapable of fully grasping the complexities of alternate realities, the act of “downloading” consciousness in her dream may represent an attempt to access or understand the version of herself that exists elsewhere, thereby making sense of her beliefs.

(D) *Two-dimensional woman.* The appearance of a two-dimensional figure is physically impossible within our three-dimensional world, and even visualizing such a form is challenging. This woman resembled a former friend with whom the dreamer had cut ties. Her flatness and displacement may symbolize her exclusion from the dreamer’s current life, rendering her an outcast within the dreamer’s dream world.

(E) *Shiny black gown.* This imagery likely draws from the dreamer’s recent reading of *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, particularly her vivid impressions of the Netherfield ball and its characters.

Dreams are not random or insignificant; these dream images illustrate how the subconscious mind reorganizes waking-life experiences into symbolic narratives.

### Sleep paralysis, false awakening and lucid dreaming

Pacheco (2025) posits that sleep paralysis (SP), false awakening (FA), and lucid dreaming (LD) often co-occur and may constitute a similar mental state. In this case, the dreamer experienced LD, SP, and FA during a dusk nap, taken while anticipating an upcoming dinner in waking life. While dreaming of a two-dimensional lady, the dreamer became lucid when she attempted to see the figure’s “front.” This LD subsequently transitioned into SP. During this state, the dreamer was mentally awake and could smell the dinner being cooked in reality.

Sharpless and Barber (2011) suggest that SP typically occurs as a result of sleep deprivation and general sleep disturbances. In this instance, anticipation, poor sleep quality, and the awareness that she would need to wake soon likely contributed to the onset of SP. The dreamer then assumed she had awakened and began speaking to her partner about a light switch; however, the light would not turn on. As noted by Pacheco (2025), false awakenings are often highly realistic, though certain details—such as malfunctioning lights—may differ from waking reality. The false awakening loop, combined with SP and the resulting difficulty opening her eyes, was a terrifying experience. While experiencing LD, SP, and FA separately can be exciting, their simultaneous occurrence was overwhelmingly distressing.

### Conclusion

Search results related to ‘Filipino dreams’ tend to emphasize *aspirations* rather than oneiric experiences. This paper can serve as the start of exploring the context of Filipino dreams in the scientific field, rather than a conclusion based on a single philosophical stance.

This article examined the phenomenology of lucid dreams, sleep paralysis and false awakenings through a subjective experience of the dreamer. By analyzing a first-person account alongside literature, this proves that the state of consciousness can form an interrelated sequence rather than an isolated case.

A phenomenological approach allows for a deeper appreciation of how identity, agency, and perception are negotiated within dream states. Future research may benefit from further qualitative exploration of false awakening loops to better understand their structure, emotional impact, and relationship to other liminal sleep phenomena.

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