

Between Identity and Obligation: Queer Males Navigating Mixed Orientation Marriages

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Sexual orientation is an understudied and controversial in South Asia. In Collectivist cultures, people deny rights to liberty of queer people most queer people end up marrying non-queer individuals. Considering prevalence of social phobia and a significant lack of education or awareness on the topic of identity, gender and sexuality within the society, queer population is forced to spend their lives under a havoc of shame and neglect within heteronormative social structure of marriage.

Methodology: The current study explores the lived experiences in mixed orientation marriages and to execute this qualitative study phenomenological research design was used. A sample of 7 participants from diverse cultural backgrounds who were all Pakistani, 18+ adult, male, queer, and married/divorced were selected using snowball sampling technique. Data was collected using the face-to-face interview method technique. Collected data was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. 7 major themes emerged as a result which provide in-depth insight into lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies through which queer people navigate across the intersection of their marital status and queer identity.

Findings: Findings contribute to a significant gap in the existing literature over the lived experiences of queer population and may help design culturally informed counselling techniques or policy for said population.

Conclusion: The study highlights the profound emotional, social and identity-related challenges faced by queer men in mixed-orientation marriages within a collectivistic society like Pakistan. The findings emphasize the importance of awareness, acceptance and culturally appropriate mental health services for queer individuals.

Keywords: Mixed Orientation Marriages, Mental Health Issues, Marital Issues, Identity Issues, Queer Experiences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The institution of marriage is the cornerstone of every societal structure and every human society that exists. Mixed orientation marriages is a form of heterosexual marriage with one spouse who is queer while the other sex spouse is heterosexual (Schwartz, 2012). Khalid (2025), defined marriages in Pakistan as a socially and legally approved union between a by birth man and woman regulated by religion, law of the state, roles dictated by culture and legitimacy. These types of social frameworks make marriage as an institution that is established on the principal like inclination towards heterosexuality, that will ultimately lead to reproduction, protection of bloodline, protecting the family honor and social endurance (Martin & Tunlid, 2009). Heteronormativity impacts the social life of the individuals as it labels heterosexuality as innate normal and natural process (Pollitt et al., 2019) simultaneously this belief system directly impacts the family system, economy, administration and social order (GaniYeva, 2022, Chigbu et al., 2023; Obilor et al., 2021).

Pakistan is considered as a collectivistic culture, where there is huge pressure to marry as it is considered to be a reflection of conformity to the already laid norms, continuity of group harmony and obedience (Triandis, 1993). Literature targeting the arranged marriages in South Asia highlights forced marriages and social/cultural boundaries as the main factors that individuals face. These rigid norms are one of the core reasons that why marriages in Pakistan carries so much importance and is seen as huge achievement and millstone but often it is tied to the family honor and social acceptance among the members (Maqsood, 2021). The legislative structure of Pakistan registered under laws such as ‘Muslim Family Laws Ordinance’ (VIII, 1961), the ‘Christian Marriage Act’, (XV, 1872), and the ‘Hindu Marriage Act’ (VII, 2017). All these laws are formulated under the restrictions of the state's religious framework and so are heteronormative in their nature. No law in ‘The Constitution of Pakistan, 1973’ exclusively exists either for and against queer marriages except for transgender people who are exclusively not given the right to marriage in accordance with ‘Pakistan’s Penal Code, 1860’, as informed by ‘The Transgender Persons (Protection and Rights) Act, 2018’ (XIII, 2018) and ‘Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, 2020’. However, no law is present to protect queer individuals from forced mixed orientation marriage.

Queer identities in South Asia is not a new concept it dates back to Mughal era where different genders and their sexual flexibility were acknowledged (Michelraj, 2015), the emergence of colonial system and extreme impact of religion over the time have suppressed these identities. Currently in Pakistan queer identity is labeled as something that is unnatural and inappropriate, the mainstream media as well as the cultural practices reinforces the normative heterosexuality through all possible channel thus, repressing the diversity (Ng, 2013). In case of deviation from the normative orientation; individuals are subjected to violence, homelessness, social rejection and in severe cases even honor killings (Heydari et al., 2021). Families to ensure their reputation among the society and to avoid scandals they pressurize the queer males to indulge in heterosexual marriages (Lehr, 1999).

Hopwood (2019), stated that it is difficult to identify queer male prevalence who enter mixed marriages as their identities are kept secret. In a global survey of 27 countries, 3% of respondents declared to be queer (Statista Research Department, 2023). In Australia more than 17,000 males (about the seating capacity of Madison Square Garden) were found to be queer while they were either married or involved in relationships with females (Hopwood, 2019). 3% (two million) males and females in the United States came out as queer who were heterosexually married (Buxton, 2008). However, in Pakistan, exact statistical data in this area is not available but a study by Ajmal and Rasool (2024) suggested that in total 9% (211 out of 2400) male participants reported ever having had sexual relations with males, out of which 2.6% (62 respondents) reported exclusive sexual relationships with males while 26% of them were married.

Western literature highlights that queer individuals who are in mixed marriages reports a lot of psychological discomfort, conflict within their identities, isolation from their surroundings and greater substance use (Hopwood et al., 2019). In situation where the identity disclosure is feared and unsafe

among male queer there were reports of constant anxiety, depression and cumulative stigma (Hopwood, 2019). On the other hand, queer males in Pakistan are impacted not only by these factors but also with additional cultural intolerance, forced marriage, the belief that heterosexual partner can overcome the queer desire and religious implications (Younas, 2024).

The main aim of this study is to fill into the massive research gap that exists between the Western and Pakistani qualitative research around experiences of queer males in heterosexual marriages. As Moagi et al. (2021) reported that all existing empirical research on the mental health challenges of queer individuals particularly homosexual queer males, has been conducted in the first world democratic countries where this population already enjoys fundamental rights that it has earned successfully. Some Western countries even provide laws to queer population for protection from discrimination. However, queer sexual behavior is a still a crime in Pakistan that is punishable under section 377 (PPPCA; XLV, 1860) which does not specifically mention queer behavior, but queer men eventually become the easiest target against discrimination and harassment. Lack of recognition of these identities further marginalize the population, leaving practitioners in every field unequipped to address their needs (Pervez & Saleem, 2021). To address these issues, the current study explores Pakistani queer males within mixed orientation marriages, the challenges they face and their coping strategy in society where till date heterosexual marriages are prevalent.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The development of the study and the data analysis in this study will be iterated by integrating the theory of social constructionism, and the sexual minority stress model (Meyer, 2013). This theoretical integration that supplies a base to study lived experiences of queer males, originates from humanistic school of thought which believes that every individual is unique and have an ability to reach their own unique best level of functionality when the environment is certain. It may also provide a conceptual basis and framework in this study for the clear and empirical understanding of experiences of queer individuals in mixed orientation marriages in a context of Pakistani culture and society.

Social constructionism theory will be used to explore how Pakistani queer males within heterosexual marriages negotiate their multiple identities and how these identities intersect. This framework will examine how social and cultural forces shape our understanding of gender and sexuality. It can be useful in understanding how societal norms and expectations influence an individual's decisions to enter a mixed orientation marriage while identifying as queer. "Social Constructionism" is used to understand how meanings of gender and sexuality are socially reconstructed or reconstructed and how they are differently performed and negotiated in different class contexts (Brickell, 2006) and how variables like education, peer influence, income, access to internet, class consciousness may affect gender and sexuality of a person.

Sexual Minority Stress Model (2013)' offers in-depth insights towards psychological and emotional wellbeing and challenges among queer population. It is formulated by incorporating theories from psychology and other social sciences. It provides a theoretical framework that helps explain and understand psychological, social and structural elements that contribute to mental health inequalities which queer populations experience very often (Meyer, 2013). Sexual Minority Stress Model also highlights societal expectations, family pressures and potential consequences of coming out may factor into their decision-making process.

2.1 Research Questions

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of Pakistani queer males in mixed orientation marriages?

RQ2: How Pakistani queer males cope up with challenges experienced in mixed orientation marriages?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

To study and explore the lived experiences of Pakistani queer males in context of mixed orientation marriage using qualitative research methodology has been a thorough source of rich and detailed data which provided a detailed insight into the lives of this population. The phenomenological research design was opted as it best suited to get a clear picture of the experiences that Pakistani queer males have in a mixed orientation marriage and how they themselves interpreted those experiences or find a good or bad meaning in them. For this purpose, a sample of 7 participants was set that was approached using snowball sampling technique which helped gain insights into this marginalized group's experiences.

3.2 Sampling

A sample of 7 Pakistani queer males who were either married or divorced, was recruited the participants belonged to diverse cultural backgrounds within Pakistan from rural and sub urban to metropolitan cities. These participants were approached via snowball sampling method which most suited as a sampling technique in data collection to study a marginalized community. As Sadler et al. (2010) also highlighted how sampling technique snowball can be effective in recruiting members of traditionally marginalized, underserved, or vulnerable populations. All the participants were Muslim and had a diverse religious inclination. 5 participants identified as being bisexual whereas 2 participants identified themselves as homosexual queer males (see Table 1). Three participants were divorced. All participants were 25+ years of age and were Urdu speaking nationals residing in Lahore fulfilling the inclusion criteria for the study. The exclusion criteria of the study included;

- Non-queer individuals who have intimate encounters with queer males
- Queer or non-queer male sex workers
- Heterosexual and cis-gendered individuals with queer gender expression
- Individuals with ongoing substance abuse
- Non-queer individuals with chronic medical conditions, or sex-related malfunction

3.3 Data Collection

For the data collection, a semi-structured interview method was used to explore the in-depth lived experiences of Pakistani queer males in mixed orientation marriages in depth. As Guion et al. (2011) suggested that in-depth interview method offered help in providing knowledge that is not only new but also which is not accessible through other methods of data collection and was a way to offer marginalized people with a voice for making their own history. Main advantages of this method includes that the information it supplies is much more detailed than what could be feasible through other means of data collection. Probing in the interview supplied detailed and elaborative insights for each participant. It also provides a more comfortable environment for rapport building that made the participants feel more relaxed in having an elongated conversation about their personal experiences (Boyce & Neale, 2006). All one-on-one interviews exceeded the time duration of 35 minutes and were audio-recorded with the permission of each participant. Recorded audio data was kept safe in a password protected drive to which only the researcher had access. For participant 5 and 7, a voice filter of AI was used on their request, as they showed concerns over privacy. Data provided by an additional 8 participant in the study was safely discarded as he withdrew from the research. However, the insights he had provided were used to modify the interview guide and demographics form. All the interviews were conducted bilingually in both English and Urdu languages to make the interview process convenient for the participants in terms of understanding. All interviews were then transcribed word to word completely to avoid loss of any relevant data. The transcripts of all the participants were then transliterated in English language to assist the analysis process which consisted of coding.

3.4 Data Analysis

In order to examine the richness of people's experiences, Paul Flowers, Michael Larkin, and Jonathan Smith founded IPA in the 1990s. IPA researchers focus on lived experiences and how people make sense of these experiences within the context of their personal and social realities. It goes beyond reiterating what others have said and instead aims to understand the event from the perspective of the individual (Crone et al., 2023). This method according to Price and Smith (2021) is ideal for investigating events deemed to be extremely important. The stages of IPA Smith (2017) include; 1) reading a transcript, 2) first annotation of a transcript; 3) subordinate theme development; 4) interconnections among subordinate themes 5) continuing with the next transcript and going through steps one through four again, 6) examining transcripts collectively, 7) evaluating the coherence and believability of the theme structure, and 8) crafting a story based on the findings and introspection.

So, transcribed collected data from the interview with participant 1 was read enormous times to build familiarity with the data. Emergent codes were derived from the transcribed data; similar codes were merged into sub-ordinate themes from which themes of similar nature were further merged into super-ordinate themes. Then analyzed data was reported in the results section. The entire process was repeated for the rest of the interviews one by one and then master table and analysis of all the results was formulated. The results were reported as write-up, tables and figures and were subjected again to validity methods like peer review and expert review.

The analysis was subjected to member check to ensure validity, and with the approval the entire procedure was consecutively repeated for all following interviews. Reflective journal and individual analyses were also subjected to expert review. Themes were refined and redefined as per suggestions by the expert reviewer and results were reported.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

American Psychological Association's code of ethics was followed throughout the research process. While conducting the study, the anonymity and confidentiality of all the participants were kept intact, as being queer is still stigmatized in many parts of Pakistan, and the individuals who were interviewed were concerned about the consequences of revealing their gender identity or sexual orientation. To protect the research participants from any potential harm the data supplied was kept safe in a password protected drive and will be discarded after seven years of the publication process. As a part of ethical code of conduct in this research all the APA guidelines were thoroughly followed keeping the general principles in view, i.e., fidelity and responsibility, beneficence and non-maleficence, justice, integrity, and respect for people's dignity and rights. The topic of queer experiences in mixed orientation marriages was approached with sensitivity and respect for all the participants involved by developing ethical and culturally proper interview questions as their experiences varied widely and each person's journey was unique.

An approval of the research proposal from University's Institution Review Board was taken and then an interview guide, consent form and a demographic form was designed and shared for further approval from the ethical board of the university. Permission to use all these forms and conduct interviews was secured from the Institutional Review Board of University under the registration number (UCP/PSY/PUB/0059). All relevant forms were shared with participants via email. The consent form was given to all participants before the interview. The interview protocol was subjected to expert review before utilizing for the interview.

Table 1: Demographic information of all participants in the study

Participant	Age	QI ^b	Marital status	Years in marriage	Children	ESA ^c	Background
1	28	B	M	1+	0	Active	Jampur
2	39	H	D	2+	0	Active	Jehlum
3	28	H	D	0.6+	0	Active	Islamabad
4	27	B	M	1+	0	Active	Quetta
5	28	B	M	1+	1	Active	Kasur
6	31	B	M	1+	0	Active	Lahore
7	28	B	D	4+	0	Active	Quetta

Note. All participants were Pakistani and moderately religious and identified as Muslims

^bQI = Queer Identity (H; Homosexual: B; Bisexual)

^cESA = Extramarital Sexual Affair

4. RESULTS

Interpretative analysis highlighted convergence and divergence in reporting across participants, showing all themes that the participants altogether share and the unique way in which each theme is manifested for everyone. The following master tables show major themes and sub-ordinate themes for lived experiences, challenges and coping for all participants (see Table 2 & 3).

Table 2: Master table showing theme, sub-theme and relevant quotes for lived experiences of queer males in MOMs

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Quotes
Queer Identity	Identity foundation	<i>"I felt attracted towards both girls and boys since childhood."</i> _ Participant 7
		<i>"Homosexuality I think is more about identity rather than behavior, you can recognize yourself as homosexual without having any sexual experience with same gender."</i> _ Participant 2
		<i>"If you identify yourself as queer then you are considered evil. People have extreme reactions which is tormenting and humiliating."</i> _ Participant 4
	Orientation of identity	<i>"When people deny accepting themselves, they try to turn themselves into heterosexuals."</i> _ Participant 5 <i>"It became clear to me what my identity was, yet I shoved it in closet ... I was fully inclined to continue my marriage."</i> _ Participant 2 <i>"I had killed my liking towards men thinking there is some problem with me, and I will be fine once I get married. Clearly that was not the case."</i> _ Participant 2
	Dissonance	<i>"I am confused because religion is clear but so is my situation."</i> _ Participant 2 <i>"I'm a bit confused because of course religion is very clear in things and so is my situation. I'm actually divided in my answer and opinion also. I don't remember any point in my life</i>

		<i>where I had a choice, and I made a choice to be the way I am”</i> _ Participant 2
		<i>“I was about to get married and accept the life that conflicts with my inner identity”</i> _ Participant 2
Social Experiences	Experiences with family & friends	<i>“A person’s mental health is worth the most, but it matters if you can leave your family or not.”</i> _ Participant 6
		<i>“My family had to show people that we are spending lots of money, just to avoid judgement.”</i> _ Participant 3
		<i>“My parents have rights over my life and everyone around me has certain expectations of me.” ... “If you live in such a culture, a man loving a man is not practical.”</i> _ Participant 6
	Cultural experiences	<i>“People sexually engage with the gender that is more feasible with privacy.”</i> _ Participant 7
		<i>“I was blackmailed into this marriage by my family. I was forced.”</i> _ Participant 3
		<i>“I was not given the choice to choose my family on my own, it was under pressure.”</i> Participant 5
	Marital experiences	<i>“A lot of homosexual men in our society are tied up in a bond of marriage living a terrible life.”</i> _ Participant 2
		<i>“Avoiding your spouse or not fulfilling her needs hurts them and eventually they feel trapped ... I do not think such relationships work.”</i> _ Participant 7
		<i>“She will make a fuss out of everything. Even on a glass of water she would say, ‘I left everything for you, and if you did not want to get married, why did you even marry me’.”</i> _ Participant 3
	Pressure of Parenthood	<i>“Children put weight in a marriage even if there are severe conflicts in it”. _ Participant 6</i>
		<i>“It’s a good thing that I did not have kids. Then it would have been a compromise for rest of our lives.”</i> _ Participant 2
		<i>“Children in such marriages are prone to psychological problems”. _ Participant 4</i>
Personal Experiences	Public scrutiny	<i>“They had social pressure as well that people would come and ask them what is wrong? Why are you not getting your son married?”</i> _ Participant 3
		<i>“It’s more difficult for older people to live in this society as homosexuals.”</i> _ Participant 2
		<i>“With time as you age, people start questioning you and that’s when life becomes harder.”</i> Participant 6
	Religious beliefs	<i>“If we strictly follow Islam, it will terribly affect our mental health and we will live in a torment.”</i> _ Participant 5
		<i>“Our religion has set boundaries for us. We cannot cross</i>

		<i>them. I have never thought anything outside of it.” _ Participant 1</i>
		<i>“Islamic law criminalizes it. In our society these laws are misused in many ways” _ Participant 7</i>
	Legal experiences	<i>“Even if I would go to court, they would be like you are a male, why don’t you want to get married? This is so outrageous on your part, and this is abnormal.” _ Participant 3</i>
		<i>“The legal system works this way they are going to question my identity and my choices.: Participant 7</i>
		<i>“Going to a court room is not safe at all, what would I say when I tell them that I don’t want to marry.” Participant 5</i>
Intimate Experiences	Experiences with spouse	<i>“When she becomes aware it may hurt her but eventually, they compromise. I know a lot of such women”. _ Participant 6</i>
		<i>“Firstly, she would never want to live with him. Even if they continue their marriage, their lives would be terrible.” _ Participant 4</i>
		<i>“You cannot control it due to your sexual preference, nor can you stay sincere in your marriage due to your identity.” _ Participant 7</i>
	Experiences outside marriage	<i>“I’m part of a system; I cannot just isolate myself from everything and live a different life which is not acceptable to everyone.” _ Participant 2</i>
		<i>“You may quit it as well. However, it would be unnatural. When you go against nature, you torment yourself.” _ Participant 4</i>
		<i>“I know a lot of couples whose reason of divorce was that the male spouse was queer and were engaged in extra-marital affairs.” _ Participant 4</i>
	Early experiences	<i>“Since males in our culture have more access. Compared to females he can explore his sexuality more.” _ Participant 6</i>
		<i>“If your interaction is going to stay within boys only then it is normal to find your sexual preference among them.” _ Participant 4</i>
		<i>“Even having had sex with a girl before getting married I would have thought that I should not get married, but I would have had to get married.” _ Participant 2</i>

Figure 1: Showing main theme and emergent sub-themes from lived experiences of queer males in MOMs

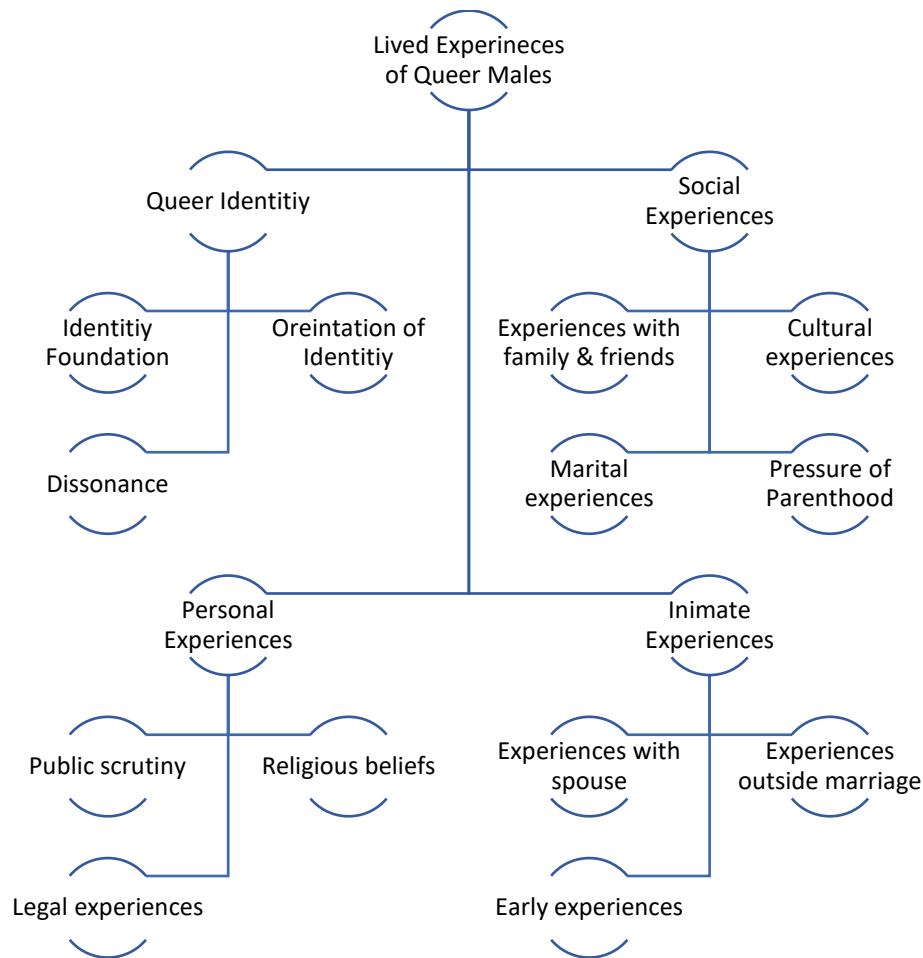


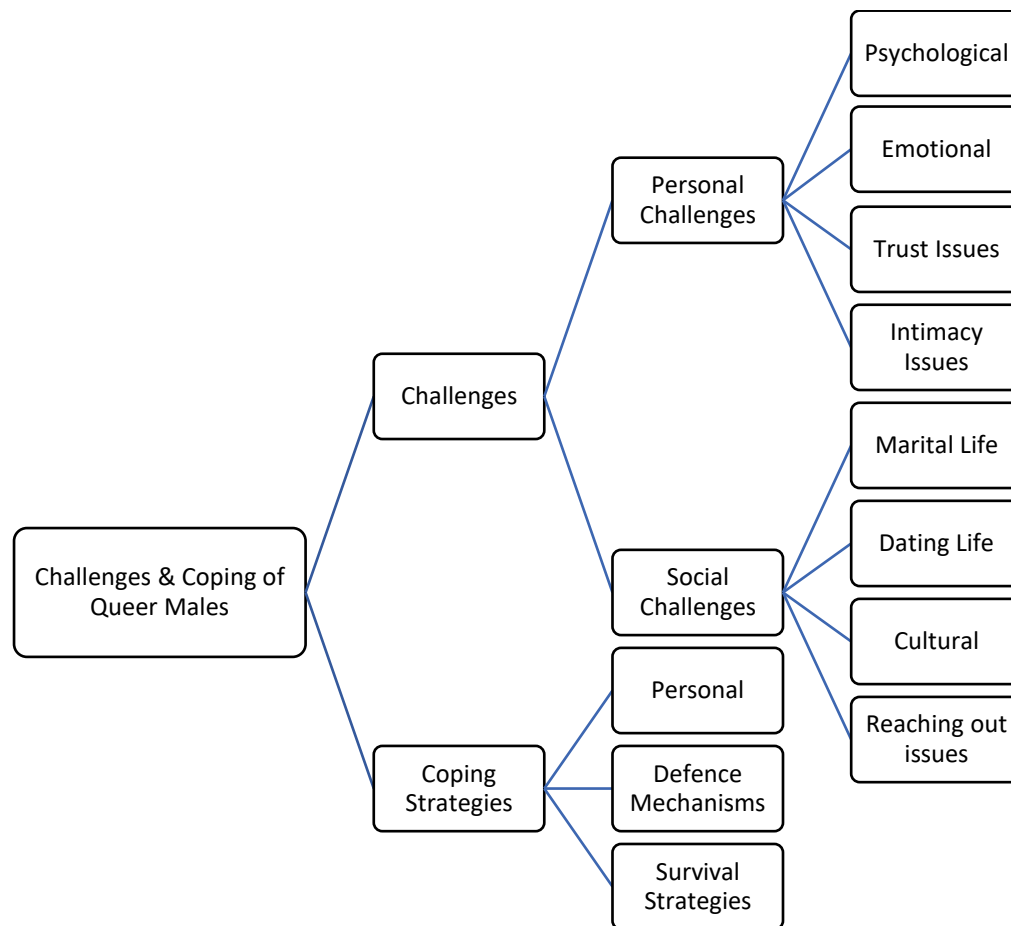
Table 3: Master table showing challenges experienced & coping methods used by queer males in MOMs

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Quotes
Personal challenges	Psychological challenges	<i>"When we are struggling with everything a lot of things are killing us from inside. They affect our mental and physical health in every way." _ Participant 7</i> <i>"Once you are depressed due to lack of love. Then, you are also scared of the consequences if marriage ends, and if others find out." _ Participant 7</i> <i>"Building a family with someone you are incompatible with is the most troublesome thing for your mental health." _ Participant 4</i>
	Emotional challenges	<i>"It depends upon you as a person, but I think guilt must be there obviously." _ Participant 6</i> <i>"At wedding day and since then every day, especially at nights, I feel suicidal." _ Participant 3</i>

		<i>"It was a pressure cooker that kept increasing, increasing and it just erupted as the end of the marriage rather than a big fight." _ Participant 2</i>
	Trust issues	<i>"There have been a lot of challenges for her due to my different orientation. She has suspicions over my extra-marital activities." _ Participant 5</i> <i>"A lot of people do not speak about this subject because they are too scared that their identity might get revealed." _ Participant 2</i> <i>"She is not aware much. As she has tried to test me many times using other women, but I turn out to always be innocent." _ Participant 4</i>
	Intimacy issues	<i>"I am sure I wasn't able to perform as good as a heterosexual guy would have." _ Participant 2</i> <i>"The kind of mental state that I am in, for me it is marital rape." _ Participant 3</i> <i>"If you have to stay married to someone you do not feel sexually satisfied with and you have to live with that person for the rest of your life, it becomes a havoc for your mind." _ Participant 6</i>
Social challenges	Challenges in marital life	<i>"I do not know what she is going through. I mean, she is sad, yes that I can sense." _ Participant 3</i> <i>"Even if children are born out of these marriages, they are not born out of choice." _ Participant 4</i> <i>"Now, I sometimes think that getting divorced was the best thing that ever happened to me. Because had I been in that marriage, I would have been living a life of compromise. If I had kids, it would have been even more difficult." _ Participant 2</i>
	Challenges in dating life	<i>"When you are a married man a lot of queer people do not want to date you." _ Participant 4</i> <i>"I think marriage is important to fulfil your life from a legal, cultural, and religious point of view" ... "When you are going to live your life, you cannot live with someone against law, religion and society." _ Participant 4</i> <i>"The country that I live in where having a queer partner is not practical, you cannot be together." _ Participant 2</i>
	Cultural challenges	<i>"There is separate science for us. Whenever a storm comes or earthquake comes there is a certain science in it, that does not have anything to do with the queer community in the country. They would blame us for everything. Even in this Palestine-Israel conflict they are going to blame us. If a war occurs, they say it must have occurred due to queer people. I mean this society treats us so badly just because we are different." _ Participant 3</i> <i>"I have travelled enough to know that homosexuals are looked down upon even in the most progressive societies." _ Participant</i>

		<i>"They will tell me that they like my personality but when I tell them that I am homosexual. Suddenly their treatment would change. Suddenly they would hate my existence." _ Participant 3</i>
	Challenges in reaching out	<i>"Resources are available in major cities, but no help is available in backward areas of Pakistan." _ Participant 4</i>
		<i>"I do not know if I go to a mental health practitioner and tell them that this is the problem that I am having, will they even be willing to help me or just accept the issue that I have. Even if they are willing to help me, I do not think they would have enough capabilities." _ Participant 2</i>
		<i>"Help was never an option, very limited options available and I was always unsure that they might not understand my situation." Participant 6</i>
Modes of coping	Personal strategies	<i>"Bisexual people are able to carry on their marital and queer life together." _ Participant 1</i>
		<i>"For me coping up is like I come to my office, I talk to people, I go to gym, I distract myself." _ Participant 3</i>
		<i>"I have kept everything separate. I never let my queer life affect my family life" _ Participant 4</i>
	Defense Mechanisms	<i>"Female gets busy with children to compensate lack of attention and time from her spouse." _ Participant 5</i>
		<i>"Unfortunately, you cannot avoid marital rape. So, you are forced to use your imagination. You must be mentally somewhere else to be physically there." _ Participant 3</i>
		<i>"I used to distract myself mentally as well as emotionally to survive." Participant 2</i>
	Survival strategies	<i>"I know a lot of people who moved abroad just to escape from marriage" _ Participant 7</i>
		<i>"Queer people put extra efforts in their marriage in order to avoid any disturbance in their marital-social life." _ Participant 4</i>
		<i>"I would do whatever I can to make sure she doesn't feel it and surely, she would have. Because it isn't that easy to put up a show daily." _ Participant 2</i>

Figure 2: Showing main theme and emergent sub-themes for challenges & coping methods of queer males in MOMs



Theme 1: Queer Identity

This theme highlights insights and understandings of queer identity of participants along with the ways how they execute and compensate their unique sexual or gender identity.

Queer identity is a unique personal identity that constitutes a wide spectrum of gender or sexual identities. However, every Pakistani queer male has his own meaning or sense that they derive out of their internal feelings, and personal or social beliefs or experiences. Queer identity is multi-faceted and nuanced, and not fixed categories of gender expression or sexual behavior. This is why every Pakistani queer male participant of the study described it differently which helps understanding their style of exhibition of their identity.

As participant 3 reported that;

“It means being different from the usual community of the men. For me it was not so difficult to identify it. It was an easier thing to identify that I have different feelings.”

For him it meant two things ‘internal feelings’ and ‘uniqueness’ from his normative society. It suggests that his sense of identity was driven out of cultural reference as he experienced difference from his wider community based on his internal feelings.

Orientation of identity is another theme that suggests how Pakistani queer males draw sense out of their

unique identity and the ways how they exhibit it. Orientation of a queer person's identity may be affected by the cultural context in which he lives. As participant 4 reported that;

"You adapt to the society that you live in with time, you become part of it and you can't separate yourself from it. Sometimes you have to accept things from the society and sometimes you have to make the society to accept certain things."

He stated that people adapt to the society that they live in and because they are a part of society, they cannot live in isolation. This is why many queer people conform to social or cultural values, beliefs, and behavior. When a queer person's identity goes against social norms, they may get accustomed to various sorts of perceptions, beliefs, or behavioral patterns. The idea that when the queer identity of a person conflicts with his social context, he may experience dissonance in the orientation of his identity. As participant 2 reported;

"I am actually divided in my answer and opinion also. So not really clear because I said it in my demographics form as well that I am moderately religious."

He stated that due to his religious beliefs he experienced a dissonance in exhibiting his queer identity or making a sense out of it. The reason for this dissonance could be his strong affiliation with his religion, whose views conflict with his identity.

Theme 2: Social Experiences

Mixed orientation marital experiences include general feedback of participants of their experiences in married life. These experiences are extraordinarily complex and are based on multiple factors such as identity and orientation of an individual which shapes their 'sense of self' in a mixed orientation marriage. Experiences with family & friends this sub-theme explores the good outcomes in mixed orientation marriages. As reported by participant 5;

"A person's mental health is worth the most, but it matters if you can leave your family or not."

He further reported that social pressure to get married in the lives of Pakistani queer males may never cease to exist. He suggests that for some Pakistani queer males mixed orientation marriage may work out fine. However, for some it may be difficult, while for others it could even be so difficult that their mixed orientation marriages may reach the point of divorce.

For participant 6 various personal and social factors that contributed to his decision to enter a mixed orientation marriage, were reported by him as;

"The first reason to get married was my age, people constantly kept asking me about it and one of the reasons can also be that I wanted to have someone with me all the time."

It shows that culture and the mainstream society have a direct impact on the experiences and decisions of a Pakistani queer male as after a certain age social pressure on getting married keeps on increasing on a queer person till he succumbs to this pressure eventually. Although, the institution of marriage is always romanticized in a Pakistani culture the ground realities may be different. As participant 2 reported;

"It should be a union of two people who live together, support each other, form a family, have kids, enjoy life, which is usually not the case. But from a concept point of view, it is how it should be. Since it is not just about having babies. It is more about two people coming together, living as a family."

It suggests that from a conceptual point of view a marriage is supposed to be a healthy and consensual union of two people who would choose to live with each other as a family. Both partners in a mixed orientation marriage surrounding children including narratives and will of having children in mixed orientation marriage. It also explores the experiences of children born in these marriages and their birth's impact on the marital relationship between both partners. As participant 5 stated;

“Yes definitely, it should happen. It completes your circle of life; it is something you also want.”

He suggested that having children could complete their life cycle and support both partners emotionally. This suggests that having children in mixed orientation marriages may enhance the marital relationship.

Theme 3: Personal Experiences

Personal and social experiences of Pakistani queer males drive their sense of identity and orientation but also drive their other life experiences including their romantic/sexual behaviors, and their decisions to either enter/stay in or move out of a mixed orientation marriage. Public scrutiny, this could be an incredibly significant factor behind a queer person getting forced to enter a mixed orientation marriage despite his resistance. As participant 3 reported;

“So, people would come and ask that if you are getting trouble in the kinship so let him marry our daughter. So, the opportunist society causes that pressure to mount on your family and then they will force you which is outrageous. So, the biggest pressure was that people would come and ask my mother that what is wrong with it.”

He implied that since Pakistani community is close-knitted, people in the social circles have the authority to interrogate the reasons behind a person refusing to get married after a certain age. The feeling of loneliness may directly contribute to a Pakistani queer male’s decision to enter a mixed orientation marriage. Participant 5 also stated that;

“In our society, there is certain age limit and we should get by it at any cost, to complete ourselves and our lives. If you look at it our religion and legal system also supports that.”

He indicated that for him religious perspective or the legal framework does not play a role of much importance in his experiences surrounding mixed orientation marriage, more than his culture. However, even this acknowledgement may not precisely help them resisting forced mixed orientation marriages as participant 7 also reported that;

“If it were my mistake, it would have not told them that I do not like the person I am being married to. Prior marriage I told them this is going to be a disaster but then they were like we know better than you and then they just forced me into it.”

He suggested that he disclosed all his concerns about the mixed orientation marriage, yet he was forced into it.

Theme 4: Intimate Experiences

This theme explores the good or bad experiences that the heterosexual female partner in marriage has. These experiences had some commonalities such as none of the participants had disclosed identity to his female spouse. However, all of them implied that the disclosure would bring about an extremely negative response from the female spouse and it may also result in their marriage breaking down. Participant 2 reported;

“There would be some women in our culture or society who know that their husbands are gay but they’re just putting up.”

He suggested that there are some women in Pakistan who put up with their mixed- orientation marriage despite knowing about the queer identity of their male spouses. Most Pakistani queer males who are married to a female may experience having a dating life in the queer community of Pakistan which may have multiple factors behind it. Participant 2 reported that;

“It would have impacted of course my dating life, if I had been married, for a lot of people are very conscious of the fact that I am not married.”

He suggested that being a divorcee acts in his favor as many queer people would not prefer to date a married queer person. Another sort of challenge that Pakistani queer males may experience in mixed orientation marriages may be mental incompatibility, as participant 7 reported;

“Now if you take a man who has spent his whole life among males and you put that person with girls, he won’t be able to understand their talks, gestures or emotions. So understanding no doubts becomes the biggest problem, that was the main reason of the divorce.”

He suggested that the primary reason he assumes that his mixed orientation marriage ended in divorce was the mental incompatibility between him and his heterosexual female spouse.

Theme 5: Personal Challenges

Many Pakistani queer males may choose to get married to deliberately change their queer identity to a heterosexual one which seems to be a normal in the scheme of things in a Pakistani society. Romantic and sexual experiences in a mixed orientation marriages may significantly contribute to the orientation of their queer identity as well as may influence their navigation across the intersection of their contradicting realities. Participant 2 reported his sexual experiences in the marriage as;

“As I said my acceptance of the fact of my sexuality is after my divorce. Before that I always thought there was something wrong with me. During the marriage also. Yes, I could feel at that time that I am not feeling the same level of sexual attraction that she was feeling for example for me.”

He stated that before entering a mixed orientation marriage, he had assumed that romantic or sexual experiences with a partner of the opposite sex in this marriage may change his queer identity which he considered his problem to be fixed. However, he had realized in his mixed orientation marriage that it was not very practical. Distinctions between Pakistani queer males may predict somewhat of their romantic or sexual experiences in mixed orientation marriages. As participant 4 stated;

“Everyone think from the physical perspective of what they are. If they are bisexual that is one thing, if they feel attracted towards another gender that is another thing. If they can manage both things that’s great, but some people can’t.”

He reported that every individual may understand what his identity is. He suggested that being bisexual and being a transgender person are two completely distinguished things.

Difficulties and Dissatisfaction may also arise from the unsatisfactory sexual experience as participant 2 reported;

“I am sure I was not able to perform as good as a straight guy would have. But this is again my speculation that I was not good enough to satisfy her as a straight person would have probably. But I do not know!”

He implied that since him and his female spouse never communicated it was difficult for him to speak on her behalf, however, he reports that he was not able to perform as good as a heterosexual man would have. There could be challenges of various nature in mixed orientation marriages for both queer male and non-queer female partners. Participant 4 reported a challenge of unsatisfaction in the married life as;

“The main challenge is that you do not get the partner of your choice and from there the rest of challenges start.”

He suggested that if a Pakistani queer male does not find a partner of his choice, he is obviously remaining unsatisfied from his married life.

Theme 6: Social Challenges

This theme also encompasses experiences and general narratives or feedback of Pakistani queer males for the mental health resources available in Pakistan as participant 1 reported;

“They don’t go to other people for help but they are very disturbed. They can’t share what they feel, they think that being queer is an issue, so they only discuss things like these with another person who is also queer.”

He implied that most Pakistani queer males do not seek mental health assistance even when they are significantly distressed. The reason behind this distress is notably the lack of education about the queer population, their personal bias or prejudice against queer people.

As suggested in the results earlier mental health issues for Pakistani queer males in mixed orientation marriages are more likely to be severe for homosexual people. It was also reported by participant 3 as;

“My mental health is so bad like I might have mentioned it or not, but I am suicidal every night. I have made plans of cutting my vein or throwing myself out of the window of the building I work at. That is how it has affected me.”

He stated that as he identifies his non-consensual sexual experiences in the mixed orientation marriage as marital rape, staying in this state for a period of 5 months has severely affected his mental wellbeing. He experiences significant suicidal ideation at 3 different points in the interview. He further explained these experiences as;

“As far as incompatibility is concerned that is the most visible thing in my marriage. When I have to be intimate, I have to think of something else, I mean. Somehow, I think if I would be mentally there and thinking about what I was doing then I would just have a brain hemorrhage or some of my brain vein might get ruptured because that would give me such an anxiety.”

It suggests that he must use imagery to avoid realizing his sexual contact with a person he is not attracted to otherwise it causes such immense anxiety that he fears a brain hemorrhage. Mental health issues highlighted by other participants were less severe, but all agreed that mixed orientation marriages significantly impact the mental health of both partners and their children.

Theme 7: Coping

This theme explores coping strategies used by Pakistani queer males in mixed orientation marriages. To avoid further challenges getting married to a person of their choice could make the experiences in their mixed orientation marriages significantly easier. This assumption was implied by participant 1, 4, 5, and 8. Participant 6 also reported similarly that:

“If you are given the option to marry person of your own choice, then living would have been much easier.”

Participant 2 reported an unusual way of navigation as;

“During my marriage it became a bit more clear to me what my identity was, But I still shoved it in the closet.”

He clearly stated that since his queer identity turned clearer to him in his mixed orientation marriage, he still chose to remain unacknowledged of his queer identity. However, it happened to him subconsciously which made his navigation in the mixed orientation marriage easier.

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study is to explore the lived experiences of Pakistani queer males living in mixed marriages describing areas like their lived experiences, challenges and coping strategies specifically in context of Pakistan's culture, religion and legal system where marrying the person with same sex is considered a crime and shame. These findings clearly highlight that the individuals suffering in these marriages are not due to their personal weakness but instead it is the outcome of strong social constructs, limited choices and suppression of the identity. The results of the study align with the social constructionism and sexual minority stress model, both of which explain clearly that how societal expectations and discrimination lead to poor mental health (Meyer, 2013).

Participants of the study revealed that queer identity is something they understood internally right from a young age, but they were not able to express it openly. Their identity grew under the fear of rejection, exclusion and punishment. Brickell (2009) in his study revealed that identity is not something that is formed in isolation rather it is something that grew strongly under the influence of culture and its norms. Pakistan is a conservative society where heterosexual marriages are considered as moral obligation and duty, making it difficult for other identities to even exist. This situation creates a sense of inner conflict, confusion and emotional turmoil among the queer individuals living in the South Asian countries (Jaspal, 2014). On the other hand, religion also plays an integral part in the suffering of the queer individuals. Queer individuals who value their religion experienced strong amount of guilt and shame, as their identity was in contradiction to their religious beliefs. These kinds of internal identity conflict eventually give rise to emotional stress among the queer Muslims as religion is something that is strongly attached with their daily life (Yip, 2008; Meyer, 2013).

When describing their marriages, queer individuals do not describe it as a personal choice, instead it is a union due to severe family pressure, fear of social judgement and in the name of caring family honor. Triandis (2018) while evaluating the Pakistani marriages came to the conclusion that it is considered as responsibility towards the family and society rather than an individual decision. Men who remain unmarried after a certain age face a lot of questions and suspicion, not only from their family but also from the society. One of the main reasons of the shame and guilt is because masculinity in societies like Pakistan is closely linked with marriage and fatherhood, that's why queer males can't remain single without any social consequences (Connell, 2005). Families of queer individuals often believe that heterosexual marriages will eventually solve their identity issues (Uddin, 2025). This strong belief often leads to ignoring the emotional well-being and suppression of the distress queer people go through (Jaspal, 2014).

Marital life in mixed orientation marriages is often described as emotionally distant and sexually unsatisfying. A strong amount of guilt towards the spouse, the fear of their identity being discovered and difficulty maintaining emotional intimacy. These all experiences are also similar with the western literature as well, which reflects that hiding one's sexual orientation in marriage leads to long-term relationships strain (Buxton, 2008). In Pakistan the situation is much worse because the disclosure of the identity can lead to legal trouble, violence and rejection from the family, that's why queer individuals felt trapped. Research indicates that when queer individuals engage in sexual relations without the emotional and sexual consent under pressure, it negatively affects the mental health as well as the stability of the relationship ((Rothmann, 2018).

According to the participants narrative; Depression, anxiety, emotional exhaustion and suicidal thoughts were reported. These findings came in support to the sexual minority stress model, which clearly explains that how repeated exposure to discrimination, fear and secrecy leads to psychological harm (Meyer, 2013). Pachankis (2007) identified that queer individuals experience extreme stress not only from the discrimination but also from constant hiding of their identities and fear of exposure. In Pakistan these difficulties are fueled by limited access to mental health professionals who don't understand the issue and deal with it accordingly. Literature highlights the fact that professionals often lack knowledge and hold biased views and discourage the individuals from seeking any sort of help (Pervez & Saleem, 2021).

While covering the topic of coping strategies the participants focused on the component of survival instead of emotional healing for it. It includes strategies like distraction from the routine, emotional withdrawal, separation from both personal and marital life and thoughts of leaving the homeland. All of these strategies are used by the queer people while living in the conservative societies like Pakistan, where talking openly about such issue is not considered safe (Hopwood, 2019). Bisexual participants mentioned more flexibility in maintaining marriage while also engaging in extra marital affairs, but literature also suggest that this alone won't give them any sort of protection from emotional distress they feel (Balsam et al., 2005).

All of these major coping strategies helped the participants manage their daily life while research suggest that long term suppression of their real identity leads to burnout, confusion and intense psychological distress (Pachankis, 2007).

Overall, the findings of the result indicate that in Pakistan mixed orientation marriages are formed to meet the societal expectations than emotional compatibility. These marriages place a huge psychological burden on the queer male and directly affect their families and spouse. This study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive mental health services that acknowledge the gender difference, preference, separate it from religion and law. The study also calls out for more local research as western models don't fully explain the experiences of queer living in society like Pakistan; by documenting such experiences, the study will provide a foundation for future researches and culturally specific mental health practice.

5.1 Limitations

Considering the extreme prevalence of homophobia and transphobia in normative Pakistani culture the queer population in mixed orientation marriages is not a much feasible population for research. Because of cultural and legal constraints, the criminalized queer population in mixed orientation marriages was extremely difficult to approach even using snowball sampling as most people kept their marital and sexual identity private in Pakistan to be safe from discrimination, social isolation, and hate crimes. This is why the sample of the current study could not include transgender and female queer people living in mixed orientation marriages. It also could not include non-queer females living in mixed orientation marriages because of extreme gender segregation and to protect confidentiality of the male queer participants.

Many Pakistani queer males did not want to communicate about their lives in a public or professional environment which is why they were excluded from the study for the safety of the researcher. Lack of incentive also prevented Pakistani queer males in mixed orientation marriages from participating in the study. Lastly, an extreme lack of understanding or knowledge of ethical research or their implication also made it difficult to conduct this controversial study. Due to all these reasons the sample size of the study was limited to 8 participants, however, the repeated patterns in the lived experiences of Pakistani queer males highlight a proficient level of generalizability of this research.

6. CONCLUSION

In Pakistan queer people are stigmatized and marginalized for having a different sexual preference or gender expression. It leads them to enter mixed orientation marriages which could be unsatisfying and at times harmful not just to their psychological wellbeing but also to the psychological, emotional, and sexual wellbeing of the non-queer female spouse, children born in these marriages and the queer people who form relationships with these males. These marriages work based on lifelong betrayal and deceit which may create a toll on mental health of both partners involved in these marriages. However, there is a significant amount of need for research and building mental health expertise in this regard in the profession of mental health.

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Ethical Approval Ethical Approval was taken from the University of Central Punjab under the registration number ((UCP/PSY/PUB/0059). Consent to publish is not applicable in this paper as no personal information or identity is disclosed.

Authors Contribution

RMZ collected the data and did the initial analysis on the data. AN helped in conceptualizing the study, supervising the data analysis and developing the research design. ZS wrote the paper. Revision and final manuscript were approved by ZS and AN.

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