Stereotypical Perceptions, Self-Silencing, Psychological Distress, and Emotional Regulation among Unmarried Women in Pakistan

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Abstract

In Pakistan, marriage is a fundamental social institution crucial for a woman's perceived security and success. Societal stigmatization of unmarried women significantly contributes to their psychological distress, negatively affecting their social, educational, and professional lives. This study utilized a quantitative method based on cross-sectional survey research. Data were collected from 250 unmarried women aged 30 and above, using a purposive sampling technique with self-report questionnaires including the Negative Stereotyping of Single Person Scale, Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, Self-Silencing Scale, and Emotion Regulation Questionnaire. Self-report questionnaires were used alongside a demographic sheet detailing characteristics such as age, education, family structure, birth order, and number of siblings. The findings revealed significant positive correlations between negative stereotypical perceptions of psychological distress, self-silencing, and emotional regulation. Psychological distress showed a significant positive correlation with self-silencing but a non-significant correlation with emotional regulation. Self-silencing exhibited a significant negative correlation with emotional regulation. The study reveals a strong link between negative stereotypes and psychological distress in unmarried women, who often experience inferiority complexes, diminished moral confidence, and psychological suffering due to societal discrimination. Self-silencing is a crucial mediator, exacerbating these issues. However, emotional regulation can moderate these effects, promoting better mental health among unmarried women.

Keywords: Self-silencing, Negative Stereotypical Perceptions, Psychological Distress, Emotional Regulation

Introduction

Marriage is a profound social, moral, and religious institution that unites two individuals. Due to recent societal changes, a large number of women either have a lack of interest in marriage or need to meet the criteria set by various socio-cultural standards and expectations (Rehman & Arooj, 2023). In Asia, the age at which individuals marry is progressively increasing, with notable delays documented in some societies (Yeung & Jones, 2023). In Pakistan, data reveal a gradual increase in the median age at first marriage for women, rising from 19.1 years in 2006–07 to 19.5 years in 2012–13. Furthermore, the proportion of never-married women declines with advancing age: 7.2 per cent of women aged 30-34, 3.0 per cent of women aged 35-39, 2.1 per cent of women aged 40-44, and 1.3 per cent of women aged 45-49 remain unmarried (Sultan et al., 2020).

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In Pakistani society, marriage is often seen as the cornerstone of a woman's future security and success, significantly impacting her physical, mental, and economic well-being. However, unmarried women continue to face stigmatization and are perceived as failures, which severely limits their talents and capacities (Ghazal et al., 2022). This stigma contributes to psychological distress, affecting their social, educational, and professional performance (Shahrak et al., 2021).

Single women in Pakistan experience greater stereotyping and social rejection compared to their counterparts in other regions, leading to unimaginable stress and pressure during their singlehood. This social rejection often results in internalized negative self-perceptions and increased stress (Ammara & Jameel, 2022). Additionally, social factors and self-silencing, where women repress their thoughts and feelings to maintain relationships, exacerbate these issues, leading to lowered self-esteem and depression (Emran et al., 2020). Despite perceptions of being more adaptive and emotionally controlled, single women struggle with emotional regulation due to societal pressures, facing criticism that undermines their self-esteem and capabilities (Khan et al., 2020).

Unmarried women are often ostracized for defying cultural standards and practices (Sultana et al., 2021). They may unconsciously internalize singlism, developing negative self-perceptions and attitudes toward other single women (Hancock, 2017). The concept of self-silencing, introduced in a model of female depression, highlights how women repress specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviours to maintain stable interpersonal connections, which lowers self-esteem and leads to depression (Jack & Dill, 1992). Unmarried women with depressive illnesses often exhibit predictable patterns of interpersonal dynamics, meeting socially imposed feminine obligations such as maintenance, atonement, and submissiveness. This usually results in the suppression of specific thoughts, ideas, and behaviours (Sultana et al., 2020). Such self-silencing significantly harms women's mental health (Maji & Dixit, 2018). Recognizing the relevance of social and cultural dynamics, the 'Silence the Self' theory enhances our understanding of these problems, emphasizing the significance of relationships and their impact on a woman's mental health (Emran et al., 2020).

Women are frequently perceived as more adaptive, self-aware, and capable of controlling their emotions than men (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014). However, single women's liberty is often jeopardized amid the pressures of everyday life. They frequently struggle to cope with their circumstances and respond to situational demands, leading to a lack of emotional control and subsequent psychopathologies (Joorman & Stanton, 2016). Societal critique and stigma further undermine their self-esteem and talents, making it difficult for them to envision life beyond societal expectations (Khan et al., 2020).

From the perspective of Social Cognition Theory, the experiences of unmarried women in Pakistan are shaped by the interplay of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. Societal stereotypes and norms significantly influence the social environment, affecting how unmarried women perceive themselves and are perceived by others. These societal expectations lead to self-silencing behaviours, where women suppress their thoughts and emotions to conform to social norms, resulting in increased psychological distress. Social Cognition Theory posits that individuals internalize these stereotypes through observation and social interactions, which subsequently affect their cognitive and emotional regulation strategies. As a result, unmarried women who face heightened social rejection and negative self-perceptions are more likely to experience lowered self-esteem and depression.

Moreover, societal prejudices and stigmas against unmarried women for not adhering to conventional marital expectations exacerbate their psychological burden. These women are often perceived as flawed individuals, which forces them to navigate life under constant criticism. Over time, many develop patience and outwardly display happiness despite societal pressures.

Much of the existing research focuses on the well-being of unmarried women, their coping mechanisms, and comparisons between single and married couples. However, there needs to be more understanding of how single women internalize or reject societal stigmatization and the specific challenges and stereotypes they face. Therefore, the study was carried out to examine the relationships between stereotypical perceptions, psychological distress, self-silencing, and emotional regulation strategies among unmarried women in Pakistan. Specifically, it aimed to determine the impact of stereotypical perceptions on psychological distress with the moderating role of emotional regulation strategies and the mediating role of self-silencing.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative method based on cross-sectional survey research. Data were collected using a purposive sampling technique with self-report questionnaires, i.e., the Negative Stereotyping of Single Person Scale (Pignotti & Abell, 2009), measuring stereotyping of unmarried individuals; the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2003), measuring psychological distress; the Self-Silencing Scale (Jack, 1991), measuring suppressed feelings; and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003), measuring cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression and a demographic sheet capturing characteristics such as age, qualification, family structure, birth order, number of siblings, and number of unmarried siblings. The sample comprised 250 unmarried women aged 30 years and above, with an inclusion criterion of women aged 30 to 45 years with 14 to 18 years of education, while divorced, separated, adopted, and engaged women, as well as those with mental illnesses and physical disabilities, were excluded. The participants' ages ranged from 33 to 45 years (M = 36.50, SD = 11.25). Of the participants, 44% had completed 16 years of education, and 56% had completed 18 years. Employment data showed that 46% of participants worked in the private sector or were self-employed, while 54% were employed in the government sector. Regarding parental status, 32% of participants' parents were alive, 14% had one surviving parent, and 35% had lost both parents. Educational levels of parents revealed that 32% were graduates, 9% were undergraduates, 14% of participants' mothers were graduates, and 9% of fathers were undergraduates, with 24% of fathers being graduates and 12% of mothers' undergraduates. Sibling data indicated that 26% of participants had one unmarried sibling, 43% had two, 19% had three, and 12% had four unmarried siblings, with 37% of these siblings being female, 29% male, and 34% of both genders. Participants were asked about the influence of the caste system on their marital status, with 34% strongly agreeing, 21% agreeing, 28% being neutral, 6% disagreeing, and 11% strongly disagreeing. Additionally, 48% expressed a willingness to marry, 24% were unsure, and 28% disagreed. Data were collected from various government and private offices and institutes in Lahore, with participants generally cooperative and supportive.

Results

Table 1: **Pearson Correlation among Study Variables (N=250)**

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Negative Stereotypical Perception	--	.18**	.25**	.24*
2. Psychological Distress		--	.13*	-.12
3. Self-Silencing			--	-.40**
4. Emotional Regulation				--

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

The Pearson correlation among study variables shows that negative stereotypical perceptions have a significant positive correlation with psychological distress ($r = .18^{**}$, $p < .01$), self-silencing ($r = .25^{**}$, $p < .01$) and emotional regulation ($r = .24^{*}$, $p < .01$). Psychological distress has significant positive correlation with the self-silencing ($r = .13^{**}$, $p < .01$) and non-significant correlation with emotional regulation ($r = -.12$, $p < .01$). The self-silencing has significant negative correlation with emotional regulation ($r = -.40^{**}$, $p < .01$).

Table 2: Model Fit Indices of Final Modified Model

Model	X^2				RMSEA	AIC	BIC
	Value	df	p	Value	95% CI		
Saturated model	17.17	1	>.05	.32	[.68, .74]	20.00	55.21

Note: RMSEA = Root mean square error of approximation, CI = Confidence interval, AIC = Alkaile information criterion, BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

The above table shows exemplary fit indices of the final modified model of study. Model fit indices were satisfactory (NFI, CFI > .90). Results show that the indirect effect of negative stereotypical perception on self-silencing was significant ($\beta = 3.67$, $p < .001$), the indirect effect of self-silencing on psychological distress was also significant ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$). The direct effect of negative stereotypical perception on emotional distress was significant ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$). This shows that self-silencing significantly partially mediated the relationship between negative stereotypical perception and emotional distress. The moderating effect of emotion regulation between negative stereotypical perception and emotional distress was also significant ($\beta = -.73$, $p < .001$). Emotion regulation significantly negatively moderated the relationship between negative stereotypical perception and emotional distress.

Figure 1: The Final Modified Model of the Current Study
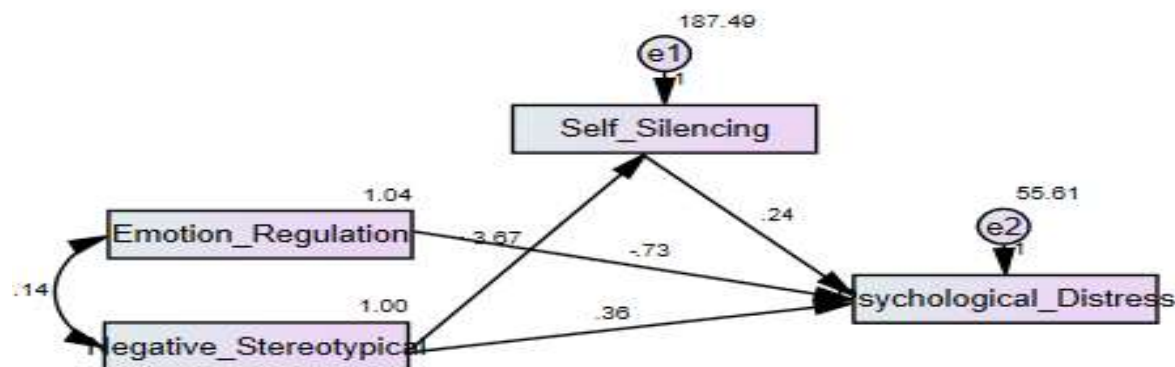
Results show that the indirect effect of negative stereotypical perception on self-silencing was significant as well as the indirect effect of self-silencing on psychological distress. The direct effect of negative stereotypical perceptions on psychological distress was significant. This shows that self-silencing significantly partially mediated the relationship between negative stereotypical perception and psychological distress. The moderating effect of emotion regulation between negative stereotypical perception and psychological distress was also significant which shows that emotion regulation significantly negatively moderated the relationship between negative stereotypical perception and psychological distress.

Figure 2: Moderation of Emotion Regulation between Stereotypical Perceptions and Psychological distress (N= 250)
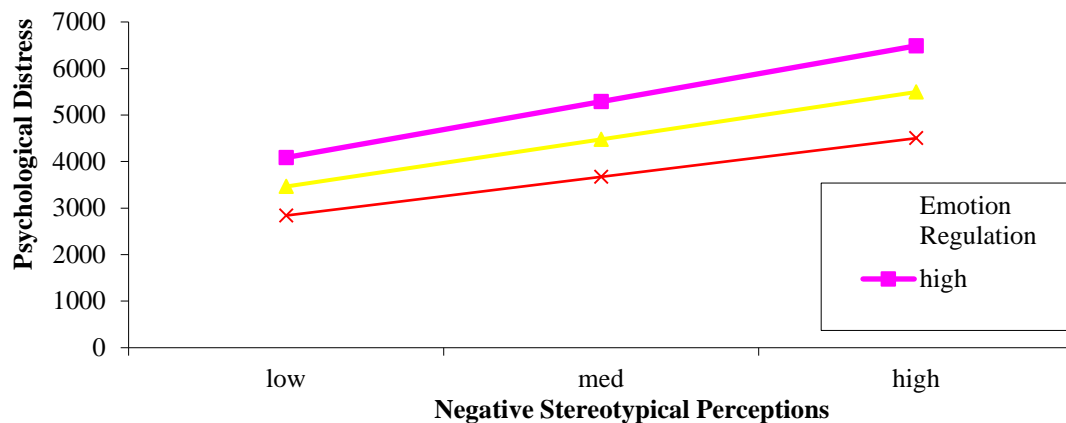
The figure shows that emotional regulation significantly moderated between negative stereotypical perceptions and psychological distress. It shows that at a higher level of emotional regulation, the impact of stereotypical perception decreases, which decreases the level of psychological distress.

Discussion

The findings of the present study revealed that self-silencing was positively associated with a higher level of psychological distress and emotional regulation in unmarried women. Further, this study's results illustrated that self-silencing was negatively related to emotional distress. The outcomes of this study are consistent with earlier research findings. Previous studies have indicated that self-silencing is one of the most critical factors in enhancing mental health problems, such as psychological distress in unmarried women (Maroufizadeh et al., 2018). Interestingly, it was observed that in Pakistan culture, women engage in interpersonal behaviours like self-silencing or suppressing their thoughts and feelings when they find themselves in situations that they can't control to maintain their social position or relationship. So, they find a way to keep their position in society but at the cost of increased risk for depression and other psychological problems (Naeem et al., 2021). The findings of the present study supported our first and second objectives and hypotheses. Moreover, the findings described that self-silencing partially mediated the relationship between negative stereotypical perceptions and psychological distress in unmarried women. This study's findings also validated our second goal.

Furthermore, women who are less expressive and preserve an outer locus of control will typically read their character from the eyes of others. Their primary goal is to make people happy, regardless of whether it is on the record of their pleasure (Viertiö et al., 2021). The continual effort to extend the image of a "great lady" contributes to a pattern of pressure, penance, and award. Regardless of whether the support is little, females will need to get more significant support by performing a more considerable penance. They not only lose touch with their true selves along the process, but they also become more susceptible to anxiety and burdensome side effects (Abbas et al., 2019).

Furthermore, it was also hypothesized that self-silencing will be negatively related to psychological distress and emotion regulation among unmarried women. Our research findings revealed that self-silencing has a significant negative association with psychological distress and emotion regulation. Our findings validated and expanded on Pierre Janet's separation

theory (Van der Hart & Horst, 1989) and self-quieting theory (Jack & Dill, 1992). According to the separation theory, negative sentiments like significant anxiety and rage emerge when an individual is unable to perform all-around adjusted tasks. Outrageous feelings disintegrate the brain, impairing a person's capacity to mix and coordinate incoming info and producing separations in sensitive persons. (Öztürk et al., 2021). Women who are involved in self-silencing behaviour also internalize their feelings of anger and aggression and don't express them. When they believe their relationship is in jeopardy, they adopt faux obedience to mask their rage. As a result, they are more vulnerable to psychological problems like dissociation (Ijaz et al., 2022). So, our hypothesis that self-silencing is positively related to psychological distress was supported in unmarried women.

Emotions are present in our daily lives, particularly in situations that give a diverse range of enjoyable or unpleasant events. Administration of these sensations is often a deliberate and planned action to fit with ordinary functioning and cultural rules (Katana et al., 2019). It was also hypothesized that emotion regulation would likely moderate the relationship between negative stereotypical perceptions and psychological distress among unmarried women. The findings of the study revealed that emotion regulation has a negative correlation with self-silencing and also moderated the relationship between negative stereotypical perceptions and psychological distress. According to the broad and build theory, pleasant emotion guidance may extend a person's thought-activity collection, resulting in long-haul individual assets, which may boost social adaptability and success (van Kleef & Côté, 2022).

Furthermore, these findings confirm that persons who are unable to control their emotions successfully have negative thoughts and are in a bad mood most of the time. As a result, an unmarried woman's failure to have an emotion regulation strategy to direct unpleasant feelings and their adverse impact might put her in mental discomfort (Shahrak et al., 2021). So, it is necessary to identify such patterns or environmental factors for designing targeted changes or interventions that can lower the likelihood of psychological distress and psychological suffering among these women.

The findings of the study also revealed a non-significant relationship between emotional regulation and psychological distress. In Pakistani society, remaining unmarried and attaining a suitable age leads to a range of cultural biases and negative stereotypes. The negative cultural stigma, stereotypes, and misconceptions connected with unmarried women hamper their lives (Mehdi, 2023). The outcomes of this study support that unmarried woman face negative stereotypical perceptions as a result of their unmarried status. They were outraged when others made basic statements about them and dismissed them as inept humans incapable of establishing relationships. Because they are unmarried, many people would identify them as sad and feel sorry for them. They and their families are admonished from time to time for being too imprecise, demanding, and strict in their partner selection. This gloomy declaration about their finite singlehood depresses and irritates them and makes them hopeless about their future (Sultana et al., 2021).

From the perspective of social cognition theory, the findings of this study highlight the significant obstacles unmarried women face within their families and broader society, irrespective of social conditions, marriage customs, or personal circumstances. In a male-centric culture that highly values the timely marriage of young women, extended singlehood leads to various psychosocial issues, including depression, shame, criticism, emotional instability, feelings of inadequacy, and disappointment in not fulfilling societal expectations of being a "chosen lady." The internalization of societal stereotypes and norms shapes these outcomes. The constant exposure to and acceptance of these societal norms results in internalized negative self-perceptions and heightened psychological distress among unmarried women.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study underscore the significant obstacles unmarried women face within their families and broader society, irrespective of social conditions, marriage customs, or personal circumstances. In a male-centric culture that prioritizes the timely marriage of young women, extended singlehood can lead to a range of psycho-social issues. These issues include depression, feelings of shame, self-criticism, emotional instability, and a pervasive sense of inadequacy. The societal expectation for women to marry early and the pressure to embody the ideal of a "chosen lady" exacerbate these challenges, leading to profound feelings of disappointment and failure when these expectations are not met.

Unmarried women often grapple with internalized stigma and negative self-perceptions, further contributing to their psychological distress. The societal narrative that equates a woman's worth with her marital status places undue stress on unmarried women, compelling them to conform to restrictive norms that hinder their personal and professional development. The pressure to marry not only affects their mental health but also impacts their social and educational performance, limiting their potential and capacity to succeed in various domains of life. Moreover, the study highlights the role of self-silencing and emotional regulation in exacerbating or alleviating these issues. Unmarried women may suppress their thoughts, feelings, and needs to maintain social harmony and avoid criticism, leading to lowered self-esteem and increased psychological distress. Emotional regulation strategies can either mitigate or worsen these effects, depending on how effectively they are employed. By shedding light on these dynamics, the study calls for a more inclusive and supportive approach to addressing the challenges faced by unmarried women in Pakistan. It emphasizes the need for societal change that values women beyond their marital status and promotes mental health support to help them navigate the complexities of singlehood in a culture that heavily stigmatizes it.

Limitations & Suggestions

The current research, while comprehensive in its approach, has limitations. Firstly, the sample comprised 250 unmarried women aged 30 to 45 years with 14 to 18 years of education, which may only partially represent the broader demographic of unmarried women in Pakistan. This inclusion criterion may exclude the experiences of younger or older women, as well as those with varying educational backgrounds. Future research should include a more diverse age range and educational spectrum to capture a more comprehensive array of experiences and challenges faced by unmarried women.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability and recall bias. Participants might under-report or over-report their experiences and feelings due to societal pressures or personal perceptions. Employing mixed methods, including qualitative approaches like in-depth interviews or focus groups, could provide a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of unmarried women.

Moreover, the study focuses on unmarried women in Pakistan, which limits the findings to this cultural context. Comparative studies involving unmarried women from different cultural backgrounds could highlight universal challenges and culturally specific issues, providing a more global perspective on the matter. Lastly, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for the examination of changes over time. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial in understanding how the psychological and social dynamics of unmarried women evolve, particularly as they age or experience changes in their circumstances. Additionally, this study can help psychologists understand how to support single women in managing stress and improving their adaptability skills. Mindfulness campaigns targeting women over 30 can be established through media, lectures, and educational institutions to address their unique challenges in finding suitable partners.

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