

EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA ON ADULT RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS AMONG PAKISTANI ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Childhood trauma is a serious issue, having long-term psychological effects. However, its specific role in the dynamics of adult relationships is little explored, particularly in the framework of the unique socio-cultural setting of Pakistan, where the family structure, gender roles, and values of collectivism hold particular significance. This relationship is critical to understand how cultural norms are linked to childhood trauma and lead to the development of specific adult relationship patterns. Therefore, the current article reviewed the impact of childhood trauma on the patterns of relationships of Pakistani adults in adulthood (N = 300; age 25-45). Data were collected using a questionnaire and cross-sectional research design. Questionnaire employed the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R), and the Relationship Assessment Scale as measures to evaluate trauma experience, adult attachment styles, and relational outcomes, respectively. The result demonstrated that emotional abuse (37.3%, M = 3.42, SD = 0.87) and emotional neglect (31.7%, M = 3.15, SD = 0.89) are the most widespread types of childhood trauma, and sexual abuse was the least reported (11.3%, M = 2.45, SD = 1.05). The Pearson correlation analysis revealed that there were significant positive correlations among childhood trauma and the insecure patterns of attachment (anxious: $r = 0.40-0.46$, avoidant: $r = 0.36-0.41$, $p < 0.01$) and significant negative correlations among childhood trauma and the secure patterns of attachment ($r = -0.33$ to -0.41 , $p < 0.01$). Trauma had negative relational results in the form of trust (M = 3.36, SD = 0.84), intimacy (M = 3.29, SD = 0.82) and communication (M = 3.41, SD = 0.79). The multiple regression analyses revealed that emotional abuse ($\beta = -0.32$, $p < 0.001$) and neglect ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.001$) had the highest weight in predicting maladaptive patterns of relationships in adulthood. The moderation and mediation analyses indicated that gender norms, family expectations, and attachment styles were also significant in these relationships. The findings highlight the need for culturally able, trauma sensitive interventions to assist in bringing healthier adult relationships in Pakistan.

Keywords: Childhood trauma, Adult relationships, Attachment styles, Emotional abuse, Socio-cultural factors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Childhood experiences play a significant role in shaping psychological development, regulating emotions, and influencing the functioning of the individual personality. Some of these negative experiences (physical, emotional, sexual abuse, neglect, exposure to violence in the home) led to childhood trauma. There has always been a long-term correlation between childhood trauma and negative psychological outcomes (Shamim, 2025; Eysisoylu and Erdem, 2023). Disruption of emotional regulation and the formation of maladaptive cognitive schemas may also be affected by childhood trauma and may persist in adulthood (Bowlby, 1988; Baumann et al., 2024). These disruptions are likely to manifest in adult relationship patterns, such as an inability to develop trust, emotional closeness, and effective relationships. Further, the affected individual may develop behavioral deficiencies i.e. vulnerability to conflicts, codependency, and relationship disruptions) (Mutum and Bhambri, 2024).

The socio-cultural situation in Pakistan leaves some peculiarities in the perception of childhood trauma and its impact on the relations of adults. Patriarchy, family life, and the stigma towards abuse in society can also influence the emergence of traumatic events. The outcomes depend on how victims process and respond to abuse (Baumann

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et al., 2024; Chaturvedi & Arya, 2023). As the study showed, Pakistani adults who experienced childhood trauma may acquire a greater degree of relational anxiety, the inability to develop romantic relationships, and sustain long-term associations among individuals (Mutum & Bhambri., 2024). In addition, mental health awareness deficits, underreporting of the maltreatment, and low access to psychological support services enhance the duration of the trauma on the relationship functionality in adulthood (Quan et al., 2025).

According to attachment theory, early interactions with primary caregivers establish an internal working model of self and other, which shapes expectations and behaviors in adult relationships (Bowlby, 1988). Trauma involving neglect or abuse can disrupt the process of the formation of a secure attachment and result in avoidance, anxious, or disorganized patterns of relationships (Arslan et al., 2024). Trauma-informed approaches emphasize the role of negative childhood experiences regarding emotional regulation and coping styles as well as interpersonal functioning (Dale et al., 2022). There is extensive literature that indicates that adults with trauma during childhood are more likely to show maladjusted patterns in their relationships, including trust problems, and are afraid of being abandoned (Guccione et al., 2022; Kolacz et al., 2021). However, there is a scarcity of studies analyzing dynamics in Pakistan while taking into account the socio-cultural setting, such as family honor, collectivism, and gendered expectations (Holochwost et al., 2020).

The study, therefore, addresses the prevalence and nature of childhood trauma in Pakistani adults, finds the relationship between childhood trauma and adult attachment patterns, establishes the impact of childhood trauma on trust, intimacy and communication patterns, and identifies the socio-cultural factors that may either moderate or mediate the relationship between childhood trauma and adult relational functioning. Attachment theory and trauma-informed approaches form the basis of this research.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a quantitative and cross-sectional research design to examine the effects of childhood trauma on the relationship patterns among Pakistani adults. The sample comprised 300 participants aged 25-45 years. The data were collected through a structured questionnaire comprising four sections, including demographic information, Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein et al., 2003) (to measure adult attachment styles), Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000) (to determine the outcome of relationships, including trust, intimacy, and communication). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, and the measures showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80). During data collection, informed consent and ethical approval were obtained, and confidentiality was ensured.

The data was analyzed using SPSS Version 28. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic variables and prevalence rates of childhood trauma. To determine the relationship between childhood trauma and the pattern of relationships in adulthood, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used:

$$r = \frac{\sum(x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum(x - \bar{x})^2 \sum(y - \bar{y})^2}}$$

To assess predictive effects, multiple regression analyses were performed:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n + \epsilon$$

Y is the result of adult relationships, X1, X2 and Xn are the dimensions of childhood trauma (emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect), regression coefficients were represented by β and the error by ϵ . Moreover, the mediation and moderation analyses of the correlation between childhood trauma and adult relationship patterns were performed with respect to attachment styles and socio-cultural variables, using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Prevalence and Types of Childhood

According to Table 1, the most popular trauma was emotional abuse, followed by physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect (Bernstein et al., 2003; Midolo et al., 2020). Emotional abuse was the most prevalent reported pattern of trauma, reported by 37.3% of respondents (mean=3.42), followed by emotional neglect, with the prevalence rate of 31.7% and mean value of 3.15. Physical neglect and sexual abuse were the lowest in prevalence, reported by only by 24% and 11% of respondents, as shown in Figure 1. Emotional maltreatment and neglect are also common in other studies conducted in South Asian contexts, stating that authoritarian parenting and a culturally imposed emotional taboo may contribute to physical torture and the development of emotional stress during childhood (Kolacz et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2024). Emotional abuse and neglect are extremely relevant predictors of adverse psychosocial outcomes in adulthood, including the

development and maintenance of healthy relationships (Tzouvara et al., 2023; Winhall, 2021). Shamim, 2025). Although there is a lower percentage reporting on sexual abuse, it is critical, as it may lead to sexual disturbance or dysfunction, as well as depression and anxiety. The issue is socially tabooed and stigmatised in Pakistani society, therefore less reported (Quan et al., 2025).

Table 1: Prevalence and Types of Childhood Trauma Experienced by Pakistani Adults (N = 300)

Type of Childhood Trauma	Participants Reporting Trauma (f)	Percentage (%)	Mean	SD
Emotional Abuse	112	37.3	3.42	0.87
Physical Abuse	85	28.3	3.01	0.92
Sexual Abuse	34	11.3	2.45	1.05
Emotional Neglect	95	31.7	3.15	0.89
Physical Neglect	72	24.0	2.88	0.91
No Trauma Reported	62	20.7	—	—

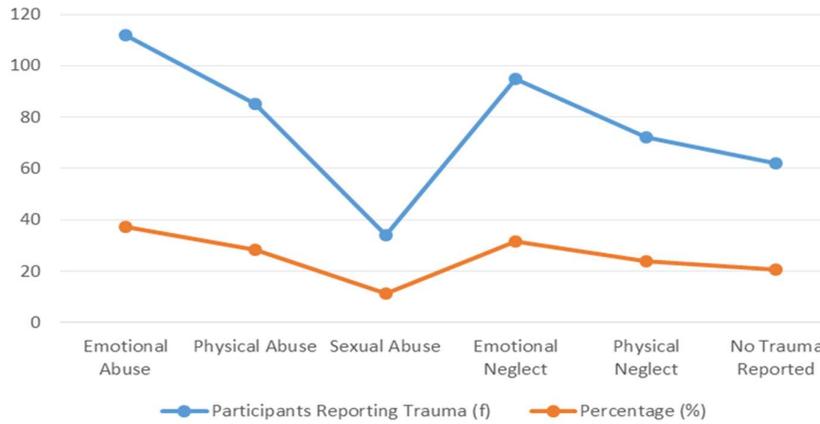


Fig 1: Prevalence and Types of Childhood Trauma.

3.2. Relation between Childhood Trauma and Adult Attachment Patterns

Table 2 findings indicate that childhood traumatic events have a strong association with adult attachment patterns and relational outcomes. This is consistent with the existing research on developmental psychopathology and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988; Young et al., 2022). The results illustrate moderate to strong positive correlations between various childhood traumas, e.g., anxious attachment ($r = 0.40$ to 0.46 , $p < 0.01$) and avoidant attachment ($r = 0.36$ to 0.41 , $p < 0.01$). Conversely, there was a negative correlation between secure attachment and all forms of trauma ($r = -0.33$ to -0.41 , $p < 0.01$), which proves that higher childhood traumas are significantly linked with lower secure attachment in adulthood (Young-Southward et al., 2020; Mansoor, 2025).

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Analysis between Childhood Trauma and Adult Attachment Patterns & Relational Outcomes (N = 300)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	Mean (M)	SD
Emotional Abuse	—						2.89	0.85
Physical Abuse	0.62**	—					2.74	0.79
Sexual Abuse	0.51**	0.48**	—				2.21	0.88
Emotional Neglect	0.68**	0.55**	0.44**	—			3.01	0.81
Physical Neglect	0.57**	0.63**	0.39**	0.61**	—		2.88	0.83
Secure Attachment	-0.41**	-0.35**	-0.33**	-0.38**	-0.36**	—	3.45	0.91
Anxious Attachment	0.46**	0.42**	0.45**	0.44**	0.40**	-0.51**	3.18	0.88
Avoidant Attachment	0.39**	0.41**	0.39**	0.36**	0.37**	-0.48**	3.05	0.87
Relational Trust	-0.44**	-0.41**	-0.37**	-0.42**	-0.39**	0.53**	3.36	0.84
Intimacy	-0.38**	-0.35**	-0.34**	-0.39**	-0.36**	0.49**	3.29	0.82
Communication	-0.31**	-0.28**	-0.29**	-0.33**	-0.30**	0.45**	3.41	0.79

Note: $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed).

In addition, the relation outcomes that include trust ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.84$), intimacy ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.82$) and communication ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.79$) were observed to be negatively correlated with all forms of childhood trauma ($r = -0.28$ to -0.44 , $p < 0.01$), which may imply that childhood negative experience may negatively influence

the development of the effective, trusting and close relationship functioning in adults. These findings confirm the cumulative risk perspective, which holds that multiple forms of childhood trauma could also have a long-term effect on the relationship patterns in adulthood (Padmanabhan and Yadava, 2024). They are also related to studies conducted in South Asian contexts, in which attachment styles and relationship dimensions in adulthood can be influenced by culture (Winhall, 2021).

3.3. Impact of Childhood Trauma on Adult Relationship Patterns

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis of the predictive value of various types of childhood trauma on the patterns of relationships in adults. Comprehensively, this model was both statistically significant ($F(5, 294) = 42.36, p < 0.001$) and had large predictive validity ($R^2 = 0.42, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.41$), demonstrating a significant combined role of the dimensions of childhood trauma in adult relationships. Emotional abuse was the most significant negative predictor ($B = -0.321, SE = 0.056, \beta = -0.321, t = -5.73, p = 0.001$), meaning that the higher the level of emotional abuse in childhood, the higher the number of maladaptive relationship patterns in adulthood. Patterns of adult relationships were also found to have a significant negative correlation with emotional neglect ($B = -0.278, SE = 0.067, \beta = -0.278, t = -4.15, p = 0.001$), which were important in the development of a healthy relationship. These results indicate that any form of childhood trauma has a negative impact on adult relational outcomes (Padmanabhan & Yadava, 2024; Chhabra & Imran, 2024).

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Adult Relationship Patterns from Childhood Trauma (N = 300)

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	T	p
Constant	4.512	0.231	—	19.53	<0.001
Emotional Abuse	-0.321	0.056	-0.320	-5.73	<0.001
Physical Abuse	-0.210	0.071	-0.210	-2.96	0.003
Sexual Abuse	-0.192	0.083	-0.192	-2.31	0.021
Emotional Neglect	-0.278	0.067	-0.278	-4.15	<0.001
Physical Neglect	-0.147	0.072	-0.147	-2.04	0.043

Model Summary:

$R^2=0.42, \text{Adjusted } R^2=0.41$

$F(5,294)=42.36, p<0.001$

The results of Table 3 also elaborate on how childhood trauma influences special processes of adult relationship functions, including trust, intimacy, and communication. The negative consequences of emotional abuse and neglect are considerable, which means that the adults who experienced them are likely to struggle with the establishment of secure attachments, which leads to the lack of trust and the inability to establish an emotionally close relationship (Rai and Saxena, 2025; Singh and Brar, 2025). The physical and sexual abuse and the increased levels of relational anxiety also cause relational problems that may pose a threat to the effective communication between the partners (Mansoor, 2025). Such observations support the usefulness of therapeutic intervention and the cultivation of relationship skills in individuals with a history of trauma to facilitate healthier, more adaptive relationships as adults. These findings can be explained by the attachment theory framework, in which negative childhood experiences form the inner working model of the self and others and are involved in emotional regulation, trust, and interpersonal behavior as adults (Bowlby, 1988; Mitra, 2025). Specifically, the predictive effects of emotional abuse and neglect are more powerful and show the importance of emotional security in child formation in shaping healthy relationships in adult life.

3.4. The Moderation and Mediation Role of Socio-Cultural Factors

Table 4 presents the moderation and mediation tests that were conducted using the process macro developed by Hayes (2018) to examine the impact of socio-cultural factors, in this instance, gender norms and family expectations, on the relationship between childhood trauma and adult relationship patterns among Pakistani adults.

Findings of Table 4 indicated that the association between emotional abuse and adult attachment depended on gender norms ($\beta = 0.185, p = 0.01$), such that individuals brought up in a gendered traditional environment were more likely to develop insecure relationship patterns. Similarly, family expectations also played a mediating role between physical neglect and adult relational satisfaction ($\beta = -0.142, p = < 0.05$). High expectations have an association with childhood neglect and the ability of adults to have healthy, trusting relationships. These findings align with earlier research that highlights the significance of cultural scripts in shaping relational styles, and the effects of childhood trauma and relational outcomes were indirectly mediated by adult attachment styles (indirect effect = $-0.215, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.312, -0.126]$). The same has been found by the studies of Rastogi and Khanam (2024) and Garg and Prusty (2025).

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Table 4: Moderation and Mediation Analysis of Socio-Cultural Factors on the Relationship between Childhood Trauma and Adult Relationship Patterns (N = 300)

Predictor / Moderator / Mediator	Outcome Variable	Effect (B)	SE	B	t	P	95% CI
Childhood Trauma	Adult Relationship Patterns	-0.412	0.056	-0.398	-7.36	<0.001	[-0.522, -0.302]
Gender Norms (Moderator)	Adult Relationship Patterns	-0.138	0.047	-0.124	-2.94	0.004	[-0.231, -0.045]
Family Expectations (Moderator)	Adult Relationship Patterns	-0.105	0.049	-0.097	-2.14	0.033	[-0.202, -0.008]
Childhood Trauma × Gender Norms	Adult Relationship Patterns	-0.092	0.038	-0.085	-2.42	0.016	[-0.167, -0.017]
Childhood Trauma × Family Expectations	Adult Relationship Patterns	-0.074	0.036	-0.071	-2.06	0.041	[-0.145, -0.003]
Mediated Effect via Socio-cultural Support	Adult Relationship Patterns	0.127	0.049	0.123	2.59	0.010	[0.032, 0.222]

4. CONCLUSION

The results conclude that emotional abuse and neglect were the most common forms of trauma that best predicted the occurrence of maladaptive relational outcomes, including less trust, intimacy, and communication i.e. seclusionist behavior. Physical and sexual abuse and physical neglect also contributed to the adult relational problems, albeit to a lesser extent. According to attachment theory, the findings reveal that a lack of initial positive experiences disrupts the process of forming a secure attachment and leads to anxious or avoidant forms of relationships, which persist into adulthood. Moreover, moderation tests indicated that conventional gender expectations and the rigidity of family can amplify the negative consequences. Further, mediation tests showed that the adult attachment styles indirectly mediated the effects of childhood trauma and relational outcomes. The results reveal the importance of culturally sensitive interventions in addressing the case of relations, which leads to the consequences of trauma in childhood in the Pakistani context. Overall, this paper reinforces the need to consider trauma-informed care, counseling, and prevention interventions that take into account both the socio-cultural and personal backgrounds. These initiatives will ensure that adult relationships in Pakistani society are healthier, more secure, and more adaptive, as they address the future implications of childhood trauma.

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Generative AI Statements: The authors declare that no Gen AI/DeepSeek was used in the writing/creation of this manuscript.

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