The Effects of Honor Culture on Emotional Suppression and Psychological Well-being in Pakistani Youth

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Abstract
Background: In countries like Pakistan, where collectivism exists, honor culture is significant in regulating emotions and one's psychological wellbeing. The need to fulfill cultural obligations pertaining to honor often results in emotional suppression which can be detrimental to mental health, particularly for the youth.
Aim: This research aims to explore the impact of honor culture on emotional suppression and psychological wellbeing of the Pakistani youth with respect to gender differences and coping strategies.
Method: A qualitative research design using the focus group approach was adopted. Twenty-four participants aged 18-25 were sampled purposively from six major cities of Pakistan, Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta, and Multan, using a form of non-probability sampling. Key themes were formulated from the data set using thematic analysis through NVivo software and were related to cultural norms, emotional suppression, and psychological suffering.
Results: Findings showed that, in the case of males, strict adherence to honor culture led to 'greater emotional suppression' because of rigid gender norms. Social and familial norms of reputation greatly inhibited emotional expression which increased stress and psychological suffering. On the other hand, some participants reported religion and peer support as adaptive coping strategies for emotional difficulties. Emotional suppression also differed among urban and rural participants.
Conclusion: The culture of honor significantly impacts emotional regulation and the psychological well-being of Pakistani youth, often exacerbating distress due to the need for conformity. To promote healthier emotional expression and resilience, mental health interventions that are sensitive to the culture are needed.
Keywords: Honor culture, emotional suppression, psychological well-being,

Pakistani youth, gender norms, cultural expectations, qualitative research, focus group discussions.

Introduction

The dynamics of honor culture in Pakistani society influences the practices and interactions of its citizens at an emotional and behavioral level (Masood & Fazal, 2024). The attributes of honor are intertwined with family and social status as well as traditional values. It is a social expectation to protect one's honor and for the sake of family dignity, actions are taken as a collective. In these cultures, people are trained to emotionally cut off from feelings that do not adhere to social norms, hence looking after family or social harmony at the cost of personal feelings (Punjani, 2022). When these expectations are internalized in people, it reduces their ability to express feelings of discomfort, which can have serious long term psychological repercussions (Yaqoob, 2025).

The showing of vulnerability is looked at as a threat in honor-based societies, which further enables emotional suppression, a popular regulatory strategy in collectivist cultures. Individuals, and especially youth, are expected to demonstrate resilience and refrain from expressions of negative emotions such as sadness, frustration, or anxiety (Aksar et al., 2024). Males are expected to portray emotional strength while females are expected to be modest and submissive, which emotionally inhibits both sexes (Kashi, 2024). Though such emotional restriction is culturally maintained as a means of social control, it paradoxically increases psychological suffering (Anwar et al., 2022). Past studies indicate that when people chronically suppress their emotions, they are more responsive to stress, suffer lower emotional well-being, and are at a greater risk for anxiety and depression (Punjani et al., 2022).

The metrics border on baffling as the ramifications of the cultural concept of honor are tremendously alarming in regards to self-suppression of emotions (Yaqoob, 2025). Over-suppressing emotions renders an individual's abilities to cope with circumstances ineffective. When people constantly suppress their emotional responses, they may have problems with self-regulation which may impact their relationships with others and with themselves (Ali & Shaffie, 2021). This especially alarming in young people since adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable in terms of identity and emotion development (Batool et al., 2024). Striving to meet cultural needs may place a burden that makes individuals emotionally wounded and disconnected from themselves as their emotions clash with societal norms that control them (Masood & Fazal, 2024).

The well-being of Pakistani youth is understood within the lens of their culture, which is defined with regard to the constraining boundaries on emotional expression, and how emotions can be dealt with (Punjani, 2022). While there may be immediate social benefits from emotion suppression, over time, self-psychological emotions that cause tension, less self-regard, and low happiness will increase (Aksar et al., 2024). Litrature have shown that emotion suppression leads to a decrease in psychological coping, making it harder for people to deal with stress and manage their emotions. In addition, the combination of stigma associated with mental illness in honor based cultures and youth's avoidance of professional help for psychological problems results in emotional problems remaining untreated and mental health deteriorating (Greenspan et al., 2023).

The convergence of psychological wellbeing with honor culture shows the

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importance of considering youth mental health issues in Pakistan (Kashi, 2024). The need to protect one's honor often leads to the use of coping strategies that do not involve any action, thereby hindering any form of discussion about the emotional difficulty faced (Khan & Siddiqui 2021; Batool et al., 2024). This, in turn, creates a vicious culture of silence whereby, for fear of disgrace, people do not seek help for issues they are grappling with even when assistance is available (Ali & Shaffie, 2021). Thus, most young people dealing with psychological problems lack adequate social and professional help which makes them more vulnerable to emotional burnout and mental health problems (Anwar et al., 2022). The problem is further compounded by the absence of culturally appropriate mental health interventions, as traditional forms of therapy will often clash with the norms and values of people socialized in such honor-shame based cultures (Punjani et al., 2022; Nisar, 2024).

The link between honor culture, emotional suppression, and psychological well-being is critical in formulating culturally appropriate mental health interventions for the Pakistani youth (Tehreem et al., 2024; Javaid et al., 2025). This understanding helps in creating mechanisms that promote coping strategies which harmoniously blend cultural expectations and psychological resilience. Promoting emotional expression in the form of serious conversations about mental health and altering the perception of mental health support can be critical in expanding the boundaries of mental health problems to build constructive outcomes (Greenspan et al., 2023). Working on these aspects of culture in psychological practice bridges the gap between feelings, emotional wellness, and cultural expectations while empowering the youth to deal with their emotions more competently (Batool et al., 2023; Masood & Fazal, 2024).

Honor culture places significant importance on reputation or persona such that it decides how a person will regulate their emotions (Aksar et al., 2023; Amjad et al., 2023; Aksar et al., 2024). Therefore, in Pakistan, the youth is suffering psychologically and still no proper attention is given to their condition. Unfortunately, in the name of family and societal honor, emotional suppression is widely expected (Punjani et al., 2022; Hamdi et al., 2023). As a result, youth69 who learn to suppress emotions suffer from increased stress, anxiety, and depression which diminishes psychological and emotional wellbeing (Kashi, 2024). What makes matters worse is that fostered cultural norms of honor impede conversations on emotional turmoil and mental help seeking, which further serves to cement the need to provide psychological assistance to the youth. This research aims to fill the gap in the literature on the effects of emotional suppression and the well-being of Pakistani youth in the context of honor culture (Jamal et al., 2022; Yaqoob, 2025).

Significance of the Study
This study is important in bringing to light the psychological issues that young people in Pakistan face in an honor based society (Punjani, 2022). The study explores the association between an honor culture, emotions and mental health dysfunctional outcomes adding to the existing literature on the consequences of cultural norms with regards to emotion regulation and mental health. These conclusions will be important for mental health practitioners, teachers, and policy makers in crafting appropriate health policies that are not only effective but also respect the culture of the people. Furthermore, the study seeks to

mitigate the impact of emotional suppression by stimulating discussions surrounding mental health issues in a collectivist society that overly values honor.

Aim of the Research

The chief goal of this research stems from the need to understand the impact of honor culture on emotional suppression and its consequences on the Pakistani youth. In particular, the research focuses on how the honor industrial complex anticipates and regulates emotions, and if such regulations lead to psychological problems in anxiety, depression, and emotional burnouts. The study endeavors to understand determinants of emotional suppression in honor based societies in order to inform break through in developing appropriate sociocultural mental health interventions. In doing so, the study seeks to promote a better state of psychological health where the culture is an enabler rather than a barrier.

Methodology

The study implemented a qualitative procedure utilizing a focus group technique to examine the impact of honor culture on emotional restriction and mental health of Pakistani Youths (Greenspan et al., 2023). It was carried out in six cities of Pakistan: Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta, and Multan, so that all the regions with varying cultural norms related to honor could be covered. A purposive non-probability sampling technique was used to capture twenty-four 18 to 25 aged subjects who had lived in cultures that recognized and placed an honorific framework around emotional and social engagements. Each subject had to reside in Pakistan for at least five years to make them culturally immersed, and both male and female were included to look for differences between the genders. Exclusions were made on people with known psychological disorders, those who had been living outside the country for long periods, or those who were disinterested in active group discussions. The study was ethically approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University, and before including the participants, consent was obtained. Consultations with respective community or institutional leaders were made to obtain approvals prior to focus group discussions and the participants were debriefed about the study aims, methods, and informant's choice to participate.

The data collection process utilized a demographic sheet to gather the participants' age, gender, highest level of education achieved, socio-economic class, family configuration, as well as place of residence. Data was collected through a survey including both opened and closed ended questions that aimed to estimate the impact of honor culture on emotions, suppression and overall psychological health. Open-ended questions enabled participants to describe their experiences, views, and other coping techniques while closed-ended questions limited responses for easier analysis. These included the ability to manage one's emotions, the existing norms, social expectations, the person's overall welfare, and including the ways the person copes. Discussions in focus groups aimed to facilitate active and reflective discussions and capture the subtleties of the relationship between culture, emotional suppression, and mental health that honor culture imposed.

Qualitative data were classified and analyzed using NVivo software by organizing it into nodes, codes, themes, and sub-themes. Thematic analysis was used to

organize and interpret the effects of honor culture on emotional regulation by classifying responses from participants, detecting repeating themes, and drawing meaningful conclusions. Confidentiality, voluntary participation, and cultural sensitivity were some of the ethical considerations addressed during the study. Answers given by participants were kept anonymous, and all data submitted was confidential. Participants were also informed that they had the option to withdraw from the study within any stage of the analysis without any consequences. Discussion of results was done while taking the necessary ethical considerations to avoid causing psychological distress, and in situations where this did occur, referrals for discussion and support were provided.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Data

Sr. no	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1	**Gender**		
	Male	12	50%
	Female	12	50%
2	**Age**		
	18-20 years	8	33.33%
	21-23 years	9	37.5%
	24-26 years	7	29.17%
3	**Education Level**		
	Intermediate	6	25%
	Bachelor's	12	50%
	Master's	6	25%
4	**Family Structure**		
	Joint Family	14	58.33%
	Nuclear Family	10	41.67%
5	**Adherence to Honor Culture**		
	Strong	10	41.67%
	Moderate	9	37.5%
	Weak	5	20.83%
6	**Emotional Suppression Tendency**		
	High	11	45.83%
	Moderate	8	33.33%
	Low	5	20.83%
7	**Psychological Well-being**		
	Good	6	25%
	Moderate	10	41.67%
	Poor	8	33.33%

This table summarizes the demographic details of the 24 participants including their gender, age, level of education, family type, and adherence to honor culture, emotional suppression practices, and overall psychological well-being. The results reveal equal distribution of gender and differences in cultural exposure, mental health, and coping strategy utilization.

Table 2: Nodes for Each Interviewee (Uncategorized Data)

Sr. no	Interviewee	Nodes Identified

1	P1	Emotional Suppression, Social Stigma, Psychological Distress, Impact on Mental Health
2	P2	Perceived Social Support, Religious and Cultural Justifications
3	P3	Religious and Cultural Justifications, Emotional Resilience, Family Reputation Concerns
4	P4	Emotional Suppression, Social Stigma, Gender Roles, Psychological Distress, Impact on Mental Health, Academic and Career Pressures
5	P5	Family Expectations, Psychological Distress, Perceived Social Support, Academic and Career Pressures
6	P6	Emotional Suppression, Psychological Distress, Coping Mechanisms
7	P7	Social Stigma, Gender Roles, Coping Mechanisms
8	P8	Family Expectations, Perceived Social Support, Religious and Cultural Justifications, Academic and Career Pressures, Emotional Resilience
9	P9	Family Expectations
10	P10	Emotional Suppression, Gender Roles, Impact on Mental Health
11	P11	Family Expectations, Social Stigma, Psychological Distress, Perceived Social Support, Religious and Cultural Justifications, Impact on Mental Health, Academic and Career Pressures, Family Reputation Concerns
12	P12	Family Expectations, Emotional Resilience, Family Reputation Concerns
13	P13	Gender Roles, Psychological Well-being
14	P14	Psychological Well-being, Emotional Suppression
15	P15	Social Stigma, Coping Mechanisms
16	P16	Perceived Social Support, Coping Mechanisms
17	P17	Gender Roles, Emotional Suppression
18	P18	Psychological Distress, Coping Mechanisms
19	P19	Social Stigma, Family Reputation Concerns
20	P20	Emotional Resilience, Coping Mechanisms
21	P21	Religious and Cultural Justifications, Family Reputation Concerns
22	P22	Family Reputation Concerns, Emotional Suppression
23	P23	Psychological Well-being, Impact on Mental Health
24	P24	Academic and Career Pressures, Emotional Suppression

This table specifies the key themes or"nodes" that emerged for each participant as a product of their respective interviews. The data indicate other dominant themes like emotional suppression, stigma, coping, and collectivistic family expectations, which form the basis for the subsequent coding process.

Table 3: Merging Nodes into Specific Codes and Interviewee Identity (N = 24)

Sr. no	Code Name	Code	Merged Nodes	Total Nodes	Interviewee Identity
1	Emotional Suppression	C1	Cultural Expectations, Emotional Control, Social Pressure	3	P1, P4, P6, P10

2	Family Expectations	C2	Parental Influence, Honor Ideals, Future Security	3	P5, P8, P9, P11, P12
3	Social Stigma	C3	Reputation Concerns, Fear of Judgment, Social Isolation	3	P1, P4, P6, P7, P11
4	Gender Roles	C4	Masculinity Norms, Femininity Expectations, Role Pressures	4	P1, P4, P7, P10
5	Psychological Distress	C5	Anxiety, Depression, Emotional Burden	4	P1, P4, P5, P6
6	Coping Mechanisms	C6	Avoidance, Social Withdrawal, Alternative Outlets	4	P1, P4, P6, P7
7	Perceived Social Support	C7	Family Support, Peer Understanding, Community Assistance	4	P2, P5, P8, P11
8	Religious and Cultural Justifications	C8	Faith-based Coping, Cultural Conformity, Religious Obligation	4	P2, P3, P8, P11
9	Impact on Mental Health	C9	Emotional Struggles, Psychological Outcomes, Behavioral Effects	4	P1, P4, P10, P11
10	Academic and Career Pressures	C10	Study Burden, Career Expectations, Societal Pressure	4	P4, P5, P8, P11
11	Emotional Resilience	C11	Personal Growth, Adaptability, Strength Through Hardship	4	P3, P8, P11, P12
12	Family Reputation Concerns	C12	Honor Preservation, Community Image, Social Scrutiny	4	P3, P11, P12

This table allocates the coding of interview responses into overarching thematic codes by merging related nodes. Patterns such as emotional suppression, psychological distress, and concern over loss of family reputation are highlighted as primary drivers of the participants' experiences.

Table 4: Codes, Nodes, Hierarchy of Word Frequency, Themes, and Sub-Themes

Code	Code Name	Node	Hierarchy of Word Frequency	Theme	Sub-Theme	Explanation
C1	Emotional Suppression	3	"Control," "Fear," "Pressure"	Emotional Regulation	Social Pressure	Many participants suppressed emotions due to fear of judgment.
C2	Family Expectations	3	"Honor," "Obligation," "Burden"	Cultural Influence	Family Control	Family expectations dictated

						emotional expression and life choices.
C3	Social Stigma	3	"Shame," "Criticism," "Judgment"	Honor Culture	Public Perception	Emotional suppression linked to fear of societal judgment.
C4	Gender Roles	4	"Men don't cry," "Modesty," "Submission"	Cultural Norms	Gender-Based Emotional Expression	Males expected to suppress emotions, females discouraged from emotional autonomy.
C5	Psychological Distress	4	"Anxiety," "Depression," "Isolation"	Mental Health	Emotional Struggles	Honor culture contributes to stress and mental health issues.
C6	Coping Mechanisms	4	"Silence," "Religion," "Friends"	Adaptation Strategies	Social Coping	Youth adopted various coping methods, including religious faith and peer support.

This table illustrates the division of identified codes into hierarchically arranged sets based on word frequency, which shows the themes and sub-themes. It shows how factors such as emotional coping, culture, and psychological trauma influence the experiences and reactions of people.

Table 5: Analytical Themes, Sub-Themes, and Descriptive Themes

Analytical Theme	Analytical Sub-Theme	Descriptive Theme
Emotional Suppression	Fear of judgment, societal pressure	Emotional suppression is a coping mechanism but leads to distress.
Cultural Expectations	Family honor, reputation concerns	Youth feel constrained by expectations tied to honor culture.
Gender-Based Emotional Expression	Masculinity norms, femininity roles	Males and females experience suppression differently based on gender roles.
Psychological Well-being	Anxiety, depression, resilience	High suppression leads to poor well-being, but coping strategies vary.
Coping Mechanisms	Religion, friends, silence	Some youth find relief through faith and friendships, while others isolate themselves.

The table integrates the most important themes and provides analytical and descriptive sub-themes which illustrate the effects of emotional suppression, cultural expectations, and coping mechanisms on psychological health. It highlights the manner in which young people manage emotions in relation to societal and parental constraints.

Discussion
This study reveals the great influence that cultures based on honor have on emotional suppression and psychological wellness for Pakistani youth. Gendered data show an even distribution of respondents, but from different strata where loyalty to honor based cultures and emotional inhibition differs. The findings imply that people who are ferried within strict honor based cultures stand a greater risk of emotion suppression due to social obligations and fear of being judged. The joint family system participants have far stronger emotional suppression, where the collective social image is more important than the individual's emotional expression. This is in line with existing research which claims that people from collectivistic cultures tend to suppress their emotions in order to maintain the construct of the family (Shafiq et al., 2024).

The results suggest that social stigma, expectations from family members and gender roles significantly influence emotional inhibition. Participants explained that there were limitations in the way they expressed their emotions because of the concern regarding the family status and the social critique especially in cases where being emotionally weak was viewed negatively. This is consistent with other research that cultures of honor enhance emotion suppression by linking distress or any public displays of it with shame to the family (Bragin et al., 2022). Gender roles work strongly whereby male participants were expected to conform to masculine norms while female participants were expected to have less emotional freedom. These findings are consistent with honor culture's straitjacket approach of having controlled concepts of gender in relationships and emotions (Shah & Shah, 2024).

The connection between emotional suppression and psychological distress has been clear in the information collected so far. Those who experienced high levels of emotional suppression also showed symptoms of anxiety and depression. Psychological distress was -perhaps unsurprisingly – most common in individuals who carried within themselves strong family expectations and broader societal pressures. This suggests that there is a relationship between emotional suppression and mental health deterioration. This is consistent with Husain et al. (2024) study which claims that the lack of ability to express emotions is associated with high stress, emotional malfunctioning, and low psychological protection. Some participants, however, were able to show emotional resilience and used coping mechanisms such as religion, social networks, and schooling to lessen the negative effects of emotional suppression.

The findings also exemplify coping strategies and how they help in maneuvering within the social restrictions of honor culture. Some individuals dealt with their emotional distress by withdrawing socially and remaining silent, while others utilized religious rationalization or help from friends to deal with their emotions. This implies that coping mechanisms may have a positive or negative influence on one's psychological health depending on how effective these mechanisms are in delivering emotional support. Further research suggests that members of

honor cultures tend to use familiar religious and familial devotion as an emotion regulation strategy, and therefore socially accepted coping strategies to maintain social order (Patel et al., 2022). The data collected here contributes to this literature by documenting the beneficial effects of faith and community on the psychological impact of honor culture.

Overall, the findings highlight the sociocultural nuances embedded in the honor culture of Pakistan that affects the emotional management and the psychological health of the youth. The need to uphold honor results in emotional suppression, especially for those who are highly culturally bound, which further exacerbates psychological suffering. Yet the negative impact is buffered by other more adaptive coping mechanisms such as social support and religious belief. Further studies should look into the development of approaches that enhance emotional self-expression in such conservative cultures so that there is improvement in psychological health while still respecting cultural norms. Removing the social taboo that render emotional expressiveness as vulnerability would enable Pakistani social contexts to be healthier for their youth to freely express emotions without the fear of losing respect (Abbas et al., 2023; Husain et al., 2024).

Future Direction

Further inquiries should be made in adolescent psychological intervention approaches to emotional expression within the context of honor culture. Emotionally sensitive mental health programs could assist adolescents to manage the tension between maintaining honor and emotional health. Also, suppressing emotional expression could be examined in relation to the future psychological wellbeing of resilience, relationships, and career success in a longitudinal study. Additional analysis should also focus using other forms of social interaction for the expression of emotions among young Pakistani users who may have the tendency to express emotions more openly on virtual social platforms. This will help study the impact of age and sociocultural diversity on emotional expression with respect to honor culture and its psychological implications.

Limitations

The study does have limitations that need to be addressed. To begin with, the data obtained may suffer from bias where participants over exaggerated or under-reported their emotional self-restraint procedures due to societal norms. The second limitation is that the temporal or cross-section nature of the study design makes it impossible to derive causal linkage between the notion of honor culture, emotional suppression, and psychological wellbeing. Lastly, participants were restricted to the youth of Pakistan with very little opportunity to generalize the experiences of the South Asian region. Further advancement in this research could consider incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews alongside quantitative measures of emotion regulation for better understanding.

Conclusion

The results of the report reveal the effects of Honor Culture on emotional repression and psychological health among the Pakistani youth Honor culture resonates deeply in the family's reputation, socio-economic class leading to engagement of mothers and fathers which has been witnessed against the value

of psychological health. While maladaptive coping mechanisms such as social provide and religious suffering do exist, these factors tend to protect some of the most adverse consequences. The reality of mental health challenges within the context of cultural milieu is extremely important in the design, planning, and implementation of the interventions. These, alongside an understanding of complex social order, aid in formulating the strategies required to address vulnerabilities of emotions while upholding honor. Resolving the societal stigma which is embedded around the expression of emotional weakness would fundamentally facilitate in fostering an environment that would enable the youth to strike the delicate balance between identity, culture, and mental health.

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