ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences
Volume 5, Issue 3(s6), 2026 ISSN-L (Online): 3006-6638

Emotional Attachment in Non-Marital Abusive Relationships among Young Women in Pakistan: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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Received: 08-02-2026 **Revised:** 23-02-2026 **Accepted:** 10-03-2026 **Published:** 24-03-2026

ABSTRACT

Emotional attachment within abusive romantic relationships remains a complex and often misunderstood phenomenon, particularly among young women navigating non-marital relationships in sociocultural contexts where discussions of dating and intimate partner abuse are frequently constrained. While abusive relationships are commonly examined through the lens of victimization and psychological harm, less attention has been directed toward understanding how emotional attachment persists despite repeated experiences of distress. The present Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study explored how young women in Pakistan experience and make sense of emotional attachment to abusive romantic partners. Twelve women aged 18–30 years who had experienced emotional and psychological abuse within non-marital romantic relationships participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using IPA procedures involving idiographic examination, emergent theme development, and cross-case synthesis. Five superordinate themes were identified: Love Through Pain: Emotional Confusion Within Abuse; Waiting for the Person He Used to Be; Fear of Loss and Emotional Dependency; Living Between Secrecy and Social Expectations; and A Divergent Case: Staying Without Emotional Attachment. Findings suggest that emotional attachment was sustained through recurring cycles of harm and intermittent affection, whereby apologies, reassurance, validation, and temporary relational repair fostered hope and reinforced emotional dependency. Participants described experiencing profound emotional conflict, simultaneously recognizing

relational harm while maintaining hope for change and reconciliation. The findings further indicate that attachment was shaped not only by interpersonal dynamics but also by sociocultural concerns related to reputation, secrecy, and gendered expectations surrounding romantic relationships. A contrast case demonstrated that remaining in an abusive relationship does not necessarily reflect emotional bonding, highlighting the importance of distinguishing attachment from other motivations for staying. The study contributes to existing literature by illustrating how emotional attachment is constructed and maintained through the interaction of psychological, relational, and sociocultural processes. Implications for culturally responsive assessment, intervention, and prevention efforts are discussed.

Keywords: *emotional attachment, abusive relationships, trauma bonding, intermittent reinforcement, young women, Pakistan, intimate partner abuse, interpretative phenomenological analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Emotional attachment to a romantic partner who causes harm is among the more paradoxical experiences in relational psychology. For individuals who remain in abusive relationships, the persistence of attachment often appears counterintuitive to those outside the relationship and frequently to the individuals themselves. Understanding how this attachment forms, endures, and is subjectively experienced is essential for both theoretical and clinical progress in the field of intimate partner violence.

Research on intimate partner violence (IPV) has predominantly focused on physical abuse, with comparatively less attention directed toward emotional and psychological abuse (Follingstad, 2009). Psychological abuse encompasses a range of behaviors including manipulation, humiliation, isolation, and coercive control that can produce significant and lasting harm (Johnson, 2008). Among young adults, non-marital romantic relationships represent a context in which such abuse may occur with limited external visibility, particularly in societies where premarital relationships carry social stigma (Ali & Naylor, 2013).

In Pakistan, romantic relationships outside of marriage occupy a culturally ambiguous and often stigmatized space. Young women who experience abuse within these relationships may face compounded difficulties in seeking support, as disclosure risks exposing the relationship itself to family and community disapproval (Rabbani et al., 2008). This context creates conditions in which emotional experiences are suppressed, relational harm goes unacknowledged, and attachment to an abusive partner may be sustained without meaningful intervention.

Theoretical frameworks have been proposed to account for the persistence of attachment in abusive contexts. Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory holds that human beings develop internal working models of relationships based on early caregiving experiences, and these models shape relational expectations and emotional responses throughout life. When a romantic partner alternates between threat and comfort, the attachment system may be chronically activated, intensifying rather than diminishing the bond (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Dutton and Painter (1993) extended this analysis through the concept of trauma bonding, proposing that intermittent reinforcement alternating punishment and reward produces a powerful psychological dependency in the abused partner. Walker's (1979) cycle of violence similarly identifies the tension-building, incident, reconciliation, and calm phases as a cyclical structure that sustains hope and emotional investment.

Despite these theoretical contributions, relatively little qualitative research has explored how young women in non-Western, non-marital relational contexts subjectively experience and interpret their emotional attachment to abusive partners. This gap is particularly notable in Pakistan, where cultural norms, gender expectations, and relational secrecy create a distinct experiential landscape that mainstream Western IPV literature does not fully address.

The present study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of young Pakistani women in non-marital abusive relationships, with specific attention to how they experience, understand, and make sense of their continued emotional attachment. IPA was selected for its capacity to capture the meaning-making processes through which individuals interpret complex and emotionally laden experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions: (1) How do participants describe their emotional attachment to abusive partners? (2) How is this attachment experienced within cycles of harm and affection? (3) How do participants make sense of staying despite recognizing relational harm? (4) How do sociocultural expectations shape their interpretations of these relationships?

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted an IPA design, consistent with an interpretivist epistemological stance. IPA is a qualitative methodology that examines how individuals make sense of significant personal experiences (Smith et al., 2009). It is grounded in three theoretical commitments: phenomenology, which directs attention toward lived experience rather than objective description; hermeneutics, which acknowledges that meaning is interpretive and context-dependent; and idiography, which prioritizes depth of understanding at the level of the individual case before moving to cross-case analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Central to IPA is the concept of the double hermeneutic: the researcher is engaged in interpreting the participant's own attempt to interpret their experience (Smith et al., 2009). This layered interpretive process is particularly suited to the present inquiry, given the complexity and contradiction that characterize participants' sense-making around attachment in abusive relationships.

Participants

Twelve young women between the ages of 18 and 30 participated in the study. Eligibility criteria required that participants had experienced emotional or psychological abuse within a non-marital romantic relationship in Pakistan. Physical abuse was not an exclusion criterion, but the study's focus was explicitly on emotional and psychological dimensions. Participants were recruited using a purposive and snowball sampling strategy, consistent with IPA's emphasis on selecting participants who are able to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation (Smith et al., 2009). Initial contacts were made through university networks, women's support groups, and community organizations in urban Pakistani cities. Referrals from initial participants expanded the sample. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided written informed consent with the right to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitivity of premarital relationships in the Pakistani cultural context, additional safeguards included conducting interviews in private settings, ensuring confidentiality, and allowing participants to pause or stop interviews if distress occurred. Information about psychological support services was also provided. Ongoing reflexivity was maintained to manage potential researcher–participant power dynamics.

Data Collection

Data were collected through 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews designed to explore participants' experiences while allowing emergent themes. Questions focused on relationship experiences, emotional responses, meaning-making, and sociocultural influences, using experience-focused prompts rather than "why" questions in line with IPA conventions.

Interviews were conducted in Urdu, Punjabi, or English, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where necessary with attention to preserving meaning and idiomatic nuance.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2009), beginning with detailed, case-by-case idiographic analysis before moving to cross-case synthesis. Each transcript was repeatedly read for immersion, followed by descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual noting, development of emergent themes, and identification of patterns and tensions within and across cases, leading to superordinate themes. Analytical rigor was ensured through reflexive journaling, an audit trail, and member checking with a subset of participants to enhance credibility and transparency.

RESULTS

Analysis yielded five superordinate themes: (1) Love Through Pain: Emotional Confusion Within Abuse; (2) Waiting for the Person He Used to Be; (3) Fear of Loss and Emotional Dependency; (4) Living Between Secrecy and Social Expectations; and (5) A Divergent Case: Staying Without Emotional Attachment.

Theme 1: Love Through Pain: Emotional Confusion within Abuse

Across participants, a dominant experiential tension emerged between the recognition of harm and the persistence of love. Participants did not typically describe their feelings as simple or uniform; rather, they articulated a form of emotional simultaneity holding love and hurt as concurrent rather than mutually exclusive states. This confusion was not experienced as cognitive irrationality but as a deeply felt and often overwhelming emotional reality.

Participants described how moments of tenderness and apology following an abusive episode created genuine emotional relief, which in turn was experienced as evidence of the partner's love. The affective intensity produced by these cycles harm followed by repair appeared to heighten rather than diminish emotional connection. This pattern is consistent with intermittent reinforcement dynamics, wherein unpredictable positive reinforcement strengthens behavioral and emotional responses (Dutton & Painter, 1993).

"After he would say something that really broke me, he would hold me and cry and say he was sorry. In those moments, I felt closer to him than I ever had. I knew it would happen again but I also felt like that version of him was real too." (Sana)

"I couldn't explain it to anyone. They would ask why I stayed if he hurt me. But the hurt and the love were the same thing somehow. I don't know how else to say it." (Nadia)

The emotional confusion evident in these accounts reflects what attachment theorists describe as the activation of the attachment system under conditions of threat. When the source of fear is simultaneously the source of comfort, the attachment response becomes intensified and ambivalent (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Participants' accounts suggest that this confusion was not a failure of rationality but an adaptive if ultimately harmful response to a relational environment defined by inconsistency.

Theme 2: Waiting for the Person He Used to Be

A second superordinate theme concerned the temporal dimension of participants' attachment: their orientation toward a prior version of the relationship or the partner. Participants frequently described their emotional investment as directed not at the partner as currently experienced, but at a remembered or hoped-for version of him one associated with the early phase of the relationship, or with moments of warmth and care that punctuated the abuse.

This theme reflects a form of sustained hope that functioned as a central mechanism in maintaining attachment. The possibility of return to the early relationship, to the "good" partner served as an organizing narrative that gave meaning to remaining in the relationship despite ongoing harm.

"In the beginning, he was so different. Caring, attentive. I kept thinking that person is still there, somewhere. I was waiting for him to come back." (Maryam)

"Every time things were good, I thought this is it, he's changed. And I held onto that. Even when it started again, I still believed it would go back to how it was." (Ayesha)

Walker's (1979) cycle of violence offers a structural account of this dynamic: the reconciliation and calm phases, in which the abusive partner may express remorse and affection, produce genuine positive experience for the abused partner and sustain the belief that change is possible. This sustained hope is not naive; it is grounded in real if episodic and unpredictable relational experience.

Theme 3: Fear of Loss and Emotional Dependency

While hope and love figured prominently in participants' accounts, a third theme pointed to fear of loss as a distinct and potent driver of continued attachment. Participants described a form of emotional dependency in which the prospect of the relationship ending was experienced as threatening or destabilizing not merely disappointing.

This fear was not simply fear of being alone, but a more specific anxiety organized around the particular person. Participants described intrusive thoughts about the partner, difficulty imagining life without him, and a sense that their emotional well-being had become contingent on his presence and approval. This dependency did not reflect contentment within the relationship; several participants acknowledged that they were not happy. Rather, the dependency appeared to be a product of the relational dynamics themselves.

"I knew I wasn't happy. But when I thought about him leaving or me leaving, I felt like I couldn't breathe. I needed him even though he was the reason I was falling apart." (Hira)

"It wasn't even about love anymore at some point. I just didn't know who I was without the relationship. He had become everything, even when he was hurting me." (Zara)

Dutton and Painter's (1993) trauma bonding framework is particularly relevant here. They propose that the power imbalance and intermittent reinforcement characteristic of abusive relationships produce a form of dependency that mirrors the bonding observed in other high-stress dyadic relationships. The emotional dependency described by participants is consistent with this model and suggests that attachment in abusive contexts may become increasingly self-reinforcing over time.

Theme 4: Living Between Secrecy and Social Expectations

A fourth superordinate theme illuminated the role of sociocultural context in shaping participants' experiences of attachment and their sense-making of the relationship. Participants consistently

described navigating a dual reality: an internal emotional world of pain and attachment, and an external social world in which the relationship itself could not be acknowledged.

In Pakistan's cultural context, premarital romantic relationships carry significant stigma, and the disclosure of such a relationship particularly one involving abuse risks not only social disapproval but potential consequences for family honor and the participant's own reputation. This environment of enforced secrecy had several effects. It limited participants' access to social support. It produced a sense of isolation that intensified emotional dependency on the partner. And it created conditions in which shame about both the abuse and the relationship compounded the difficulty of seeking help or leaving.

"I couldn't tell anyone. Not my friends, not my family. If they found out I even had a boyfriend, the relationship itself would have been the scandal not what he was doing to me." (Fatima)

"The shame of it all the relationship, the abuse, staying it was all mixed together. I didn't know what I was more ashamed of." (Anum)

Cultural norms surrounding female respectability and relational propriety in Pakistan create conditions in which young women experiencing abuse in non-marital relationships are structurally isolated (Rabbani et al., 2008). Shame and secrecy are not simply emotional responses; they are socially organized experiences that reflect and reinforce gendered power dynamics. The silence imposed on these women by cultural norms functioned not as neutral absence but as an active force sustaining their entrapment in harmful relationships.

Theme 5: A Divergent Case: Staying Without Emotional Attachment

One participant's account diverged meaningfully from the patterns observed across the rest of the sample, and is presented here as a contrast case consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment. Rida described a relationship in which she had remained for an extended period but did not experience what she identified as emotional attachment to her partner.

Rather than describing love, hope, or emotional dependency, Rida characterized her reasons for staying in terms of fear of the partner's reactions if she were to leave, concern about the social consequences of a broken relationship within their shared social network, and a sense that leaving would require explanation and disclosure she was not prepared to manage. Her account was markedly different in tone and content from those of other participants more pragmatic and less emotionally enmeshed.

"I don't think I loved him not really, not anymore. I stayed because leaving felt more dangerous and complicated than staying. It wasn't about my feelings for him. It was about what leaving would cost me." (Rida)

Rida's account is analytically significant because it demonstrates that continued presence in an abusive relationship does not necessarily reflect emotional attachment. Her experience illustrates the importance of distinguishing between attachment-based staying, fear-based compliance, and socially constrained decision-making. This distinction has direct implications for clinical assessment and intervention: approaches calibrated to address trauma bonding and emotional dependency may be insufficient or misdirected for individuals whose primary reasons for staying are pragmatic, fear-based, or socially pressured rather than emotionally constituted.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored how young women in Pakistan experience and make sense of emotional attachment to abusive partners in non-marital relationships. The analysis identified five superordinate

themes, reflecting a complex interaction of psychological, relational, and sociocultural processes that contribute to the formation and maintenance of emotional attachment in this context.

The findings are consistent with and extend existing theoretical accounts of attachment in abusive relationships. Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory provides a foundational explanation, suggesting that when an attachment figure is simultaneously a source of comfort and threat, the attachment system becomes chronically activated. Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) concept of anxious attachment, characterized by emotional preoccupation, hypervigilance, and fear of abandonment, closely reflects participants' relational experiences, where unpredictability within the relationship intensified emotional investment rather than reducing it. Dutton and Painter's (1993) trauma bonding framework further explains this intensification through the mechanism of intermittent reinforcement, where alternating cycles of harm and affection create a powerful emotional dependency that becomes resistant to disruption. Participants' accounts of relief, hope, and emotional closeness during reconciliation phases align with this mechanism, as these intermittent positive experiences reinforced attachment despite ongoing harm. Similarly, Walker's (1979) cycle of violence offers a structural explanation, particularly the reconciliation phase in which expressions of remorse, affection, and promises of change generated sustained hope. This hope was not a simple cognitive distortion but rather reflected genuine episodic experiences of relational repair embedded within an overall cycle of abuse.

A key conceptual contribution of this study is that emotional attachment in abusive relationships is not a fixed psychological trait nor merely a consequence of victimization, but rather an ongoing construct shaped through repeated cycles of harm and intermittent affection. It is also deeply embedded within sociocultural contexts. Participants' attachment could not be explained solely through emotional investment or social constraint, as both factors were simultaneously present and mutually reinforcing. Social isolation created by cultural expectations of secrecy intensified emotional dependency on the partner, while this dependency increased the psychological cost of disclosure or exit. This created a reinforcing feedback loop in which psychological and sociocultural processes continuously amplified one another. In this sense, cultural context does not simply act as an external factor influencing decisions to stay, but actively shapes the emotional structure of attachment itself by influencing how harm is interpreted, how hope is sustained, and how leaving is mentally and emotionally evaluated.

The contrast case presented in the findings further highlights the importance of conceptual precision in understanding staying behavior in abusive relationships. Not all participants who remained in such relationships did so due to emotional attachment. One participant's account demonstrated that continued involvement may instead reflect fear-based compliance, social pressure, or practical constraints rather than emotional bonding. This distinction carries important clinical implications. Interventions focused on trauma bonding, emotional dependency, and attachment repair may be appropriate for individuals whose staying behavior is rooted in emotional attachment and ambivalence. However, for individuals whose primary motivations involve fear, safety concerns, or social pressure, intervention approaches emphasizing safety planning, practical support, and resource facilitation may be more appropriate. Therefore, accurate assessment of the underlying mechanism sustaining the relationship is essential for effective intervention.

Finally, the cultural context of Pakistan played a significant role in shaping participants' experiences. The stigma associated with premarital romantic relationships contributed to enforced silence, limiting access to social support and intensifying feelings of shame. Additionally, gendered cultural expectations that place responsibility on women for maintaining relational harmony and family honor created further pressure to endure relational difficulties privately. Although these cultural dynamics are particularly salient in the Pakistani context, the underlying mechanisms through which shame, secrecy, and relational endurance operate are not unique to this setting. Similar patterns can be observed across various cultural contexts, although they may manifest differently depending on social and gender norms. Thus, while the findings are culturally situated, they also offer broader conceptual relevance for understanding emotional attachment in abusive relationships across diverse sociocultural environments.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was recruited through university networks and community organizations, which may have introduced selection bias toward participants with greater social resources or familiarity with psychological discourse on relationships.
- Women experiencing severe social isolation or limited access to formal support networks may be underrepresented.
- IPA relies on a small, purposive sample, which limits generalizability; the focus is on depth of interpretation rather than representational breadth.
- Data were based on retrospective self-reports, making them vulnerable to memory bias and narrative reconstruction over time.
- Participants' accounts reflect current meaning-making rather than fully contemporaneous experiences.
- Cultural sensitivity around abusive relationships may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose fully, potentially limiting the depth of some narratives.

Future Directions

- Cross-cultural comparative qualitative studies are needed to explore how attachment in abusive relationships is experienced and interpreted across different sociocultural contexts.
- Longitudinal qualitative research could examine how meaning-making evolves over time, especially during cycles of leaving and returning to abusive relationships.
- Including perspectives of mental health practitioners in Pakistan could provide complementary insights into clinical understanding and intervention approaches for this population.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the understanding of emotional attachment in abusive relationships by providing an interpretative account of how young Pakistani women experience, sustain, and make sense of attachment to abusive partners in non-marital relational contexts. The findings indicate that emotional attachment is produced and maintained through the interaction of intermittent reinforcement, sustained hope, emotional dependency, and sociocultural constraint. A contrast case demonstrates that not all staying in abusive relationships reflects emotional bonding, highlighting the clinical importance of distinguishing between attachment-based staying, fear-based compliance, and socially pressured endurance.

Culturally responsive clinical assessment and intervention must attend to the specific mechanisms through which attachment is sustained in a given relational and cultural context. In Pakistan, where relational secrecy and gendered shame compound the experience of abuse, intervention frameworks must address not only the psychological dimensions of attachment but also the social conditions that enforce silence and isolate young women from support. The present study offers a foundation for the development of such frameworks and signals the value of continued qualitative inquiry into the lived experience of abuse in under-researched sociocultural contexts.

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