

PARENTAL EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING AMONG TEENAGERS IN PAKISTAN: RESILIENCE AS A MODERATOR

Original Article

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Conflict of Interest: None

Grant Support & Financial Support: None

Acknowledgment: The authors thank all participating students and institutions for their support and cooperation.

ABSTRACT

Background: Parental emotional abuse is a pervasive yet often overlooked form of psychological maltreatment that can significantly disrupt adolescent development. In Pakistan, cultural norms and familial structures often obscure the recognition and reporting of emotional abuse. Although global literature has addressed various forms of abuse, there remains a notable gap in examining parental emotional abuse and its psychological effects within the Pakistani context, particularly regarding the protective role of resilience among teenagers.

Objective: This study aimed to investigate the relationship between parental emotional abuse and psychological well-being among Pakistani teenagers, with resilience assessed as a moderating factor.

Methods: A cross-sectional correlational design was employed using purposive sampling to recruit 374 Pakistani teenagers aged 13 to 19 years ($M = 16.12$, $SD = 2.02$), all of whom had a self-reported history of parental emotional abuse. Three standardized tools were administered: the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (30 items, $\alpha = .94$), the Brief Resilience Scale (6 items, $\alpha = .80-.91$), and the Psychological Well-Being Scale (18 items, $\alpha = .87-.93$). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, including Pearson correlation and moderation analysis.

Results: Parental emotional abuse was significantly and negatively correlated with both resilience ($r = -.10$, $p < .05$) and psychological well-being ($r = -.19$, $p < .01$). Resilience was positively associated with psychological well-being ($r = .11$, $p < .05$). Moderation analysis revealed that resilience significantly buffered the negative impact of emotional abuse on psychological well-being ($\beta = -.006$, $p < .001$), with the model explaining 7% of variance ($R^2 = .07$, $F = 10.12$).

Conclusion: The study highlights resilience as a critical moderating factor that can mitigate the psychological harm of parental emotional abuse among teenagers. These findings support interventions aimed at promoting emotional resilience and establishing culturally sensitive child protection policies in Pakistan.

Keywords: Adolescent Psychology, Emotional Abuse, Mental Health, Pakistan, Parental Behavior, Psychological Resilience, Well-Being.

INTRODUCTION

Parental emotional abuse, a covert yet profoundly damaging form of maltreatment, involves persistent verbal assaults, rejection, emotional neglect, or psychological manipulation that impairs a child's emotional development and sense of self-worth. While not always visible like physical abuse, emotional abuse can leave deeper and longer-lasting psychological scars, significantly disrupting the cognitive and emotional growth of children (1). Such experiences are linked to an increased risk of mental health disorders including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal, affecting the individual's ability to trust others, build healthy relationships, and cope with life challenges (2,3). In this context, psychological well-being—conceptualized as a composite of emotional, cognitive, and social functioning (4)—becomes critically undermined when children are repeatedly subjected to parental emotional abuse. Research has consistently shown that such adverse childhood experiences disrupt the foundations of psychological resilience and mental health (5). Children who endure emotional abuse often internalize chronic feelings of shame, helplessness, and insecurity, which may persist into adolescence and adulthood. These psychological consequences can manifest as academic underachievement, difficulties in peer interactions, and poor occupational outcomes (6,7). Furthermore, prolonged exposure to such toxic parenting environments may trigger neurobiological alterations in brain regions responsible for emotion regulation and stress response, further compounding the impact (5). A recent Pakistani study among young adults highlighted a significant and direct relationship between parental emotional abuse and reduced psychological well-being, mediated by maladaptive emotional regulation strategies like expressive suppression, and moderated by more adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal (8).

Resilience—the capacity to recover and adapt in the face of adversity—has emerged as a critical protective factor against the detrimental outcomes of emotional abuse. Unlike fixed traits, resilience encompasses dynamic psychological resources and behaviors that can be cultivated through positive environments, self-awareness, and coping mechanisms (9,10). Past research suggests that resilience can buffer the negative impact of emotional abuse by fostering adaptive emotional responses, strengthening self-perception, and facilitating supportive social interactions (11). Moreover, growth mindset, positive school relationships, and self-esteem have been identified as mediators and moderators that can reduce the intensity of emotional distress among emotionally abused children (12,13). These findings underline the importance of fostering resilience as part of intervention strategies aimed at mitigating psychological harm and promoting well-being. In the South Asian socio-cultural landscape, particularly in Pakistan, emotional abuse by parents is often normalized, underreported, and overlooked due to deeply ingrained norms that prioritize obedience and filial piety over emotional validation (14). This cultural backdrop contributes to a lack of recognition and scholarly investigation into the psychological toll of parental emotional abuse in Pakistani adolescents. Consequently, many young individuals may suffer silently, with limited access to psychological support or understanding. There remains a significant gap in the literature regarding how resilience interacts with emotional abuse to influence psychological outcomes in this population. To address this void, the present study seeks to examine the relationship between parental emotional abuse and psychological well-being among Pakistani teenagers, with resilience assessed as a moderating variable. This investigation aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of emotional abuse within a culturally relevant framework, support the development of resilience-building interventions, and inform mental health advocacy and parental education initiatives in Pakistan.

METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional research design to investigate the relationship between parental emotional abuse, resilience, and psychological well-being among Pakistani adolescents. The cross-sectional nature of the design enabled the researchers to capture data at a single point in time, allowing for the analysis of existing associations among the key variables without manipulating any conditions. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to recruit participants who met the study criteria. The sample comprised 374 Pakistani students aged between 13 and 19 years, representing both genders and all holding Pakistani nationality. Inclusion criteria required participants to have a self-reported history of parental emotional abuse, willingness to participate voluntarily, and the ability to understand the study materials. Adolescents with cognitive impairments or those unable to provide informed consent were excluded. To ensure comprehensive and reliable measurement of study variables, three standardized instruments were utilized. Psychological well-being was assessed using the Psychological Well-Being Scale developed by Ryff and Keyes (1995), consisting of 18 items measuring multiple dimensions of well-being on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”), with internal consistency coefficients reported between 0.87 and 0.93. Resilience was measured using the Brief Resilience Scale by Smith in 2008, a six-item instrument rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with reliability scores ranging from 0.80 to 0.91. Parental emotional abuse was

evaluated using the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ) developed by Mumtaz in 2022, a 30-item scale scored on a 5-point Likert scale, with an excellent internal consistency of 0.94 (15,16).

Data were collected in educational settings with the cooperation of institutional administrations. Participants first completed a brief demographic form, followed by the EAQ, the Brief Resilience Scale, and the Psychological Well-Being Scale. The full survey administration required approximately 25 to 30 minutes per participant. The ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association (7th edition) were strictly followed. Institutional ethical clearance was obtained from Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. For those under the age of 18, additional written consent was secured from their parents or legal guardians, ensuring adherence to ethical standards for research involving minors. Following data collection, all responses were entered and managed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Data were cleaned and screened for completeness prior to analysis. The study-maintained confidentiality and anonymity of the participants throughout the research process, and all participants were debriefed and thanked for their contribution upon completion.

RESULTS

The analysis was conducted on data collected from 374 Pakistani adolescents aged between 13 and 19 years ($M = 16.12$, $SD = 2.02$). The majority of participants were boys ($n = 252$, 67%), while girls represented 33% ($n = 122$). In terms of socioeconomic background, most participants belonged to the lower class ($n = 249$, 67%), followed by the middle class ($n = 79$, 21%) and the upper class ($n = 46$, 12%). Descriptive correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant negative association between parental emotional abuse and both resilience ($r = -0.10$, $p < .05$) and psychological well-being ($r = -0.19$, $p < .01$). Conversely, a significant positive correlation was found between resilience and psychological well-being ($r = 0.11$, $p < .05$). These findings suggest that higher levels of emotional abuse are linked with lower resilience and reduced psychological well-being, while greater resilience is modestly associated with improved well-being. Moderation analysis was conducted to examine whether resilience influences the relationship between parental emotional abuse and psychological well-being. The model yielded a statistically significant interaction effect between parental emotional abuse and resilience on psychological well-being ($\beta = -0.006$, $SE = 0.001$, $t = -3.49$, $p < .001$), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.009 to -0.002. The main effect of resilience on psychological well-being was also significant ($\beta = 0.73$, $SE = 0.18$, $t = 3.92$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher resilience independently predicted better psychological well-being. Parental emotional abuse showed a marginally significant direct effect ($\beta = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $t = 1.96$, $p = .05$). The overall model accounted for 7% of the variance in psychological well-being ($R^2 = .07$, $F = 10.12$). The analysis of gender and age-based subgroup differences in psychological well-being revealed a statistically significant difference between boys and girls. Boys reported higher mean psychological well-being scores compared to girls, and the independent samples t-test confirmed this difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.37$, $p = .018$). In contrast, no significant difference in psychological well-being was found between the two age groups, 13–15 years and 16–19 years ($t = 0.17$, $p = .863$). These findings suggest that gender may be a contributing factor to differences in psychological outcomes among adolescents exposed to parental emotional abuse, whereas age does not appear to play a significant role within this sample. Further exploration into gender-specific coping strategies and socialization patterns may help explain this disparity.

Table 1: Participants' Characteristics (N=374)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age			16.12	2.02
Gender				
Boys	252	67		
Girls	122	33		
Socioeconomic Status				
Lower Class	249	67		
Middle Class	79	21		
Upper Class	46	12		

Table 2: Correlation among Study Variables (N=374)

Variables	1	2	3
1.Parental Emotional Abuse	-	-.10*	-.19**
2.Resilience		-	.11*
3.Psychological Wellbeing			

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3: Moderation Analysis (N=374)

Variables	β	SE	T	P	R^2	F	LLCI	ULCI
					.07	10.12		
PEA	.05	.02	1.96	.05			-.0005	.11
Resilience	.73	.18	3.92	.000			.36	1.09
PEA X Resilience	-.006	.001	-3.49	.000			-.009	-.002

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, PEA= Parental Emotional Abuse

Table 4: Subgroup Analysis - Psychological Wellbeing

Gender	Age Group	Mean Psychological Wellbeing	Standard Deviation	Count
Boys	13–15	70.91	9.39	102
	16–19	70.52	10.66	150
Girls	13–15	67.89	10.41	59
	16–19	66.83	10.32	63

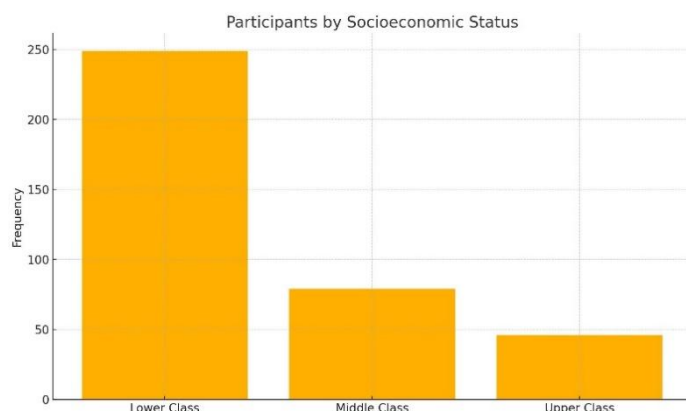


Figure 1 Participants by Socioeconomic Status

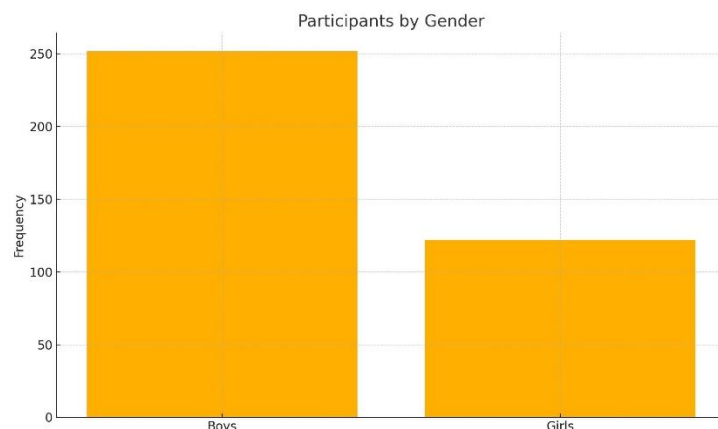


Figure 2 Participants by Gender

DISCUSSION

The present study provides critical insights into the psychological impact of parental emotional abuse on Pakistani teenagers and emphasizes the moderating role of resilience in this association. Despite the wealth of global literature on childhood abuse, emotional abuse—particularly within the cultural context of South Asia—remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining not only the direct relationship between parental emotional abuse and psychological well-being, but also the extent to which resilience may serve as a protective factor. The findings corroborate previous research indicating that emotional abuse significantly undermines psychological well-being and that individuals subjected to such abuse often exhibit reduced emotional adaptability and self-regulation. Emotional abuse was also negatively associated with resilience, suggesting that adolescents who endure parental hostility, neglect, or humiliation are less likely to develop coping strategies essential for navigating developmental challenges (17,18). The observed association between parental emotional abuse and diminished psychological well-being is consistent with earlier studies that reported

long-term psychological consequences of maltreatment, including emotional withdrawal, identity disturbances, and cognitive impairments in self-concept. Internalized distress, poor emotional expression, and difficulties in forming secure attachments have also been linked to persistent emotional abuse during adolescence, a formative period in personality development (19,20). These patterns were clearly reflected in the current findings. Moreover, the study demonstrated that resilience significantly moderated the negative impact of emotional abuse on psychological well-being. Adolescents with higher resilience reported better psychological outcomes even in the presence of emotional maltreatment, underscoring the buffering capacity of resilience. This is in line with existing evidence suggesting that adaptive capacities—such as problem-solving skills, optimism, and emotional flexibility—can mitigate the adverse consequences of psychological maltreatment (21,22).

In the context of Pakistani society, where cultural norms often valorize obedience and discourage emotional expression, emotional abuse can remain obscured and unchallenged. The study contributes to an emerging understanding that resilience in such sociocultural environments may not emerge organically but needs to be actively cultivated through structured interventions. Culturally sensitive approaches that foster emotional awareness and support can play a decisive role in safeguarding mental health in abuse-prone environments. Resilience, in this context, functions not merely as an individual trait but as a dynamic process shaped by familial, educational, and societal influences. One of the strengths of this study lies in its focused exploration of resilience as a moderating variable within a culturally relevant population, using validated instruments with strong psychometric properties. The inclusion of both male and female participants and the investigation of age and gender-based subgroup differences also enhanced the comprehensiveness of the analysis. A significant gender difference was noted in psychological well-being, with boys reporting higher scores than girls, which may be attributed to gendered differences in social expectations, emotional expressiveness, or coping mechanisms.

However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design restricted the ability to draw causal inferences, as associations were measured at a single point in time. Reliance on self-reported data could have introduced recall and social desirability biases, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic. Furthermore, the study excluded adolescents unwilling to disclose experiences of abuse, potentially limiting generalizability by omitting those most at risk. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs that can capture the evolving influence of emotional abuse and resilience over time. Qualitative approaches could also offer deeper, contextualized understanding of adolescents' lived experiences, thereby enriching the interpretation of quantitative findings (23). The study's implications extend beyond academia and offer practical value for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers. Interventions that focus on enhancing resilience in adolescents—such as school-based psychoeducational programs, peer support initiatives, and accessible counseling services—may serve as crucial countermeasures to emotional abuse. Parent-focused training in non-violent communication and emotional responsiveness can help reduce the prevalence of abuse at its source. Additionally, integrating emotional well-being programs into school curricula could normalize emotional literacy and empower students to seek help when needed. Policy-level interventions are equally critical. There is a need to develop and implement legal protections that explicitly recognize and address emotional abuse as a legitimate threat to adolescent mental health. Community engagement, mental health awareness campaigns, and support systems in educational institutions can together help shift the cultural narrative that often conceals emotional maltreatment. In sum, by establishing the moderating role of resilience, the study highlights a pivotal intervention point that can be strategically leveraged to safeguard the psychological well-being of teenagers affected by emotional abuse.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that parental emotional abuse has a detrimental impact on the psychological well-being of teenagers, and that resilience plays a significant moderating role in buffering this negative effect. The findings underscore the urgent need to recognize emotional abuse as a serious threat to adolescent mental health, particularly in cultural contexts where it is often overlooked or normalized. By highlighting the protective role of resilience, the study offers meaningful insights for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers aiming to support vulnerable youth. Promoting emotional awareness, fostering resilience, and encouraging healthy parenting practices are critical steps toward building a safer and more nurturing environment for adolescents in Pakistan.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Hira Khawar*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Samar Tariq	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Hurmat Zahra	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Daud Afzal	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Unzila Haider Shirazi	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Sana Afzal	Substantial Contribution to study design and Data Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Amna Hafeez	Contributed to study concept and Data collection Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Asim Ashfaq	Writing - Review & Editing, Assistance with Data Curation

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