

SOCIO-CULTURAL BELIEFS AND UNREALISTIC MARITAL
EXPECTATIONS: EFFECTS ON MARITAL SATISFACTION AND MENTAL
HEALTH IN PAKISTANI SOCIETY

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Abstract

This research focuses on the role of cultural beliefs and norms in relation to marital satisfaction and mental health issues in Pakistan and how idealistic views of marriage lead to mental health problems. Using self-discrepancy theory, it aims to explain how contrasts between the desired and real marital expectations influence mental well-being. The study reveals that cultural beliefs and family pressures affect marital happiness and, in turn, cause mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. Financial instability worsens these problems since financial stress increases marital disagreements and leads to psychological problems. Cultural and societal images of marriage that are unrealistic lead to marital discrepancies between expectations and realities, thus causing marital dissatisfaction and anxiety due to unmet expectations. The study highlights the need to consider cultural and economic factors in marital counselling and mental health interventions. Future work should extend these findings to other samples and at different times to reveal the long-term implications for marital satisfaction and mental health.

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important social institutions that is acknowledged by almost all cultures and societies, where it acts as a legal and moral bond between two people, as well as the backbone of society. It defines how families are formed and how social standards are maintained (Sussman, Steinmetz, & Peterson, 2013; Wallerstein, 2019). Although marriage is regarded as one of the most beautiful and celebrated social institutions, the difference between the real and the ideal in marriage can be detrimental to people's mental health. Culture and social and family expectations, however, make people have certain expectations of marriage which may not be consistent with the real situation one gets into

after marriage. This is due to the discrepancy between the theoretical and the actual, which results in psychological stress, causing stress, anxiety, and depression (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Likewise, marriage in most societies is surrounded by cultural norms and values that are aimed at maintaining social order, lineage, and honour of the family. In Eastern societies, for instance, marriage is not only a union of two individuals, but it is a social Union which is influenced by cultural norms, caste systems and family pressure (Theodore & Richard, 2014). Even though these practices are aimed at preserving the social order, they may also restrict individual autonomy, especially when it comes to marriage, as women are expected to adhere to certain norms set by

men. This makes people experience psychological pressure to meet such social standards as well as the conflict between their personal choice and social norms (Musick & Bumpass, 2012).

1.1. Intersection between marriage, self-discrepancy and mental health

Marriage thus generates the characteristics of structural roles in the sense that people are selected to be married, and married people are selected (or self-selected). Thus, those who can deal with new challenges related to the process of building better marriages are likely to experience better marital quality and maintain it while having a positive impact on their individual well-being and mental health (Arif & Fatima, 2015). Mental health, according to WHO, is the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of an individual, in which a person can achieve his or her full potential, adapt to the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to the community (WHO, 2022).

In the above definition, the WHO organisation has defined mental health as social, emotional and psychological well-being in a person's life. Emotional health relates to the overall state of a person who should have a feeling of satisfaction, happiness, pleasure, peace, and interest in life (Keyes & Waterman, 2003). On the other hand, psychological well-being means that an individual has good interpersonal relationships, has good adjustment to other people and can meet his/her daily responsibilities and is satisfied with his/her own life (Williams, 2003). Social well-being is the positive interpersonal relation with the community and the feeling of being accepted by the community, and also having some roles to perform in society, such as social participation, social achievement and social belongingness (Waite, Luo, & Lewin, 2009). Marital resources, economic, social and psychological, as well as emotional balance or the lack of it, are used to define marriage and mental wellbeing. People with fewer mental health conditions can also choose to enter into a partnership. These reasons are significant to the mental health of married young adults to different extents. Young adults may experience positive or negative impacts on their

mental health depending on various factors related to marriage (Mastekaasa, 1992; Ali & Maqsood, 2022).

Marriage can have either positive or negative effects on young adults' mental health based on cultural expectations and social pressure. In Pakistani society, marriage is considered a status symbol and a way of getting a peaceful and happy life. When young adults engage in marriage that is more consistent with their cultural expectations, for instance, family duties, gender relations, and mutual esteem, it positively impacts their psychological health by providing them with a sense of purpose, acceptance, and safety (Nawaz, Khan, & Zamir, 2022). However, the same cultural beliefs can also become a burden, especially when people are expected to meet certain standards that are impossible or unreasonably high. Expectations of marriage and roles and responsibilities, as well as financial status and sacrifices made in marriage, may not meet the set standards and thus result in disappointment (Ali, Krantz, Gul, et al. 2011). The difference between the expected and the real often leads to stress, anxiety, and even depression since people may feel entrapped and cannot fulfil the expectations set by society and their families (Fawad, Shahid, Shamim, et al. 2022). Furthermore, the societal expectation on the youth to get married may force an individual into a union that may not be suitable for them and may end up causing emotional strain, especially where the young adults are not ready for the roles and responsibilities that come with marriage. Hence, marrying can be one way of improving one's mental health, but can also be a cause of mental health problems given that it is society's expectation that may put a burden on marriage rather than providing support (Malik et al. 2020).

1.2. Previous theoretical findings

Previous research has focused on the differences between individuals' ideal and real marriage expectations and how these discrepancies affect their emotional and psychological wellness. The concept stems from the gap between the perceived role of marriage and the actual role that people encounter in marriage. This gap has been found to

have an impact on the mental health of individuals, especially on anxiety, depression, and emotional well-being (Monsma, 2014; Ola & Roopa, 2016). In a study by Grote and Clark (2001), they discovered that people who feel that there is a large difference between what they desire in marriage and what they have in marriage are likely to experience psychological problems. Marital expectations are very important when it comes to the quality of the marriage, as many studies have indicated that happy marriages result in emotional health, while unhappy marriages that involve unmet expectations result in emotional distress.

Studies show that healthy premarital expectations, that is, high but reasonable, are likely to lead to better outcomes and higher marital satisfaction in the future (Ngazimbi & Daire, 2013; Mousavi & Dehshiri, 2015). Lavner, Bradbury, and Karney (2012) noted that, however, unrealistic expectations lead to the sharp deterioration of marital quality over time, which results in poor mental health. They concluded that couples should have reasonable expectations to enhance their emotional health in marriage. The conflicts and stress, as well as the deterioration of mental health, such as anxiety and depression, can be consequences of romantic relationships that were initiated with high expectations and happy visions of love and marriage.

Analyzing mental health and marital stability, it can be stated that healthy marriages have been found to have a positive impact on the individuals' well-being. Stutzer and Frey (2006) established that people in marriage have higher levels of life satisfaction as well as fewer cases of serious depression than the unmarried or cohabiting persons. However, this benefit is dependent on the quality of marriage. Marital conflict and emotional disengagement in marriage have been associated with increased levels of psychological problems. Proulx, Helms, and Buehler (2007) have established that poor-quality marriages are likely to raise the risk of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts, showing how the real-ideal conflict can worsen mental health. These results indicate that even though marriage is said to improve one's emotional health and stability,

when the expectation and what one gets are different, then one is likely to experience mental health problems.

The effects of unfulfilled spousal expectations seem to be more prominent among the young people, due to the increased social expectations to attain the 'perfect' marriage. Uecker (2012) pointed out that married young adults may be more susceptible to the adverse mental health impact of marital discord because they are subjected to high social standards and have limited relationship experience to help them navigate through marital discontent. When these young adults experience a gap between the expected aspects of marriage and the actual life situations they encounter, they are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and other mental disorders. This highlights the need for counseling services for young couples, who may not be ready to deal with the challenges that come with marriage when they have high expectations that are not met.

In analyzing gender differences, several studies show that men and women generally have different expectations of marriage, which results in varied perceptions of the real-ideal gap. Women also have a higher tendency to focus on the emotional part of marriage, such as intimacy and communication. If these expectations are not achieved, then women are likely to develop emotional distress, as pointed out by Waller & McLanahan (2005). On the other hand, men tend to focus on tangible assistance and company, and although they may be disappointed with their partner's emotional needs, the psychological consequences are usually less severe. Fallahchai and Fallahi (2019) pointed out that this gender difference is useful for understanding why women experience more depression and anxiety in unhappy marriages than men do. While both men and women gain positive effects on mental health from marriage, Yucel and Koydemir (2015) indicated that marital quality has a greater impact on women. It has been found that women who have a high degree of similarity between the actual and ideal marriages have better mental health than women who have a low degree of similarity between the actual and ideal marriages. This could be as a result of the roles that are expected of

women in society and the culture in which they live, especially the roles that involve taking care of the husband's feelings within the marriage. Traditional gender norms may expect women to be the ones who regulate the emotional climate of the marriage, so when the marriage does not live up to these expectations, women may feel like failures (Jackson, Miller, & Oka, 2014).

Besides the gender differences, changes in societal culture and values have also played a role in altering the expectations of marriage. Kline, Zhang, and Manohar (2012) have conducted research that focuses on modern couples, especially those in Western countries, to discover that they are more challenged in managing the freedom that comes with marriage. The authors have noted that couples may encounter greater discrepancies between the ideal and real marriages due to the conflict between the old and new cultures that emphasize individualism. These conflicts often lead to marital dissonance and therefore affect the mental health of the parties involved by causing anxiety and depression. The real-ideal gap may also be expanded by the conflicts of the modern individualism with the conventional gender roles in marriage especially in societies that are in the process of change. This shows that there is a need to ensure that cultural factors are taken into consideration when it comes to marriage counseling as well as mental health treatment (Lam & Cross, 2016). Communication and conflict management strategies are some of the most important determinants of the real-ideal marriage gap. Married couples who discuss their needs and consciously solve the arising issues are more likely to have high levels of satisfaction in the marriage, which improves their mental health (Ruvolo & Veroff, 1997). According to Jacobs, Pazhoohi and Kingstone (2023), couples who are more likely to communicate their expectations and try to solve conjugal conflicts are likely to report better emotional health and less stress.

Although previous works offer a vast amount of knowledge about the real-ideal marriage gap and its effect on mental health (Casad & Salazar, 2015; Fedders & Knudson, 2009), there are still some research questions that need to be answered. First, there is a scarcity of studies that examined how

cultural differences affect the real-ideal marriage gap and its psychological consequences. Thus, most works are based on the Western population and thus fail to reveal how couples from other cultures perceive and manage the discrepancy between their expectations and actualities. A few studies have been conducted in the Pakistani cultural context (Qadir, Khalid, & Haqqani, 2013; Abbas, Aqeel, Shaher, et al., 2019; Ling, Abbas, Ziapour, et al., 2023; Zubair, 2021). Third, more longitudinal studies are required to explore how the real-ideal gap changes during the course of marriage, as most of the studies are based on short-term effects (Preotu & Turliuc, 2013; Ruvolo & Ruvolo, 2005). Thirdly, the gendered implications of unmet expectations need to be further investigated regarding the role that societal expectations and norms play in gender differences. Lastly, there is a lack of research on the efficacy of marital interventions which aim to assist couples in managing their expectations in marriage, since most of the research focuses on the consequences of dissatisfaction among couples. Filling these gaps could extend understanding of the relationship between marital expectations and mental health and inform more effective interventions for couples experiencing these problems.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

1.3.1. Self-Discrepancy Theory as the Foundation of the Study

Self-Discrepancy Theory, proposed by Higgins (1987), provides the principal theoretical lens for understanding how discrepancies between individuals' expectations and lived experiences influence psychological well-being. The theory suggests that people possess three major self-domains: the actual self (who they believe they are), the ideal self (who they wish to become), and the ought self (who they believe they should become according to social and cultural expectations). Psychological distress emerges when significant discrepancies exist among these self-domains. Within marriage, individuals often develop idealized expectations regarding emotional intimacy, financial stability, mutual respect, companionship, gender roles, and family relationships. These expectations are largely

shaped by family upbringing, religious beliefs, cultural traditions, media portrayals, and societal norms. When the realities of married life fail to match these expectations, individuals experience an expectation–reality discrepancy that may result in frustration, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, depressive symptoms, and reduced marital satisfaction.

In collectivistic societies such as Pakistan, marital relationships extend beyond the couple and involve strong family obligations, social approval, traditional gender expectations, and cultural values. Consequently, discrepancies between ideal and actual marital experiences become more complex because individuals attempt to satisfy both personal expectations and societal obligations simultaneously. Therefore, Self-Discrepancy Theory provides an appropriate framework for explaining how culturally shaped marital expectations influence psychological well-being within Pakistani society.

1.4. The current study

Drawing on self-discrepancy theory, the current research examines how ideal and actual selves are differentially related to mental health in traditional societies. Self-discrepancy theory, which was proposed to explain why people have different negative effects from comparable life events, suggests that there is a relationship between self-discrepancy and emotional state (Higgins, 1989). This research proposes to build on this theoretical framework by exploring how these self-discrepancies are operationalised within the context of marital relationships as well as cultural expectations. Most of the past research has been concerned with overall emotional reactions to self-discrepancy, and therefore, the present study provides a refined examination of how these discrepancies impinge on marital happiness and psychological well-being across culturally different contexts (Ottu & Akpan, 2011; Taylor & Kroeger, 2008). Thus, the current study finds that people in cultural collectivistic societies struggle more in the process of actual-self and ideal-self matching as compared to people in individualistic societies. This can cause the individual to feel sadder, more disappointed, and anxious, especially in marriage,

where cultural standards may limit one's ability to express oneself or attain one's potential.

In addition, the current research extends previous works by proposing a culturally sensitive framework. A couple of studies that have investigated gendered partner discrepancies and marital distress have been conducted in Western societies, for instance (Kilmann & Vendemia, 2013). The current research builds upon this research in traditional Pakistani society, where arranged marriages and cultural pressures are an issue. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the difference between the actual and the perceived state of marriage and how this difference impacts the mental health of individuals in Pakistani culture. Thus, this research aims at explaining the psychological effects of these discrepancies by analysing the role of cultural expectations in marriage choices and the strategies people use in dealing with the realities of marriage. This work underlines the significance of cultural and psychological aspects of marriage and provides recommendations for the ways people can manage the discrepancy between the ideal and real marriage. Although previous studies have investigated marital satisfaction, relationship quality, and mental health independently, limited research has explored how socio-cultural beliefs collectively shape unrealistic marital expectations that subsequently influence psychological well-being within Pakistani society. Most existing studies originate from Western populations, where marital structures, family systems, and cultural expectations differ considerably from collectivistic societies. Furthermore, previous research has largely relied on quantitative approaches, providing limited understanding of individuals' lived experiences. Therefore, the present qualitative study addresses this gap by exploring how cultural norms, family expectations, financial instability, gender roles, and media representations contribute to discrepancies between expected and actual marital experiences and ultimately affect mental health. Building on previous research and focusing on cultural and psychological dimensions, we address two primary questions:

Question 1: What is the impact of cultural beliefs, norms, and financial pressures on marriage in the Pakistani context on marital satisfaction and mental health?

Question 2: How much do the unrealistic expectations of marriage play a role in the development of mental health issues, and how do these expectations influence the difference between the expected marital experience and the real one?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the disparity between the idealized concept of marriage and its lived reality and to examine how this disparity influences the mental health of married and divorced individuals. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, beliefs, emotions, and perceptions that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, informal interviews, and focus group discussions to obtain rich, contextual, and experience-based information. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns concerning marital expectations, marital realities, and their implications for mental health.

2.2. Study Setting

The study was conducted at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. The university provides a culturally diverse environment, enrolling students from all provinces of Pakistan on regional merit. Participants represented various ethnic backgrounds, including Punjabi, Sindhi, Balochi, Pakhtun, Gilgiti, and Kashmiri communities. This diversity enabled the study to capture a broad range of perspectives on marriage, marital expectations, and psychological well-being.

2.3. Participants

The study included 25 participants (Table 1), comprising both male and female individuals who were either married or divorced. Participants were selected to ensure diversity in age, gender, educational level, marital status, and personal experiences of marriage. Although the majority were undergraduate and postgraduate students at Quaid-i-Azam University, they represented different cultural and regional backgrounds across Pakistan. This diversity enhanced the richness of the qualitative data and facilitated the exploration of varied perceptions regarding marriage and mental health.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics Frequency

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Gender	Male	12 (48%)
	Female	13 (52%)
Marital Status	Married	16 (64%)
	Divorced	9 (36%)
Age Group (Years)	20–25	10 (40%)
	26–30	9 (36%)
	31–35	4 (16%)
	>35	2 (8%)
Education	Undergraduate	14 (56%)
	Postgraduate	11 (44%)
Ethnic Background	Punjabi	8 (32%)
	Pakhtun	5 (20%)
	Sindhi	4 (16%)
	Balochi	3 (12%)

	Gilgiti	3 (12%)
	Kashmiri	2 (8%)

2.4. Sampling Technique

A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants. Initially, purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who met the inclusion criteria, namely adults who had experienced marriage or divorce and were willing to discuss their experiences. Subsequently, snowball sampling was adopted, whereby initial participants referred other eligible individuals, particularly divorced participants or those facing marital challenges who were reluctant to participate due to the sensitive nature of the topic. This combined sampling strategy facilitated access to information-rich participants while ensuring diversity in marital experiences and cultural backgrounds.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were rigorously observed throughout the research process. Before data collection, participants received a detailed explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, and expected outcomes. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed verbal consent was obtained from every participant before interviews and focus group discussions commenced.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning identification codes rather than recording participants' names, and all collected information was used exclusively for research purposes. Considering the sensitive nature of discussions related to marriage, divorce, and mental health, interviews were conducted in private and comfortable locations selected by the participants, such as their homes, university meeting rooms, libraries, or quiet cafés. The researcher remained sensitive to participants' emotional well-being throughout the interviews and discontinued or redirected discussions whenever participants experienced discomfort.

2.6. Data Collection

Data were collected using three complementary qualitative techniques: in-depth interviews, informal interviews, and focus group discussions. In-depth interviews served as the primary source of data and enabled participants to narrate their personal experiences regarding marriage, unmet expectations, marital satisfaction, family pressures, and psychological well-being. Semi-structured interview guides were used to maintain consistency while allowing participants the flexibility to discuss issues they considered important. Probing questions were employed to obtain detailed explanations regarding coping strategies, emotional responses, societal expectations, and marital conflicts.

Informal interviews were conducted through naturally occurring conversations in relaxed settings, allowing participants to express opinions that might not have emerged during formal interviews. These conversations provided supplementary insights and contextual understanding. Focus group discussions consisted of 5–6 participants per group. These discussions encouraged participants to exchange experiences, compare perspectives, and collectively reflect on cultural norms surrounding marriage. Group interaction generated additional insights into shared beliefs, societal expectations, and psychological consequences of unmet marital expectations. The researcher moderated all discussions to ensure balanced participation and maintain alignment with the research objectives.

2.7. Data Collection Procedure

Following participant recruitment and informed consent, interviews and focus group discussions were scheduled at times and locations convenient for participants. Each participant received a briefing regarding the purpose of the study and the procedures involved before data collection commenced. Individual interviews lasted approximately 45–60 min, whereas focus group discussions lasted between 60 and 120 min, depending on the level of interaction among

participants. With participants' permission, all interviews and discussions were audio-recorded to ensure accurate data capture. Field notes documenting contextual observations, participant interactions, and non-verbal expressions were also maintained to complement the interview transcripts.

2.8 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, a widely accepted method for qualitative research. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. The analysis involved six stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Coding was conducted using both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive codes were informed by existing literature on marriage expectations and mental health, while inductive codes emerged directly from participants' narratives.

The analysis generated six major themes:

1. Cultural Pressures and Gender Roles in Marital Satisfaction
2. Familial Expectations and Marital Dynamics
3. Idealized versus Realistic Expectations of Marriage
4. Financial Stability, Marital Satisfaction, and Psychological Well-being
5. Marital Expectations and Relationship Dynamics
6. Social Media and Cultural Representations of Marriage

These themes collectively illustrate how cultural expectations, family influences, financial pressures, and idealized perceptions of marriage contribute to marital dissatisfaction and psychological distress. The themes were refined through repeated comparison across transcripts to ensure they accurately reflected participants' lived experiences and addressed the study objectives.

2.9. Trustworthiness of the Findings

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, the study followed the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of the interpreted findings. Transferability was strengthened by providing rich descriptions of the study context and participant characteristics. Dependability was achieved through systematic documentation of data collection and thematic coding procedures. Confirmability was maintained by preserving an audit trail and reflective notes throughout the analytical process, minimizing researcher bias during interpretation.

3. Results

3.1. Theme 1. Cultural Pressures and Gender Roles Shape Marital Satisfaction and Psychological Well-being

This theme emerged as one of the most dominant findings of the study, with most participants reporting that traditional cultural beliefs and gender-role expectations substantially influenced both marital satisfaction and psychological well-being. Across interviews and focus group discussions, participants consistently described how socially prescribed expectations for husbands and wives created a discrepancy between their ideal perceptions of marriage and their lived marital experiences. This mismatch frequently resulted in marital dissatisfaction, emotional strain, and symptoms of psychological distress. As presented in Table 2, participants identified four closely related issues that contributed to marital dissatisfaction: (i) traditional expectations regarding women's submissiveness, (ii) pressure on men to fulfill the breadwinner role, (iii) restricted emotional expression within marriage, and (iv) the discrepancy between idealized and actual marital roles. Collectively, these experiences illustrate how cultural expectations shaped both relationship quality and mental health. Approximately two-thirds of the female participants described experiencing pressure to conform to traditional expectations of obedience, sacrifice, and submissiveness within marriage. Participants explained that these expectations frequently restricted their autonomy, reduced their

participation in household decision-making, and limited their ability to express personal emotions and opinions. One divorced participant stated:

“In our culture, a woman is expected to be submissive to her husband. It made me feel powerless, and over time that affected my mental health. The constant stress eventually contributed to our separation.”

This narrative demonstrates that traditional gender norms may diminish women's sense of personal agency and psychological well-being. Rather than perceiving marriage as an equal partnership, participants frequently described feelings of helplessness, frustration, and emotional exhaustion when cultural expectations conflicted with their personal values and expectations. These findings illustrate the expectation–reality discrepancy proposed by Self-Discrepancy Theory, whereby conflict between one's ideal marital relationship and actual lived experiences generates emotional distress. Similarly, most male participants reported experiencing considerable pressure to fulfill the culturally prescribed role of family provider. Participants explained that financial responsibility, combined with expectations to provide emotional support, created persistent psychological pressure, particularly during periods of economic uncertainty. One participant explained:

“The expectation to provide for my family financially and emotionally is overwhelming. No matter how hard I work, I often feel that I am never doing enough, and that pressure affects both my marriage and my mental health.”

The experiences reported by male participants indicate that traditional masculine norms also contribute substantially to psychological burden. Many participants associated their personal worth with their ability to meet financial responsibilities and reported feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and diminished self-confidence whenever these expectations could not be fulfilled. Consequently, financial pressures frequently intensified marital disagreements, reduced emotional intimacy, and

negatively affected overall marital satisfaction. Beyond gender-specific expectations, many participants highlighted that rigid cultural norms discouraged open emotional expression and effective communication between spouses. Participants reported suppressing their emotions to avoid criticism, family conflict, or social disapproval. Although these behaviors were often intended to preserve family harmony, they frequently resulted in emotional distancing, reduced mutual understanding, and unresolved marital conflicts.

The findings further suggest that emotional suppression acted as an important pathway linking cultural expectations with declining marital quality. Participants repeatedly described how the inability to communicate openly increased frustration, weakened emotional intimacy, and contributed to chronic psychological stress. Overall, participants consistently described a persistent gap between their ideal expectations of marriage and their actual marital experiences. In accordance with Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), this expectation–reality discrepancy emerged as a major contributor to psychological distress. Individuals who perceived larger discrepancies reported greater levels of stress, anxiety, disappointment, emotional exhaustion, and marital dissatisfaction. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that cultural gender norms extend beyond defining marital responsibilities; they shape individual identity, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being. Rather than functioning solely as social expectations, these norms appear to operate as psychological stressors that influence both relationship quality and mental health. The findings therefore identify cultural gender-role expectations as one of the primary mechanisms through which unrealistic marital expectations contribute to reduced marital satisfaction and adverse mental health outcomes within the Pakistani sociocultural context.

Table 2. Summary of the Cultural Pressures and Gender Roles in Marital Satisfaction

Subtheme	Representative findings
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Traditional gender expectations	Participants described culturally defined roles and responsibilities assigned to husbands and wives.
Expectations of women	Women reported expectations of obedience, caregiving, household management, and maintaining family harmony.
Expectations of men	Men reported expectations of providing financial security, family leadership, and emotional support.
Marital experiences	Participants described limited communication, emotional strain, and difficulties fulfilling socially prescribed roles.
Psychological impact	Participants reported stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, frustration, and reduced marital satisfaction.

3.2. Theme 2. Familial Expectations Shape Marital Dynamics and Psychological Well-being

This theme emerged as another major finding of the study, with most participants describing the influential role of parents and extended family members in shaping marital relationships. Participants consistently reported that family expectations extended beyond emotional support and often involved direct participation in marital decision-making, creating tension between the couple's personal preferences and their obligations toward the extended family. These experiences frequently contributed to reduced marital satisfaction and heightened psychological distress. As summarized in Table 3, participants identified four interrelated issues: parental and in-law interference in marital decisions, conflicting loyalties between spouses and parents, limited marital privacy, and emotional suppression to preserve family harmony. Collectively, these factors created persistent pressure that negatively influenced both relationship quality and mental health. Most participants reported that parents and in-laws played a significant role in decisions concerning finances, household management, child-rearing, and interpersonal relationships. Many participants felt that their marital autonomy was constrained because important decisions required approval from family members rather than being made jointly by the couple. One female participant expressed her frustration by stating:

"I feel like I am married to his family, especially his parents. We have to consult them about almost every decision, and that creates constant conflict between us."

This quotation illustrates how excessive family involvement may undermine marital independence and weaken the emotional bond between spouses. Rather than strengthening family relationships, participants perceived continuous parental involvement as reducing their ability to develop an independent marital identity. Several participants described feeling that their marriage was shaped more by family expectations than by mutual understanding between partners. Many married participants also described experiencing divided loyalties as they attempted to satisfy both their spouses and their parents. Male participants, in particular, explained that balancing these competing responsibilities often resulted in emotional exhaustion and feelings of inadequacy. One participant remarked:

"It is a daily battle to keep my wife happy while making sure my parents are not upset. Sometimes I feel like I am living two different lives, and it becomes emotionally exhausting."

This narrative demonstrates the psychological burden associated with competing family obligations. Participants frequently reported experiencing guilt, frustration, and emotional conflict because fulfilling one set of expectations often meant disappointing another. Such competing demands contributed to declining marital satisfaction by limiting opportunities for open communication and shared decision-making.

between spouses. Approximately two-thirds of participants further indicated that limited marital privacy reduced opportunities to establish emotional intimacy. Participants explained that frequent family involvement often prevented them from resolving disagreements independently or expressing personal opinions without fear of criticism. One female participant explained:

"I have reached a point where I feel anxious all the time. Every decision is monitored, and I no longer feel that our marriage belongs only to the two of us."

Participants associated this lack of privacy with increasing emotional isolation and reduced relationship satisfaction. The inability to establish healthy interpersonal boundaries contributed to feelings of helplessness, frustration, and continuous psychological strain. Many participants believed that constant family oversight prevented the development of trust and emotional closeness within their marriages. Many female participants, and several male participants, also described suppressing their own emotions to maintain family harmony and avoid conflict with parents or in-laws. Women frequently reported sacrificing their own emotional needs to meet the expectations of their husband's family, whereas men described compromising between parental demands and marital responsibilities. One male participant reflected:

"Balancing my responsibilities toward my wife and my parents is extremely difficult. I often feel that I am constantly compromising and losing my own identity."

This quotation demonstrates how prolonged emotional suppression contributed to chronic

psychological distress. Participants explained that continuously prioritizing family expectations over personal needs generated resentment, emotional fatigue, anxiety, and depressive feelings. These experiences further weakened communication between spouses and reduced overall marital satisfaction. Collectively, these findings illustrate that family expectations extend beyond practical support and become deeply embedded within the emotional functioning of marriage. In accordance with Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), participants experienced significant psychological distress when their ideal expectations of an autonomous marital relationship conflicted with the realities of strong family involvement and cultural obligations. The discrepancy between desired marital independence and actual family interference emerged as a central mechanism contributing to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and marital dissatisfaction. Overall, the findings indicate that extended family expectations play a pivotal role in shaping marital dynamics within Pakistani society. Although family involvement is culturally valued and often intended to strengthen family cohesion, participants frequently perceived excessive interference as limiting marital autonomy, reducing emotional intimacy, and increasing psychological vulnerability. These findings suggest that achieving a balance between cultural family obligations and couple independence may be essential for promoting healthier marital relationships and better mental health outcomes.

Table 2. Familial Expectations and Their Influence on Marital Dynamics and Mental Health

Subtheme	Qualitative Frequency	Illustrative Findings	Influence on Marital Satisfaction	Mental Health Outcomes
Parental and in-law interference	Most participants	Parents and in-laws were actively involved in marital decision-making and daily family life.	Reduced couple autonomy, increased marital conflict, and weakened spousal relationships.	Chronic stress, frustration, emotional exhaustion.

Conflicting family loyalties	Many married participants	Participants struggled to balance the expectations of spouses and parents simultaneously.	Emotional tension, divided loyalties, and declining marital satisfaction.	Anxiety, guilt, psychological burden.
Limited marital privacy	Approximately two-thirds of participants	Participants reported little opportunity to make independent decisions as a couple.	Reduced emotional intimacy and communication.	Feelings of powerlessness and emotional isolation.
Emotional suppression to preserve family harmony	Many female participants and several male participants	Participants concealed personal feelings to avoid conflict with extended family members.	Increased resentment, unresolved conflicts, and poorer relationship quality.	Anxiety, depressive feelings, emotional distress.

3.3. Theme 3. Idealized versus Realistic Expectations of Marriage and Their Influence on Mental Health

This theme emerged as a central finding of the study, with most participants describing a substantial gap between their idealized expectations of marriage and the realities they experienced after marriage. Participants consistently reported that expectations regarding their spouse's personality, emotional support, communication, physical characteristics, and marital roles were often shaped by cultural values, family beliefs, and personal aspirations. When these expectations were not fulfilled, participants described experiencing disappointment, reduced marital satisfaction, and psychological distress. As presented in Table 4, participants identified four interrelated dimensions of unrealistic marital expectations: (i) expectations of honesty and emotional compatibility, (ii) expectations regarding support and physical attributes, (iii) discrepancies between expected and actual marital experiences, and (iv) challenges in adjusting to marital reality. Together, these findings illustrate how unrealistic expectations influenced relationship quality and mental well-being. Approximately two-thirds of the female

participants emphasized that trust, honesty, emotional maturity, responsibility, and education were fundamental characteristics of an ideal marital relationship. Many women described entering marriage with expectations of mutual respect, emotional understanding, and equal partnership. One participant explained:

"I believe that honesty is the key in any marriage. If you cannot trust your partner, then what is the point? I wanted my husband to be educated, open-minded, and wise."

This quotation illustrates that female participants primarily valued emotional security and interpersonal trust when defining an ideal marriage. However, when these expectations were not fulfilled, participants frequently reported feelings of disappointment, emotional frustration, and declining marital satisfaction. Several women explained that unmet expectations gradually weakened emotional intimacy and contributed to persistent psychological stress. In contrast, most male participants described ideal marital expectations centered on emotional support, understanding, compatibility, companionship, and, in some cases, physical attractiveness and age. One participant commented:

"I wanted someone who is not only beautiful but also supportive and understanding. It is important to have someone who can grow with you. I preferred a younger woman as my wife."

The narratives of male participants suggest that both emotional and physical expectations influenced perceptions of marital quality. While emotional compatibility remained highly valued, several participants acknowledged that unrealistic expectations regarding physical appearance or ideal partner characteristics sometimes created dissatisfaction when actual marital experiences differed from these preconceived ideals. Most participants further explained that the discrepancy between premarital expectations and everyday marital realities represented one of the greatest challenges affecting relationship quality. Participants reported that marriage involved responsibilities, compromises, financial pressures, and interpersonal adjustments that had not been anticipated before marriage. Consequently, many experienced disappointment as their idealized perceptions gradually conflicted with daily marital experiences.

Participants consistently described this expectation-reality discrepancy as a major source of emotional strain. Many explained that unmet expectations generated feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and uncertainty regarding the success of their marriage. Several participants also reported questioning their own decisions or blaming themselves when their marriages failed to resemble the idealized relationships they had envisioned before marriage. Many participants additionally described difficulties adapting to changing marital realities over time. Rather than adjusting their expectations, some individuals continued comparing their spouses with their original ideals, resulting in ongoing dissatisfaction

and repeated interpersonal conflict. Participants explained that this constant comparison reduced emotional closeness and limited opportunities for mutual understanding and relationship growth. These findings indicate that unrealistic marital expectations influence psychological well-being through multiple pathways. Beyond reducing marital satisfaction, discrepancies between expected and actual marital experiences contributed to chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, reduced self-esteem, and depressive feelings. Participants repeatedly associated unmet expectations with diminished confidence in both themselves and their marital relationships, demonstrating the close relationship between marital experiences and mental health.

The findings strongly support the assumptions of Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), which proposes that psychological distress emerges when individuals experience discrepancies between their ideal self and their actual experiences. Within the present study, participants frequently described an inconsistency between their ideal image of marriage and the realities of married life. The greater this discrepancy, the greater the reported emotional distress, marital dissatisfaction, and psychological burden. Overall, this theme demonstrates that idealized perceptions of marriage, shaped by cultural beliefs, family expectations, and personal aspirations, frequently conflict with the realities of married life. These discrepancies not only undermine marital satisfaction but also contribute substantially to adverse mental health outcomes. The findings therefore identify unrealistic marital expectations as a key mechanism linking cultural beliefs with marital dissatisfaction and psychological distress within the Pakistani sociocultural context.

Table 4. Summary of the Idealized versus Realistic Expectations of Marriage

Subtheme	Qualitative Frequency	Illustrative Findings	Influence on Marital Satisfaction	Mental Health Outcomes
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Expectations of honesty and emotional compatibility	Approximately two-thirds of female participants	Women emphasized honesty, trust, education, mutual respect, and emotional maturity as essential marital qualities.	Greater disappointment when expectations were unmet; reduced relationship satisfaction.	Anxiety, frustration, emotional distress.
Expectations regarding support and physical attributes	Most male participants	Men valued emotional support, understanding, compatibility, and physical attractiveness.	Unrealistic partner expectations contributed to dissatisfaction and interpersonal conflict.	Stress, disappointment, reduced self-esteem.
Expectation-reality discrepancy	Most participants	Participants reported that actual marital experiences differed substantially from premarital expectations.	Declining marital fulfillment and emotional intimacy.	Psychological distress, self-doubt, depressive feelings.
Adjustment to marital reality	Many participants	Participants described difficulty adapting to differences between idealized and actual relationships.	Increased conflict and reduced relationship quality.	Emotional exhaustion, anxiety, dissatisfaction.

3.4. Theme 4. Financial Stability as a Determinant of Marital Satisfaction and Mental Health

Financial stability emerged as one of the most influential factors affecting marital satisfaction and psychological well-being. Most participants described financial insecurity as a persistent source of marital tension that affected communication, emotional intimacy, and overall relationship quality. Participants consistently explained that economic pressures extended beyond financial concerns and frequently influenced emotional functioning, personal identity, and psychological health within marriage. As summarized in Table 5, participants identified four interrelated aspects of

financial instability: (i) financial strain as a source of marital conflict, (ii) cultural expectations regarding the breadwinner role, (iii) reduced emotional intimacy caused by financial stress, and (iv) diminished self-worth associated with financial insecurity. Together, these findings demonstrate that financial challenges operate as both economic and psychological stressors within marital relationships. Most participants reported that financial difficulties frequently triggered disagreements regarding household expenditures, children's needs, future planning, and everyday financial responsibilities. Participants explained that economic uncertainty often shifted attention away from emotional support and toward

concerns about meeting basic family needs. One female participant described her experience:

"When finances are stretched, it feels as though the rest of life is falling apart. There is more conflict, and it becomes difficult to think about anything except how we will manage the next paycheck. Money eventually becomes the centre of our relationship."

This quotation illustrates how prolonged financial stress can transform routine economic concerns into chronic interpersonal conflict. Rather than functioning solely as a practical challenge, financial hardship reduced opportunities for constructive communication and emotional connection, thereby weakening marital satisfaction. Many participants described financial pressure as gradually replacing affection and mutual understanding with frustration and repeated disagreements. Most male participants further emphasized the psychological burden associated with fulfilling the culturally prescribed role of family breadwinner. Participants explained that financial instability often created feelings of personal failure because societal expectations associated masculinity with the ability to provide economic security. One participant explained:

"There is always pressure to meet all the needs of my family. When financial problems arise, it feels like the whole world is on my shoulders. I begin to question myself as a husband and even as a man."

The narratives indicate that financial insecurity significantly influenced male participants' self-esteem and psychological well-being. Many described feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and emotional exhaustion when they perceived themselves as unable to fulfill their financial responsibilities. Participants frequently linked these experiences with heightened anxiety, persistent stress, and symptoms consistent with depressive emotional states. Approximately two-thirds of participants also explained that financial pressures gradually reduced emotional intimacy within marriage. Couples reported spending increasing amounts of time discussing financial obligations while having fewer opportunities to communicate about emotional needs or relationship concerns. Several participants stated that economic hardship limited quality time

together and contributed to emotional distancing between spouses. Participants consistently associated prolonged financial stress with declining relationship quality. Many explained that unresolved financial concerns frequently escalated into interpersonal conflicts, reducing mutual understanding and weakening emotional support. Consequently, financial instability emerged not only as an economic challenge but also as a significant contributor to declining marital satisfaction.

Many participants further described financial insecurity as affecting their personal sense of competence and self-worth. Individuals explained that persistent financial difficulties often led them to perceive themselves as unsuccessful partners, particularly when comparing their circumstances with societal expectations or the perceived success of other families. These perceptions contributed to self-doubt, emotional fatigue, and chronic psychological strain. The findings therefore demonstrate that financial instability influences mental health through multiple psychological pathways. Participants repeatedly associated economic hardship with anxiety, emotional exhaustion, frustration, diminished self-esteem, and reduced confidence in their ability to maintain successful marital relationships. These emotional consequences frequently reinforced marital conflict, creating a reciprocal cycle in which financial stress and relationship dissatisfaction intensified one another. Consistent with Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), participants experienced psychological distress when the reality of their financial circumstances conflicted with their ideal expectations of providing financial security and maintaining a stable family life. The discrepancy between desired economic stability and actual financial conditions generated feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and emotional strain, thereby contributing to reduced marital satisfaction and poorer psychological well-being. Overall, these findings suggest that financial stability represents more than an economic resource within marriage; it serves as a critical determinant of relationship quality, emotional functioning, and mental health.

Table 5. Financial Stability, Marital Satisfaction, and Psychological Well-being

Subtheme	Qualitative Frequency	Illustrative Findings	Influence on Marital Satisfaction	Mental Health Outcomes
Financial strain as a source of marital conflict	Most participants	Financial hardship increased disagreements over household expenses and future planning.	Frequent conflict, reduced communication, declining marital satisfaction.	Stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion.
Breadwinner responsibility	Most male participants	Men perceived strong cultural expectations to provide financial security for their families.	Feelings of inadequacy and relationship strain during economic hardship.	Low self-esteem, anxiety, depressive symptoms.
Financial stress reducing emotional intimacy	Approximately two-thirds of participants	Economic concerns became the dominant focus of daily life, reducing emotional connection between spouses.	Reduced intimacy, communication difficulties, emotional distancing.	Psychological distress and frustration.
Financial insecurity and self-worth	Many participants	Participants linked financial difficulties with personal failure and diminished confidence.	Lower relationship satisfaction and increased marital tension.	Emotional burden, self-doubt, chronic stress.

3.5. Theme 5. Marital Expectations Influence Relationship Dynamics and Psychological Well-being

This theme emerged as a significant finding of the study, with most participants describing how culturally shaped marital expectations influenced everyday relationship dynamics, communication, and emotional well-being. Participants consistently explained that marital relationships were governed not only by personal expectations but also by deeply embedded cultural and family norms that prescribed appropriate behaviors for husbands and wives. When these expectations conflicted with individual beliefs or relationship needs, participants reported increased marital dissatisfaction and psychological distress. As summarized in Table 6, participants identified

four interrelated dimensions of marital expectations: (i) traditional expectations regarding marital roles, (ii) conflict between personal and societal expectations, (iii) challenges associated with fulfilling multiple marital responsibilities, and (iv) the influence of unrealistic expectations on communication and conflict management. Collectively, these findings demonstrate how culturally prescribed expectations shape relationship quality and psychological well-being. Most participants described experiencing pressure to conform to traditional marital roles that defined how husbands and wives should behave within marriage. Participants explained that these expectations frequently limited individual autonomy and created unequal responsibilities

between spouses. One female participant reflected:

"I was raised to believe that marriage means making your husband a priority in every way, but when I did not receive what I needed from him, it caused a lot of tension in the relationship. People expect you to be the perfect wife, the perfect mother, and the perfect worker, but it is impossible to be all that at once. I came into marriage believing it would be a partnership, yet I often feel that I must fit into a role that does not reflect who I am, and it has affected my relationship with my spouse."

This quotation illustrates the conflict between culturally prescribed marital roles and participants' personal expectations of equality and mutual support. Female participants frequently reported that attempting to satisfy multiple expectations simultaneously generated emotional exhaustion, frustration, and disappointment. The inability to reconcile these competing roles often reduced emotional intimacy and overall marital satisfaction. Approximately two-thirds of participants further explained that personal expectations frequently conflicted with societal and familial norms. Participants described experiencing tension when their individual beliefs regarding equality, communication, and shared decision-making differed from traditional cultural expectations. Several participants explained that these conflicting expectations contributed to misunderstandings and recurring marital disagreements. Participants consistently reported that discrepancies between personal values and cultural obligations created persistent emotional strain. Many explained that compromising personal expectations to satisfy societal standards often resulted in feelings of resentment, reduced self-confidence, and declining relationship satisfaction. These experiences suggest that cultural expectations frequently limited opportunities for authentic communication and mutual understanding between spouses. Many participants also discussed the difficulty of simultaneously fulfilling multiple marital responsibilities. Women described balancing expectations related to caregiving, household management, employment, and motherhood, whereas men explained the challenges of serving

as both emotional caregivers and financial providers. One male participant commented:

"I always feel the pressure to be both the carer and the provider because of cultural expectations. It is difficult to balance supporting my wife emotionally while also providing financial security. I feel emotionally and mentally drained, and it has affected my marriage."

This narrative highlights the cumulative psychological burden associated with multiple and often competing marital responsibilities. Participants described experiencing emotional fatigue, persistent stress, and reduced relationship satisfaction when they perceived themselves as unable to fulfill every expectation simultaneously. These pressures frequently weakened emotional connection between spouses and reduced opportunities for supportive communication. Most participants additionally emphasized that unrealistic marital expectations negatively influenced conflict resolution and everyday communication. Participants explained that disagreements frequently arose because spouses entered marriage with different assumptions regarding responsibilities, emotional support, and relationship priorities. When these expectations remained unspoken or unrealistic, conflicts became more difficult to resolve and often persisted over time.

Participants repeatedly associated unrealistic expectations with ineffective communication, unresolved disagreements, and declining emotional intimacy. Many described making continuous personal sacrifices to preserve marital harmony, yet these efforts often resulted in emotional distancing rather than improved relationship quality. Consequently, unrealistic expectations emerged as an important factor contributing to both marital dissatisfaction and psychological distress. The findings further demonstrate that marital expectations influence mental health through multiple psychological pathways. Participants frequently associated unmet expectations with stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, frustration, and reduced self-esteem. These emotional responses often reinforced relationship difficulties, creating a reciprocal cycle in which declining marital satisfaction further intensified psychological distress. Consistent with

Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), participants experienced psychological discomfort when their actual marital experiences differed from their ideal expectations of marriage. The discrepancy between expected partnership, emotional reciprocity, and shared responsibilities

versus the realities of culturally prescribed marital roles generated frustration, emotional conflict, and reduced psychological well-being. The greater the perceived discrepancy, the greater the reported marital dissatisfaction and mental health burden.

Table 6. Influence of Marital Expectations on Relationship Dynamics

Subtheme	Qualitative Frequency	Illustrative Findings	Influence of Marital Satisfaction on Mental Health Outcomes	
Traditional marital role expectations	Most participants	Participants described pressure to conform to culturally prescribed marital roles.	Reduced relationship equality and increased marital dissatisfaction.	Stress, frustration, emotional exhaustion.
Conflict between personal and societal expectations	Approximately two-thirds of participants	Individual expectations often conflicted with cultural and family norms.	Frequent disagreements, reduced communication, relationship tension.	Anxiety, emotional strain, reduced self-esteem.
Balancing multiple marital responsibilities	Many participants	Participants struggled to fulfill multiple social, family, and marital roles simultaneously.	Emotional fatigue and declining relationship quality.	Burnout, psychological distress.
Unrealistic expectations and conflict management	Most participants	Unrealistic expectations complicated communication and conflict resolution.	Poor conflict management, emotional distancing, lower marital satisfaction.	Chronic stress, frustration, depressive feelings.

3.6. Theme 6: Effects of Social Media and Cultural Representation on Marital Expectations

This theme emerged as an important finding of the study, with most participants describing social media and cultural representations as influential sources of unrealistic marital expectations. Participants consistently reported that social media platforms, television dramas, and films portray idealized images of marriage characterized by constant happiness, romance, financial prosperity, and emotional perfection. These

portrayals often created unrealistic standards against which participants evaluated their own marital relationships. As a result, many participants experienced dissatisfaction with their marriages, accompanied by increased psychological distress when their lived experiences failed to match these idealized representations. Approximately two-thirds of the female participants explained that frequent exposure to seemingly "perfect" couples on social media encouraged continuous comparison with their

own relationships. One participant described this experience:

"Every time I log into social media, I see couples that look perfect, vacationing, always loving, romanticising their relationship, and that makes me feel like my marriage is not so fancy and healthy. It is hard not to compare ourselves to others."

This quotation illustrates how exposure to idealized online content shaped participants' perceptions of what constitutes a successful marriage. Rather than viewing social media as entertainment, many participants internalized these portrayals as realistic standards, leading to feelings of inadequacy when their own relationships did not reflect similar experiences. Such comparisons frequently reduced marital satisfaction and contributed to anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional dissatisfaction. Many male participants similarly reported that media representations influenced their expectations regarding an ideal spouse and marital life. Participants explained that movies, television dramas, and social media often portrayed unrealistic images of beauty, happiness, and marital harmony that were difficult to achieve in everyday life. One participant stated:

"Social media gives me an image of a perfect wife—beautiful, happy, and always ready—and I tend to get discouraged when I do not have the same in my relationship. Movies and TV shows make everything look perfect, which is not the case in my life. This makes me feel like my marriage is failing whenever I compare it to what I see on the screen."

The narratives of male participants indicate that media exposure influenced not only expectations regarding physical appearance but also assumptions about emotional behavior and relationship success. Participants described experiencing disappointment and frustration when their real-life relationships differed from these highly idealized portrayals, resulting in increased marital dissatisfaction and emotional strain. Some participants further explained that social media reinforced traditional gender roles and unrealistic expectations regarding husbands' and wives' responsibilities within marriage. Participants believed that media frequently portrayed marriage as a relationship characterized

by constant romance, effortless communication, and uninterrupted happiness while overlooking everyday challenges such as financial pressures, family responsibilities, and interpersonal disagreements. Consequently, many participants entered marriage with expectations that were difficult to sustain in reality.

Participants consistently associated these unrealistic comparisons with declining marital satisfaction and poorer psychological well-being. Many reported experiencing feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, disappointment, and reduced self-esteem when comparing their own relationships with the idealized marriages presented online. These comparisons often generated dissatisfaction even among participants who otherwise considered their marriages stable, highlighting the powerful influence of media-generated expectations on relationship perceptions. Consistent with Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), participants experienced psychological distress when the idealized image of marriage promoted through social media and cultural representations conflicted with the realities of their own marital experiences. The discrepancy between these idealized standards and everyday marital life contributed to emotional frustration, dissatisfaction, and negative self-evaluation. The findings therefore suggest that media-driven expectations represent an important psychological mechanism through which unrealistic marital ideals contribute to reduced marital satisfaction and poorer mental health within the Pakistani sociocultural context.

4. Discussion

The research offers a comprehensive understanding of the role of cultural norms, family expectations, and an idealised image of a spouse in marital happiness and mental health. The findings suggest the interconnections of these factors in accordance with the previous research and provide current understandings of marital dynamics in the Pakistani culture. The findings of the present study align with prior studies on the effects of cultural idealism and familial pressure on the marital happiness and psychological well-being of couples. For instance, (Kline, Zhang &

Manohar, 2012; Lam & Cross 2016) discuss how the societal norms and expectations regarding gender and family in Pakistani culture lead to marital discord and psychological distress. These studies are pertinent to the present study, as the cultural and familial pressures play a pivotal role in influencing marital relations and an individual's health. For instance, women in Pakistani society are subjected to powerlessness and forced to be submissive, which leads to feelings of psychological distress. On the other hand, men experience pressure to be the provider and the head of the family, which may lead to stress, inadequacy, and marital discontent.

The findings of the study on the impact of familial expectations on marital dynamics are similar to the study conducted by Abbas, Aqeel, Shaher, et al. (2019) and Ali & Maqsood (2022), which shows how pressure from other family members worsens the marital relationship and increases stress levels. The current research builds on these findings by showing that familial expectations are not only material but also emotional and psychological in nature. Based on the findings, participants expressed a sense of being trapped between their spouses and other family members, which resulted in emotional isolation and poor marital quality. This dynamic undermines the couple's independence and creates friction that prevents the formation of a healthy marriage relationship. Financial stability was identified as a significant determinant of marital happiness and psychological well-being, supporting the results of (Lee & Dustin, 2021) which reveal that economic stress affects marriage adversely. The findings of the study show that financial problems negatively affect the relationship between spouses and reduce their happiness. It leads to a feeling of inadequacy, especially in men who are culturally expected to be providers for their families. This economic pressure leads to psychological strain, such as anxiety and depression, due to the inability to fulfil both physical and psychological requirements.

A major strength of the study lies in its discussion of the effect of social media and cultural portrayal on marital expectations. Although earlier research, for instance, Perloff (2014), has analysed the

impact of media on body image and the level of self-esteem, this study extends these findings to marital expectations. The study reveals that people are exposed to unrealistic expectations of marriage on social media, leading to lower satisfaction with their relationships. This leads to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety as people compare their marriages to the idealised relationships portrayed in social media. The study also offers a new approach by extending Self-Discrepancy Theory to the analysis of Pakistani marriages. According to Self-Discrepancy Theory by Higgins (1987), the source of psychological discomfort is the difference between the actual self and the ideal self and/or the ought self. This theoretical framework enables an understanding of how differences between the actual and the expected marital experiences lead to psychological problems. The present research findings suggest that people experience high levels of distress when their marital experiences do not meet the cultural and personal standards that are set for them. This disparity between the real image of the spouse and the anticipated results can result in frustration, stress, and depressive symptoms.

The results of this study have several theoretical and practical implications that can help improve future research and applications. The study can be used to inform culturally appropriate interventions that can help people in Pakistani culture overcome the challenges they experience. For instance, counselling services should take into account the role of family responsibilities and financial stressors on marital happiness and offer intervention strategies to address these factors. Furthermore, measures towards a realistic depiction of marriage in media could also be useful in reducing the expectations that lead to marital discontent. From a theoretical point of view, this study enriches the knowledge of cultural and familial antecedents of marital satisfaction. Using self-discrepancy theory, it is possible to propose a valuable approach to understanding the effects of the discrepancies between the marital expectations and realities on an individual's psychological state. It is possible that this theoretical framework can be used in further research to explicate how such disparities lead to

psychological problems within different cultures other than Pakistan.

5. Limitations and Future Directives

Several limitations of the study need to be highlighted. A potential limitation of the research is that there is the issue of validity, as the data used in the study were gathered through interview questions, and participants' answers may have been influenced by factors such as social desirability or cultural expectations. The study has a cross-sectional design, meaning that data were collected at one time point; thus, the researchers are unable to gauge changes in marital satisfaction and psychological well-being over time. It is recommended that the following shortcomings be tackled in future research by recruiting a more heterogeneous sample, collecting data from more than one source, and employing a longitudinal research design. Some useful information on how marital satisfaction and psychological well-being change over time might be obtained from longitudinal studies. Furthermore, future studies should also consider personality characteristics as determinants of marital happiness and mental health issues.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that socio-cultural beliefs, unrealistic marital expectations, and financial pressures play a significant role in shaping marital satisfaction and mental health in Pakistani society. Guided by Self-Discrepancy Theory, the findings reveal that discrepancies between idealized expectations and the realities of married life contribute to psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. The six identified themes highlight that traditional gender roles, family interference, unrealistic expectations of spouses, financial instability, conflicting marital responsibilities, and social media portrayals collectively influence marital relationships and emotional well-being. The study extends existing literature by providing qualitative evidence from a collectivistic cultural context, illustrating how cultural and societal expectations intensify the gap between expected and actual marital experiences. These findings emphasize that marital satisfaction

cannot be understood independently of broader family, cultural, and economic influences. The findings have important practical implications for marital counselling and mental health services. Culturally sensitive interventions, premarital education, and counselling programs should promote realistic marital expectations, healthy communication, equitable gender roles, and effective management of family and financial challenges. Although the study is limited by its qualitative design and relatively small sample, it provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of married and divorced individuals. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches with larger, more diverse samples to further examine the long-term relationships among marital expectations, marital satisfaction, and psychological well-being.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

The current work was approved by the ethical committee department of Anthropology, Quaid I Azam university Islamabad under ethical approval number 2020/00018 ANTHRO.

Consent to Publish

Not applicable.

Author declaration

All authors agree to publish the work in its current form.

Clinical Trial Number

Not applicable

Author's Contribution

Author Contributions: Qirat Naz conceived and designed the study, conducted data collection, performed data analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted the manuscript. She also contributed to the study design, supervised the research, critically reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Availability of Data and Materials

All relevant data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this manuscript. Additional data may be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding authors.

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