Volume: 5
Issue: 3 (May-Jun 2026)
Pages: 155 – 167
ISSN (Online): 3006-6646
DOI: 10.62843/jrsr/v.iii.235

JRSR
JOURNAL OF REGIONAL STUDIES REVIEW

Cite this Article: Anjum, W., Zaman, A. S., & Gul, M. (2026). Between Love and Family: Young Adults' Meaning-Making Around Marriage, Intimacy, and Intergenerational Family Experiences in Pakistan. *Journal of Regional Studies Review, 5*(3), 155-167. https://doi.org/10.62843/jrsr/v.iii.235

RESEARCH ARTICLE

JOURNAL OF REGIONAL STUDIES REVIEW (JRSR)

Between Love and Family: Young Adults' Meaning-Making Around Marriage, Intimacy, and Intergenerational Family Experiences in Pakistan

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored how unmarried young adults in Pakistan understand love, marriage, intimacy, family relationships, and intergenerational experiences. Thirty-four participants (10 men, 24 women; aged 19–23 years) wrote experiential narratives of approximately 2,000 words each, in English or Urdu, about their perceptions, observations, family experiences, and expectations of future intimate relationships. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), which involved familiarization, initial coding, theme development, review, refinement, and construction of an analytic narrative. Five themes were developed: (a) love marriage as an idealized relationship of emotional and personal fulfilment, (b) arranged marriage as family responsibility rather than individual fulfilment, (c) the social cost of choosing love, (d) marriage quality as more complex than the love-arranged dichotomy, and (e) witnessing marital suffering and reconstructing the meaning of marriage. Participants identified emotional availability, communication, respect, loyalty, reciprocity, autonomy, economic independence, and shared responsibility as essential qualities of future relationships, and described relational patterns they wished to recreate, avoid, or rebuild. The findings are discussed in relation to the cultural context of Pakistan and have implications for premarital counselling and family-based interventions.

Keywords: Love, Arranged Marriage, Intimacy, Intergenerational Experiences, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Pakistan

Introduction and Literature Review

Marriage is more than just a legal contract between two individuals. It is a social and relational institution that is negotiated through intimacy, companionship, family responsibility, identity, and expectation for the future. Young adults reflect on whom they want to marry as well as what they want marriage to mean to them and how they would want to manifest love, respect, loyalty, communication, and responsibility within an intimate relationship. Recent studies reveal that the expectations of love and marriage for young people have shifted, especially when people are concerned with broader social and psychological uncertainties, with emotional and personal aspects being added to the traditional expectations (Kazakov, 2026; Kokhanova & Shevtsova, 2026; Lim et al., 2024). The evolving expectations provide a good foundation for understanding the meaning of marriage for young adults in the process of entering into marriage. One of the most visible differences between marriage of love and arranged marriage is that a person's attitude is not the same. The difference between love marriage and arranged marriage is clearly visible in the attitude of an individual towards the marriage. Traditionally, these are referred to as two ways of choosing a partner: love marriage

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is linked with personal choice and emotional involvement, while arranged marriage is linked with family involvement and social responsibility. This opposition is, however, getting more complex. Individual aspirations and emotional factors can be part of arranged marriages, and young people can negotiate family involvement with personal choice (Netting, 2006; Pande, 2014; Reed, 2025). There is also cross-cultural evidence that, overall, there is no significant difference between the intimacy, passion, and commitment experienced by couples in free-choice marriage and arranged marriage (Sorokowski et al., 2025). In particular, Pande (2014) underscores the need to acknowledge arranged marriage in terms of lived experiences and aspirations, rather than one uniform practice. Then, it's not only a question of whether a marriage is arranged or love-based, but it's also how young adults think a good marriage ought to be.

This trend is also reflected in studies of young adults' perceptions of romantic relationships. Using relational characteristics of love, marriage, trust, comfort and stability, Lim et al. (2024) identified a distinction between short-term and long-term relationships, suggesting that the expectations of a relationship are multidimensional and extend beyond romantic attraction. At the same time, the psychological nature of young people's attitudes to love and marriage is the result of the social nature of their age, which is constantly changing and uncertain (Kokhanova & Shevtsova, 2026). Kazakov (2026) points to the factors influencing the perception of young people about marriage and marital choice. These studies, taken together, indicate that today's marriage preferences may be based on the emotional, interpersonal, and practical features that young adults expect to experience in their marriages, and that the actual experience of intimacy should be a key determinant in comprehending the preferences. The changing expectations are particularly significant in the South Asian family system where marriage is a family event and is influenced by social norms, economic aspects, and extended family responsibilities. However, research has shown that young people do not merely reimagine their personal goals in opposition to their family's expectations, but are able to negotiate their own aspirations with their families (Netting, 2010; Srivastava, 2025). Therefore, the modern marriage can be a combination of personal choice, romantic love, and family engagement (Ji et al., 2024; Reed, 2025). This means that love and family are not mutually exclusive; young adults may seek emotional connection with a partner and acceptance, support, and involvement from their families. In such family-oriented, collectivist societies, awareness of this intersection is thus relevant in a discussion about marriage expectations.

This is especially crucial in Pakistan, where marriage is intertwined with family dynamics and social norms. Studies have looked at marital choice, empowerment, trust, romantic love, marital satisfaction, and marital structures in Pakistan and among Pakistani immigrants abroad (Kausar et al., 2024; Khurshid, 2020; Qureshi et al., 2014; Zaidi & Shuraydi, 2002). A study conducted in Pakistan that compared love and arranged marriages has found that there is a difference in interpersonal problems faced by the couples (Akhtar et al., 2019), and that acceptance of marriage by parents is correlated with higher marital satisfaction as compared to choice marriages where parents are not accepted (Arif & Fatima, 2015). Pande (2014) demonstrates that arranged marriage is not a straightforward, immutable tradition of South Asians, but rather evolves according to personal goals and the dynamic of the social landscape. Similarly, the research on Pakistani and South Asian Muslim marriages indicates that marriage decisions and relations exist in a social and family context (Ahmed, 2022; Maqsood, 2021; Wurm, 2022). Thus, it is important to pay attention to the expectations of Pakistani young adults, both their love and arranged marriage preferences, and the family experiences and relational meanings that underlie these preferences. The family experiences are particularly noteworthy, given that young adults are likely to first experience marriage in the relationships of significant others, especially parents. Family systems theory considers the person as living in a network of family relationships stretching across generations (Bowen, 1978), while social learning theory posits that people learn through observing important persons and interpreting their actions (Bandura, 1977). Through these relationships, parents have the potential to play a significant role in providing relational models for youth regarding communication, conflict, affection, loyalty, emotional availability, responsibility, and relational dysfunction. Importantly, this observation doesn't always result in repetition; young adults may also choose not to repeat the patterns they have noticed, and create alternative expectations in their relationships.

Attachment theory provides another explanation, as it pertains to the availability, responsiveness, and security of close relationships, and experiences of separation and abandonment (Bowlby 1969). Hazan and Shaver (1987) adapted attachment theory to adult romantic relationships, viewing romantic love as an attachment experience. These viewpoints may account for the importance young adults place on emotional safety, trust, loyalty, companionship, and availability, as well as on the potential for abandonment, instability, and/or relational harm. But family experiences should not be taken for granted as causal, but, rather, as a context from which people form understandings and reworkings of their expectations of intimacy. The relational meanings are also constructed in a developmental space of "re"-discovering self and increased autonomy. The theory of emerging adulthood suggests that the late teens and twenties are a period in which individuals are exploring identity, relationships, and future life options (Arnett, 2000), and Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory relates identity development to the ability to build quality intimacy. Thus, young adults' views about marriage can be influenced by their experiences in the family and the kind of person and future they are creating. Thoughts on autonomy, economic independence, relationship compatibility, emotional ties, and relationship responsibility might therefore be influenced by both family backgrounds and developing self-identities.

The existing literature indicates that young adults' definitions of marriage cannot be neatly categorized into two extremes: love or marriage by arrangement. Studies show that attitudes towards love and marriage have changed, along with an increased awareness of the importance of balancing personal aspirations with family expectations, and attention to emotional and relational qualities like trust, stability, companionship, and understanding (Kazakov, 2026; Kokhanova & Shevtsova, 2026; Lim et al., 2024; Netting, 2010; Pande, 2014). In parallel, theoretical approaches indicate that expectations of intimacy are ingrained in family systems, learned relational patterns, attachment experiences, and developmental processes (Arnett, 2000; Bandura, 1977; Bowen, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1968; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Less focus has been given to how young adults in Pakistan, who are not married themselves, understand marriage, and how they connect their ideas of future intimacy with their observations and experiences of marriage in their own families.

Rationale of the Study

This study aims to fill this gap by transcending the paradigm of love vs. arranged marriage and examining the ways in which young adults construct meaning about marriage, intimacy, and future marriage within the intergenerational context of their family experiences. It is crucial that this focus is present, since young people can have multiple values: romantic connection and family acceptance; autonomy and family responsibilities; desire for emotional intimacy and caution derived from observed relationships. While there is evidence of evolution in marriage preferences, partner selection, marital satisfaction, trust and family involvement of married couples, little is known about how unmarried young adults interpret the relationship of their parents and how they incorporate these experiences into their envisioned marital futures (Ahmed, 2022; Kausar et al., 2024; Khurshid, 2020; Pande, 2014; Qureshi et al., 2014; Zaidi & Shuraydi, 2002). A qualitative approach is thus suitable because the participants can explain in their own words what they mean by love, marriage, intimacy, family responsibilities, relationship suffering, and what future partnership means to them. The study was guided by two research questions: (a) How do unmarried young adults in Pakistan understand love, arranged marriage, and intimacy? (b) How do they draw on intergenerational family experiences in constructing expectations for their future marriages?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive design to gain an understanding of the meaning of love, marriage, intimacy, family relationships, and intergenerational experiences among young adults. Special emphasis was laid on the understanding of love, marriage, arranged marriage, emotional intimacy, marital

responsibility, fidelity, communication, and expectations of future relationships that participants had developed based on their experiences and observations of their parents and family. This study was not intended to compare the effectiveness of love and arranged marriage, but to examine the ways young adult couples make sense of and cope with their love and arranged marriages in their sociocultural and family context.

Participants

The sample consisted of 34 unmarried undergraduates (10 males and 24 females, aged 19-23 years) who were selected through purposive sampling from psychology and social science classes at the University of Lahore and Lahore College for Women University, Pakistan. The participants were eligible if they had lived in Pakistani families and were able to submit their Urdu or English experiential accounts in writing. Ten were in nuclear families, 11 in joint families, five in university hostels, and eight with their mothers. Paternal polygyny (n = 5), abandonment (n = 3), and paternal intimate partner violence (n = 8) were reported, with two being orphans and one reporting on maternal remarriage, while others reported on divorce or khula.

Procedure

After informed consent, 34 participants voluntarily wrote around 2000-word experiential accounts in Urdu or English. Love versus arranged marriage, family conflict and harmony, divorce/khula, and expectations regarding intimacy, communication, respect, loyalty, reciprocity, responsibility, and future marriage were explored. Participants were allowed to skip the experiences that were uncomfortable or to leave without penalty, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing the data (e.g., P01) and removing identifying information. Urdu accounts were translated by the first author, a native Urdu speaker and bilingual researcher, and then independently checked by the third author, and differences were resolved by consensus. Culturally specific terms (e.g., *wafadari, khula*) were used with English equivalents, with the emphasis on conceptual equivalence. The information power, which depended on the focus of the study, the specificity of the participants and the richness of the accounts, was used to guide adequacy, not saturation (Malterud et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Referrals to clinical psychologists were made but not taken up. The optional Surah Al-Rahman listening therapy was offered as a supportive resource after the experiment and was not analyzed or measured as an outcome.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) was used to analyze the data. The researchers read the participants' accounts, coded them, created themes, and developed and revised themes, and then built an analytic narrative. The coding was mostly inductive, drawing on the meanings of the participants and sensitized by family systems, social learning, attachment, and emerging adulthood perspectives. Analysis focused on love, marriage, family relations, conflict, autonomy, and future relational expectations, including experiences participants wanted to maintain, avoid, or change. Themes captured assumptions and patterns beyond explicit descriptions. Coding and theme development were led by the first author, and the other authors provided reflection. Reflexivity and transparency were facilitated by team discussions and an audit trail.

Results

The five themes were formulated, and each was broken down into subthemes. Table 1 summarizes the themes and subthemes, along with illustrative extracts from participant responses and their interpretations. These are described below for each theme.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, Illustrative Participant Extracts, and Interpretive Meanings (N = 34)

Overarching theme	Subtheme	Illustrative extract or summary	Interpretive meaning
Theme 1: Love Marriage as an Idealized Relationship of Emotional and Personal Fulfilment	Emotional intimacy and companionship	"There is understanding… matching vibes… companionship."	Love marriage was built as a connection with emotional compatibility, understanding and companionship as key factors. Those involved linked the ideal marriage with a sense of emotional connection and understanding from the spouse.
	Mutual availability and communication	"They are emotionally, psychologically, sexually, financially and socially available for each other."	The availability of participants was linked to an ideal intimate relationship in multidimensional aspects. A responsible partner was known to mean financial support, emotional, psychological and sexual support and frequent communication.
	Mutual sacrifice and prioritization	"They are willing to sacrifice for each other; they prioritize their partner."	Love was defined in terms of reciprocity, accommodation, selflessness and willingness to invest in the relationship. The participants talked of "sacrificing together", not sacrificing oneself.
	Shared happiness and personal choice	"They can pursue their own wishes, fantasies and happiness."	Personal choice was associated with the concepts of autonomy and that marriage should be a means to individual and mutual satisfaction.
	Standing together against external pressures	Participant described partners standing by each other despite criticism from parents, relatives, or society.	Sometimes love was viewed as an agreement or arrangement that two individuals enter into to stay united against the will of others.
Theme 2: Arranged Marriage as Family Responsibility Rather Than Individual Fulfilment	Family involvement in partner selection	"Parents arrange the marriage."	Arranged marriage was mostly seen as a family mediated affair in which parents (or other family members) play a role in choosing the spouse.
	Socioeconomic and family considerations	"They look at socioeconomic status, economic stability, family background and demographic variables."	Arranged partner selection was seen by the participants as focusing on socioeconomic status, economic security, family environment and other social factors.
	Responsibility toward the wider family	"They have responsibilities toward the whole family, not only one person."	Marriage was understood to be a part of wider kinship commitments, between the husband and wife, parents, in-laws, children and other relatives.

	Endurance for parents and children	"They continue the marriage for their parents and later for their children."	Staying in a marriage sometimes meant fulfilling family roles even if little was achieved in ways other than husband and wife.
	Family involvement as support and mediation	"Family can mediate and support when spouses dislike each other or have misunderstandings."	Family involvement was not seen as a restriction in all cases. Participants also identified family networks as resourceful in providing mediation and support in marital problems.
Theme 3: The Social Cost of Choosing Love	Family rejection and withdrawal of support	"Parents consider it disobedience and withdraw their rights and support."	Partner selection on the individual level was seen as having potential emotional, relational, social and material consequences for the family system.
	Community stigma and humiliation	"They may be discriminated against and humiliated by society and family."	Love marriage was viewed as having social costs in instances of clash between individual choice and traditional family or community norms.
	Intergenerational transmission of stigma	Remarks made to children of love marriages: "Your parents married by their own choice." / "Your mother ran away with your father."	Stigma was considered to "rub off" onto the children and to be felt as a burden on their family relationships.
	Gendered moral judgment	Remarks reported by participants: "Your mother/father had a relationship before marriage." / "She is bold" or "characterless."	Participants talked about moral decisions made about women's marriages and felt that labels could be ongoing even after women are married and involved in family life.
	Public respectability versus private reality	Participant described a man who appears respectable outside the home but behaves differently toward his wife and children.	Participants wondered if the public social aspect was a true reflection of their private relational behaviors. They stressed the need to measure the quality of close partnerships on the basis of the actual practice in the family.
Theme 4: Marriage Quality Is More Complex Than the Love–Arranged Dichotomy	Rejection of simple labels	"No marriage form should be labeled inherently good or bad."	Participants did not view love or arranged marriage as a failure or a success by any means and did not confuse the nature of the marriage with the nature of the relationship.
	Multiple determinants of marital outcomes	"Individual, social, economic, religious, personality, communication, family and contextual factors" influence marriage.	Participants' conceptualizations of marital functioning were more complex, involving more than just marriage type, as they viewed it as multidimensional and context-specific.
	Relational qualities over marriage type	Participant emphasized that the way spouses treat one another matters more than	People moved away from how marriage was formed to how they experience relationships every day, including respect,

		whether the marriage was love or arranged.	communication, loyalty, emotional availability and responsibility.
	Love does not guarantee marital success	"Love marriage may end in divorce… not because it is loving marriage itself."	Participants differentiated between loving a person and how that love will play out in the relationship itself after marriage, and they understood that marriages do not automatically stand the test of love.
Theme 5: Witnessing Marital Suffering and Reconstructing the Meaning of Marriage	Parents' marriages as negative relational models	"I have seen a lot of abuse and dysfunction in my parents' marriage."	The family of origin experiences were significant factors in shaping one's views on marriage and patterns they didn't want to replicate.
	Paternal disengagement, infidelity, and polygamy	"My father was involved in pornography and extramarital affairs." / "He had multiple relationships."	Participants spoke about behaviors that their fathers had displayed that they found incompatible with the image of a committed husband and father. Polygamy and multiple relationships by fathers were reported, and this led to issues of fidelity and exclusive commitment.
	Abandonment and absence of paternal contribution	"He abandoned the immediate family for other relationships."	Participants interpreted paternal disengagement as more than physical absence, linking it to perceived emotional and parental unavailability.
	Fatherhood beyond financial provision	Participant described wanting a father who participates in raising his children rather than only providing financially or visiting them.	Participants questioned the provider-only perspective of fatherhood and highlighted the importance of having a father who is emotionally, psychologically, socially and practically engaged with the child and spouse.
	Intimate partner violence and marital conflict	Participant described witnessing violence/conflict between parents.	Intimate partner violence and chronic conflict of parents were factors associated with respondents' experiences of marriage as potentially causing fear, insecurity or trauma to the relationship.
	Divorce and *khula* in wider social networks	Participant described a sibling, friend, relative, or other person in their social circle experiencing divorce or *khula*.	Participants' meaning making went beyond parent-children's relationships. Observations of divorce and khula among siblings, friends, relatives and extended social networks yielded further examples of ways in which participants assessed the possibilities and risks of marriage.

	Marriage as something to fear or reject	"I am afraid of marriage." / "I don't want to get married."	Others reported moving away from marriage following problems in their own families or in the broader community.
	Singlehood as protection	"I prefer being single."	Being unmarried was sometimes defined as a protective practice against dependency, abuse, abandonment or re-traumatization.
	Economic independence as protection	"I want to become economically independent so I don't have to depend on my husband like my mother."	Economic independence was built to ensure agency and lesser perceived vulnerability in future marriage.
	Reconstructing future relationships	"I don't want the kind of marriage my parents had."	Participants didn't imitate observed family patterns. Rather, they intentionally built anticipation of future relationships in terms of peace, respect, loyalty, emotional availability, reciprocity, communication, and shared responsibility.
	Emotional and sexual loyalty	Participant described wanting a relationship in which neither partner needs to seek emotional or sexual intimacy elsewhere.	Experiences and observations of infidelity led to the expectations of emotional and sexual monogamy and reinforced the significance of the term *wafadari* (loyalty/fidelity).
	Relationships outside marriage and emotional vulnerability	Participant account concerning a non-marital relationship, breakup, abortion, emotional/psychological difficulty, or financially supportive older partner.	These stories spoke to a variety of forms of intimacy, attachment, support and vulnerability that emerged in non-heteronormative relationships. They were not perceived as necessarily dependent on parent experience but as being part of the participants' wider processes of meaning-making in relation to one another.

Theme 1: Love Marriage as an Idealized Relationship of Emotional and Personal Fulfillment

Participants created love marriage as an emotional, compatible, understanding and companionship-based relationship. One participant paraphrased this ideal as "There is understanding… matching vibes… companionship" (P2). Intimacy was seen as being multi-dimensional: partners in a love marriage were said to be "emotionally, psychologically, sexually, financially and socially available for each other"; responsibility was far from being limited to economic support. Reciprocity and mutual sacrifice were also expressed in love: "They are willing to give and sacrifice for each other… they need both to sacrifice" (P4). Participants called for mutual sacrifice, not one-sided sacrifice. Personal choice was associated with autonomy and with joint enjoyment, with the partners being able to follow their will, their fantasies and their happiness (P8). Love was also idealized as a partnership with a commitment in which partners stand by one another in spite of being criticized by parents, relatives and society.

Theme 2: Arranged Marriage as Family Responsibility, not as Individual Fulfilment

The concept of arranged marriage was mainly interpreted as a family-oriented process of marriage: "The parents arrange marriage (P3"). Participants viewed arranged partner selection as social and material

compatibility; families "take into account the socioeconomic status, economic stability, family background and demographic variables" (P4). Marriage was seen as not just a contract between two people, but one with a wider family, as indicated by the spouse's responsibilities towards the whole family, not just one person (P10). Some participants reported couples who continued to be married for duties: "They stay together for their parents and then their children" (P15). However, family involvement was not always perceived as constraining. Participants also identified that "family can mediate and support when spouses do not like each other or have misunderstandings" (P18), making a family network a possible source of help when things go wrong in marriage.

Theme 3: The Social Cost of Choosing Love

Self-selected partner was seen as having emotional, social, and material implications. The participants explained that "parents see this as disobedience, and they take their rights and support away" (P17) and that such couples could be "humiliated and discriminated against by society and families" (P16). The stigma was perceived to extend to the couple's children, sometimes from the parents saying "your parents married by their own choice" or "your mother ran away with your father" (P20). The comments and labels "your mother/father had a relationship before marriage" and "bold" or "characterless" (P21) were felt to be gendered, and to persist despite the women's post-marital roles. Simultaneously, participants wondered about the connection between public and private respectability, as to what they perceived as respectable in public but not in private among men; and they dwelled on the notion that the nature of the relationship should be determined by the treatment of family members.

Theme 4 Marriage Quality Is More Complex Than the Love–Arranged Dichotomy

Participants were not inclined to characterize either type of marriage as successful or unsuccessful, denying "no marriage form should be judged to be inherently good or bad (P24"). Rather, they believed that marital functioning is multi-dimensional and is influenced by "individual, social, economic, religious, personality, communication, family and contextual factors" (P32). Focus turned not from how a marriage was formed to the relationship traits that are seen in daily interactions between the partners: respect, communication, fidelity, emotional availability, and responsibility; participants felt that how couples treat each other is more important than whether the marriage is love-based or not. Participants also noted that love marriage does not necessarily mean a stable marriage: "Love marriage can lead to marriage failures not because love marriage is failing itself" (P33).

Theme 5: Experiencing the suffering of marriage and rebuilding the meaning of marriage.

Family-of-origin experiences were significant reference points that mediated participants' understanding of marriage. "My parents' marriage was a very poor one" was written by one of the participants (P16). Some participants shared experiences of such paternal behaviors as infidelity, polygamous relationships, or abandonment: "My father cheated on my mother" (P18); "He had more than one wife" (P19) and "He left the immediate family to devote himself to others" (P20). Participants criticized a strict, instrumental view of fatherhood that is limited to the provision of monetary support or visits, and expressed a desire for a father who is more involved in his children's lives. Accompanying the experiences of intimate partner violence and chronic parental conflict were reports of marriage as potentially fearsome, insecure, and harmful to the relationship, with observations of divorce among siblings, friends, and relatives. These experiences resulted in a distancing from marriage for some of the participants: "I am afraid of marriage", "I don't want to get married" (P21). Singlehood was built to prevent dependency, abuse, abandonment, or re-establishing problematic relationships, and economic autonomy played a similar protective role: "I want to be economically independent so I don't have to rely on my husband like my mom" (P23). Importantly, the participants didn't just copy the patterns they had seen. "No more the kind of marriage my parents had" (P24) was written by one participant. Instead, they built up their ideas of peace, respect, loyalty, emotional availability, reciprocity, communication, and shared responsibility. For some, the experience of infidelity

reinforced the value of the concept of *wafadari* (faithfulness or fidelity), a desire for a relationship in which there is no need to pursue emotional or sexual relationships outside of it. Some also commented on non-marital relationships, breakups and emotional issues; these experiences were shaped in various ways outside the traditional marital frameworks, not assumed to be a result of parental relationships and experiences.

Discussion

This study explored the definitions of love, marriage, intimacy and future relationships of unmarried Pakistani youth in the context of their family and intergenerational experiences. The participants didn't split marriage between love and arranged marriage. Instead, they considered marriage in relation to the dynamic between two people, especially their emotional openness, communication, respect, *wafadari* (loyalty), reciprocity, companionship, and shared responsibility. This aligns with the findings of previous studies that indicated that marriage is no longer just seen as a responsibility or economic provider for young adults, but also as a source of emotional and relational fulfillment (Bhattacharyya & Range, 2025; KT & Ahmed, 2025; Lim et al., 2024). The participants would sometimes idealize love marriage as an opportunity for emotional relations, emotional choice, companionship, understanding, and happiness. They took the idea of intimacy beyond romantic love and expanded it to emotional, psychological, sexual, social, and practical dimensions. This is consistent with Maqsood's (2021) description of love as understanding amongst the middle classes and with the literature indicating that young people today are negotiating romantic attachment with their own aspirations and those of their families (Netting, 2006, 2010; Reed, 2025; Allendorf, 2013). Meanwhile, the participants admitted that love is not enough for a successful marriage. They placed their focus on communication, loyalty, sacrifice, and responsibility, which implies that they knew love in their daily interpersonal relationships. The mutual investment focus is also in line with the investment model that connects commitment to satisfaction and to the resources that partners invest in a relationship (Rusbult, 1980).

Collective responsibility, socioeconomic considerations, family background, and family involvement were more related to arranged marriage. Importantly, participants did not necessarily describe arranged marriage as being without individual agency, since there is scholarship that suggests that, arranged marriage can be consensual, negotiated, and can be a result of family and personal choice (Parkin, 2021; Tahir, 2021; Wurm, 2022). The involvement of family members was also considered a potential source of mediation and support, consistent with evidence from Pakistan, indicating that parental acceptance relates to increased marital satisfaction (Arif & Fatima, 2015). Therefore, participants' stories were complex and hybrid, rather than binary, between traditional and modern (Ji et al., 2024; Reed, 2025). A key finding was about the social impacts of choosing a partner. When participants faced rejection, stigma, humiliation, and a lack of support from their families because of love marriages, they reported such experiences. The previous studies also confirm that marriage selections in the South Asian milieu are still influenced by family reputation, kinship, religion, socioeconomic status, and community expectations (Khurshid, 2020; Pande, 2014; Qureshi et al., 2014). The present results build on this research by documenting the role that social narratives about parents' marriages can play in shaping children's family identities, thus perpetuating stigma across generations.

However, the most striking element of participants' stories was the one related to what they had seen in their parents' marriages. Parental conflict, parental disengagement, infidelity, polygamy, abandonment, unequal responsibility, and intimate partner violence were used as reference points to imagine future relationships. These patterns were not just copied by the participants; they were recreated. The greater emotional absence was associated with a greater value on emotional availability, the greater infidelity was associated with a greater value on loyalty, the greater disengagement with the father was associated with a greater value on shared parenting, and the greater economic dependency was associated with a greater desire for financial independence. This implies that intergenerational influence can take place in a conscious rejection/reconstruction or in a continuity mode extending the social learning and social attachment approaches (Bandura, 1977; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Krishnan & Ahmed, 2025). In sum, the results indicate that young adults' marriage aspirations are formed by a continual process of negotiation between their own

desires and their family experiences. Participants did not want “love” or “arrangement” but emotionally safe, respectful, loyal, communicative, reciprocal, and shared-responsibility relationships. The study therefore advances the knowledge of marriage as a lived relationality that has significance beyond the point of partnership selection.

Limitations

The sample included 34 unmarried Pakistani young adults (ages 19-23 years); this may not be generalizable to married young adults, older adults, or to other cultures. The sample size was larger for women than men, and there may be fewer men included in the sample than their actual number in the population. The data collected consisted of written narratives of some 2000 words, of which there were fewer opportunities to seek clarification and further questions than would have been in an interview. The participants' accounts were also self-reported, subjective and retrospective, and sensitive experiences within the family may have been selectively reported. Lastly, the findings are descriptive and not causal, and do not suggest any causal connections between family experiences and subsequent marital behavior.

Future Directions

These meanings could be investigated in larger and more varied samples in Pakistan comprising married and unmarried adults of varying ages, socio-economic status, region, and family structure in the future. Interview studies and longitudinal studies might investigate changes in expectations prior to and subsequent to marriage. Researchers might examine the cross-generational negotiation of love, arranged, and hybrid marriages. Further research might also explore the relationship between economic independence, emotional availability, communication, and later relationship expectations, and the gender differences and/or the experiences of those who reject or reconstruct patterns they saw in their families.

Implications

Results have implications for family psychology, premarital education, and relationship-based intervention. Love and arranged marriage should not be the only options considered in young adult programs, and the emphasis should be placed on communication, emotional availability, loyalty, conflict resolution, mutual respect, shared parenting, boundaries, and economic autonomy. Interventions based on the family could be a useful way to help youth differentiate between patterns they inherited from their families and their own values; premarital counseling may help them discuss their expectations about intimacy, responsibility, family involvement and gender roles. The results also highlight the importance of acknowledging family support as a relational resource and also working on the problematic relationships that include violence, abandonment, emotional neglect, and unequal responsibility.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is observed that the young adults in Pakistan form their appreciation of marriage through the interaction of aspirations and expectations of family and experiences of the previous generations. Participants did not see the nature of marriage (love or arranged) as enough to indicate its quality. Rather, they highlighted the elements of emotional availability, communication, respect, *wafadari* (loyalty), reciprocity, companionship, and shared responsibility. Coping with their parents' pain also had an impact on protective aspirations, including the desire for better relationships and more economic autonomy. Overall, participants appeared to be reconstructing, rather than simply replicating, the relationship patterns they had inherited. Marriage was thus understood as an ongoing relational process shaped by individual aspirations as well as by family and wider social environments.

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