



THE SOUND OF SILENCE: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF STONEWALLING DYNAMICS IN MARRIED COUPLES

Laraib Iqrar

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Government College University,
Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

Zartashia Kynat Javaid

Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, Government College University,
Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding email: zartashiakynat@gcuf.edu.pk

Noor Ul Muqaddas Sharif

PhD Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Government College University, Faisalabad,
Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract

Marital communication plays a central role in shaping relationship quality and emotional well-being. Stonewalling is characterized by emotional withdrawal and silence during or after conflict, and represents a complex interpersonal dynamic that extends beyond observable disengagement. The present qualitative study was conducted to explore the lived experiences and sociocultural meanings of stonewalling within the Pakistani marital context. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit married individuals aged 25–45 years from Punjab, Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain in-depth insights into participants' experiences. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed seven interrelated themes, including behavioral withdrawal during conflict, emotional withdrawal and detachment, Silence as a coping strategy, Prolonged and persistent stonewalling, post-conflict withdrawal and isolation, and sociocultural and familial influences. Stonewalling emerged not only as a conflict response but also as a self-protective coping strategy shaped by emotional regulation needs and social expectations. Persistent withdrawal contributed to relational strain, unresolved conflicts, and gradual emotional disconnection between spouses. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive marital counseling interventions and communication-focused psychoeducation programs to address maladaptive withdrawal patterns. Future research should adopt longitudinal and dyadic approaches to understand better the reciprocal dynamics of stonewalling within marital relationships.

Keywords: Stonewalling, Marital Satisfaction, Communication Patterns, Conflict Resolution, Married Couples, Pakistani Culture.

1. Introduction

The stability of married life is often influenced by the couple's "emotional bank account," which denotes the overall ratio of good to negative interactions in daily life and conflict (Beeney et al., 2019). This study indicates that in clinically complicated situations, such as couples in which one or both partners display signs of borderline personality, there are markedly elevated levels of stonewalling and defensiveness, resulting in a rapid deterioration in relationship satisfaction.

Once this emotional equilibrium shifts to the negative side (Ali et al., 2024; Asim et al., 2024), couples are more likely to encounter the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," with stonewalling standing out as one of the most accurate predictors of marital disintegration (Gottman, 1993). In this context, stonewalling is described not as neutral silence but as a passive-aggressive action involving the willful suppression of replies, functioning as a psychological wall that hampers the resolution of relationship problems (Wright & Roloff, 2009). This tactic is often employed even by highly committed individuals when they perceive that their partner is the direct cause of their distress.

The propensity to engage in such withdrawal is deeply rooted in individual attachment dimensions. Fowler and Dillow (2011) demonstrate that attachment avoidance is a significant predictor of stonewalling, as avoidant individuals utilize withdrawal to maintain emotional distance and circumvent the vulnerability required for effective conflict resolution. This is physically manifested according to Conradi et al. (2020), who found that male attachment anxiety specifically results in increased physical interpersonal distance, suggesting that the "wall" in stonewalling is both a psychological barrier and a spatial reality.

The internal experience of the stonewaller involves significant cognitive and emotional labor, as Liu and Roloff (2015) highlight that individuals who engage in cognitive rumination repeatedly focusing on an irritating experience without disclosing it experience markedly higher levels of emotional exhaustion. This exhaustion leads individuals to default to the "silent treatment" as a means of conserving emotional energy. Ultimately, the resulting emotional loneliness acts as a powerful mediator that links stonewalling to further destructive outcomes, such as sexual disengagement and a total loss of intimacy (Fernandes & Hernández, 2024).

Busby and Holman (2009) further organized these interaction patterns into distinct relational styles, identifying three functional styles: validating, volatile, and avoidant and one maladaptive style, hostile. Their research highlights that a "mismatch," particularly between a Volatile partner and an Avoidant partner, significantly increases the frequency of stonewalling, feeding into a destructive demand-withdraw cycle. This disconnection is often exacerbated by modern sociocultural influences, such as the "marriage is scary" narrative identified by Putri (2025), and the growing role of Artificial Intelligence in couple therapy, which introduces new layers to how withdrawal is managed in contemporary unions (Aviram, 2025). When communication ceases, the relationship enters a state of "rapport destruction," where trust is lost, and psychological distress reaches critical levels (Garcia & Umberson, 2019; Jayakobi & Mun, 2021).

Theoretical Foundation of Stonewalling

Stonewalling is a maladaptive conflict response marked by emotional withdrawal, silence, and defensive disengagement, and is a well-established predictor of marital dissolution. Within Gottman's Cascade Model, it represents the final stage of relational deterioration following criticism, contempt, and defensiveness (Gottman, 1993, 1994). Physiological Flooding Theory conceptualizes stonewalling as a self-protective response to overwhelming autonomic arousal, whereby individuals disengage to regulate distress (Gottman, 1999). Although temporarily stabilizing, chronic withdrawal erodes intimacy and predicts divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Demand Withdrawal Theory further situates stonewalling within a dyadic interaction pattern in which one partner pursues while the other withdraws, a cycle strongly associated with relational dissatisfaction and instability (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Christensen et al., 2006). From an emotion regulation perspective, stonewalling reflects maladaptive suppression linked to diminished intimacy and psychological distress (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003). In collectivistic contexts such as Pakistan, culturally reinforced norms of emotional restraint and conflict avoidance may normalize silence, underscoring the need for a culturally grounded conceptualization of stonewalling.

Rationale of the Study

Effective communication is central to marital satisfaction, yet many couples experience persistent silence and withdrawal during conflicts, a phenomenon commonly referred to as stonewalling. While stonewalling has been widely studied in Western contexts, there is limited research exploring how it manifests within Pakistani marriages, where sociocultural norms, family expectations, and gender roles strongly influence relational behavior. Understanding

stonewalling in this context is crucial, as prolonged withdrawal can lead to emotional distancing, communication breakdown, and reduced marital satisfaction. By examining the behavioral, emotional, and sociocultural dimensions of stonewalling, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how couples navigate conflict and its aftermath. The findings can inform culturally sensitive interventions, counseling strategies, and psychoeducational programs to improve communication, restore emotional connection, and support healthier marital relationships in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

1. To explore how stonewalling is expressed during marital conflict, including silence, withdrawal, and post-conflict distancing.
2. To understand the emotional and social factors that shape stonewalling, such as emotion regulation, self-protection, and sociocultural pressures
3. To examine the impact of persistent stonewalling on marital relationships, including communication breakdown, trust erosion, and emotional strain.

Research Question

1. How do married couples experience stonewalling during conflict, and how does it affect their relationship?

2. Methods

Participants and Sampling

The study comprised 10 married individuals (6 females and 4 males) aged between 25 and 40 years. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who could provide rich, detailed accounts of marital communication. To ensure a deep perspective on established relational patterns and long-term conflict dynamics, the inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum marital duration of 2 years. Participants were recruited from diverse settings, including universities, professional workplaces, and community networks within Pakistan.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Married adults aged between 25 and 40 years who have been married for approximately two years were included in the study. Participants were required to have the ability to read and understand either English or Urdu and to provide informed consent voluntarily before participation.

Individuals who were unmarried, divorced, separated, or widowed were excluded from the study. Married adults whose duration of marriage was significantly shorter or longer than the specified range were also excluded. Additionally, individuals with diagnosed severe psychological or neurological conditions that could impair communication or response accuracy, as well as those who provided incomplete or inconsistent responses, were not included in the final sample.

Data Collection and Procedure

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to capture participants' personal experiences of stonewalling within their marriages. The interview guide was informed by prior research on marital conflict, emotional withdrawal, and communication dynamics, while still allowing flexibility for participants to share their stories in their own words. Interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable environment to encourage openness and lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. With consent, talks were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were read several times to develop a thorough understanding of the data. Thematic analysis was then conducted to identify

recurring patterns and meaningful themes. Initial codes were developed systematically, organized into broader categories, and refined into overarching themes that reflected the complex nature of stonewalling.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, a structured qualitative approach for identifying and interpreting patterns within data. The process followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher immersed herself in the data by transcribing the audio-recorded interviews word for word and reading the transcripts several times to develop a deep understanding of the content. After becoming familiar with the data, initial codes were created by highlighting meaningful phrases and segments related to emotional withdrawal and silence. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected the core experiences shared by participants.

The themes were carefully reviewed and refined to ensure they were consistent with the original data and sensitive to the socio-cultural context of Pakistani marital relationships. In the final stage, each theme was clearly defined and named to capture the emotional and relational dynamics of stonewalling. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the researcher maintained a detailed audit trail and supported the themes with direct quotes from participants, ensuring that the findings remained grounded in their lived experiences.

Ethical Consideration

Before conducting the interviews and audio recordings, informed consent was obtained from all participants through a formal consent form. Each participant was given a clear explanation of the study’s purpose and procedures and was assured that all information shared would remain confidential. They were encouraged to answer the questions honestly and were informed that their participation was voluntary. Participants were also told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

3. Findings

The analysis of the item pool revealed a clear and organized thematic structure that captures the complex nature of stonewalling in marital relationships. Based on the operational definition of stonewalling and informed by established theories of relationships and communication, seven main themes and their related subthemes were identified. Together, these themes highlight the behavioral, emotional, time-related, and sociocultural dimensions of stonewalling, as well as its impact on the marital bond. The study included ten married participants (N = 10), with six women (labeled F1 to F6) and four men (labeled M1 to M4). These codes were used to protect participants’ identities while still allowing the analysis to reflect both male and female perspectives clearly and accurately.

The analysis identified seven major themes and eighteen closely connected subthemes that together explain the behavioral, emotional, temporal, and sociocultural aspects of stonewalling during marital conflict (see Table 1). These themes are organized in a hierarchical manner to show not only the visible behaviors but also the underlying psychological processes that shape them.

Table 1: Major themes and sub-themes with reference to the coding of married couples’ interviews (N=10)

Major Themes	Sub-Themes	Male	Female
Behavioral Withdrawal During Conflict	Avoidance of Verbal Communication	Most participants described withdrawing	Most female participants reported remaining
	Physical and Situational Disengagement		

	Non-responsiveness and Topic Avoidance	and behaviorally by verbally silent, disengaging minimizing physically or responses, and avoiding discussion after while staying emotionally affected. escalation.
Emotional Withdrawal and Detachment	Emotional Detachment and Emotional Suppression Reduced Emotional Connection	Men reported emotional detachment and suppression as a way to distance themselves from conflict-related stress. Women reported greater emotional hurt and internalized distress, accompanied by emotional distancing rather than emotional coldness.
Silence as a Self-Protective Coping Strategy	Silence for Emotional Regulation Silence to Prevent Conflict Escalation	Male participants viewed silence as a way to regain control and cool down after heightened emotional exchanges. Female participants described silence as a protective response to avoid further emotional pain and escalation.
Prolonged/Temporal and Persistent Stonewalling	Extended Periods of Silence Delayed re-initiation of communication	Men acknowledged periods of withdrawal but were more likely to re-initiate communication after some time. Women reported longer durations of silence and greater delay in resuming communication following conflict.
Post-Conflict Withdrawal and Isolation	Post-Conflict Isolation Emotional Distance After Conflict	Male participants described temporary isolation followed by a gradual return to interaction. Female participants reported sustained emotional distance and reduced closeness even after the conflict ended.
Sociocultural and Familial Influences	Cultural Normalization of Silence Family Norms and Honor	Men emphasized cultural expectations of restraint and fear of judgment, Women highlighted social pressure,

Relational Consequences of Stonewalling	Social Pressure and Fear of Expression	maintaining authority through silence.	and family honor as reasons for remaining silent.
	Relationship Harm of Communication Breakdown Erosion of Relationship Quality	Men recognized that stonewalling led to tension but often perceived effects as temporary.	Women described deeper emotional harm, reduced trust, and lasting decline in relationship satisfaction.

Behavioral Withdrawal During Conflict

This theme captures observable behaviors through which individuals disengage from marital communication during conflict situations. The subthemes reflect different modes of withdrawal that limit dialogue, reduce interaction, and hinder mutual problem-solving during disagreements.

(a) Avoidance of verbal communication

Avoidance of verbal communication refers to the tendency to reduce or completely stop speaking during marital conflict. Participants reported choosing silence instead of expressing thoughts or emotions when disagreements emerged. This withdrawal often occurred during emotionally charged situations and functioned as a way to disengage from interaction. The behavior limited opportunities for clarification and resolution by preventing open verbal exchange.

“Jb behas shoro hti he to me khamosh ho jati hon q k bat krny se r bat barh jati he” (F₆)

“Me jan bhojh kr bat nhi krta, khamosh rehna mgy behter lgta he bjaye jagra krny k” (M₂)

(b) Physical and situational disengagement

Physical and situational disengagement involves withdrawing from the conflict by leaving the setting or avoiding shared spaces. Participants described distancing themselves physically by moving to another room, going outside, or engaging in unrelated activities. This behavior reduced immediate interaction but also disrupted opportunities for continued discussion. Withdrawal of physical presence served as a clear signal of disengagement from the conflict situation.

“Me behas k doran wahan se hat jati hon ta k bat agy na barhy” (F₅)

“jb bat had se barhti he to me room se bahir chala jata hon ta k bat agy na barhy” (M₄)

(c) Non-responsiveness and topic avoidance

Non-responsiveness and topic avoidance refer to ignoring a partner's attempts to discuss an issue or deliberately shifting the conversation away from conflict-related topics. Participants reported giving minimal responses, changing subjects, or pretending not to hear concerns raised by their spouse. This form of withdrawal allowed individuals to remain present physically while avoiding engagement with the conflict. Over time, repeated topic avoidance limited meaningful communication.

“Wo bat shoro kry to me jawab nhi deti ya mozoh badal deti hon” (F₅)

“Me aksar bat ko taal deta hon ta k behas na ho” (M₄)

Emotional Withdrawal and Internal Disengagement

This theme reflects the internal emotional processes through which individuals disengage during marital conflict. Emotional withdrawal was expressed as reduced emotional

availability, inhibition of affective expression, and a weakened sense of emotional connection with the spouse during disagreements.

(a) Emotional detachment and coldness

Emotional detachment and coldness refer to a noticeable reduction in emotional responsiveness during conflict. Participants described becoming emotionally distant, indifferent, or unresponsive to their spouse's feelings. This detachment was experienced as a lack of warmth and emotional presence, even when physical proximity remained. Such emotional coldness signaled disengagement from the relational exchange.

"Behas k doran mery husband k dil me koi ahsas nhi rehta" (F₁)

"Me jazbati tor or khud ko alag kr leta hon, jesy kuch mehsoos hi na ho rha ho" (M₂)

(b) Suppression and concealment of emotions

Suppression and concealment of emotions involve consciously holding back feelings during conflict situations. Participants reported controlling their emotional expressions by hiding anger, sadness, or hurt. This emotional inhibition was often described as an effort to maintain self-control or avoid further escalation. However, emotions remained internally experienced despite outward restraint.

"Me apny jazbat Zahir nhi krti sb kuch dil me hi rakh leti hon q k btany ka koi faida nhi" (F₂)

"Behas k doran me apna gussa dbany ki koshish krta hon" (M₃)

(c) Reduced emotional connection with spouse

Reduced emotional connection refers to a temporary or prolonged sense of emotional distance from the spouse during and after conflict. Participants described feeling disconnected, unsupported, or less emotionally bonded during disagreements. This reduction in connection extended beyond the immediate conflict, affecting ongoing emotional closeness. Emotional disengagement was experienced as a weakening of the marital bond.

"Mjy lgta he k hamary bech jazbati Rishta kamzor ho gya he" (F₄)

"Behas k bd me khud ko jazbati tor pr dhor mehsoos krta hon" (M₂)

Silence as an Emotion-Regulation Strategy

This theme understands silence as a way people cope with strong emotions during conflict. Participants described silence not as punishment, but as protection. Many shared that when arguments became intense, they chose to stay quiet to calm themselves, think clearly, and avoid saying hurtful things they might regret later. In these moments, silence helped them regain emotional control and feel safer. It acted as a personal boundary, giving them space to process their feelings before responding. Participants also explained that silence was sometimes used to prevent the situation from getting worse. By choosing not to respond immediately, they aimed to stop arguments from escalating into shouting or deeper emotional hurt. This type of silence was not meant to distance themselves from the relationship. Instead, it was usually temporary and intentional. Once emotions settled and tension reduced, they felt more prepared to communicate in a calmer and more constructive way.

"Khamoshi ikhtiyar krna mery liye behtar he ta k me khud ko control kr skon" (F₄, F₁, F₂)

"Jb gussa bht ziyada ho jye to me khomsh ho kr bahir chala jta hon ta k khud ko control kr skon" (M₁, M₄)

Prolonged/ Temporal Persistence of Stonewalling

Stonewalling was not limited to momentary disengagement but frequently extended over prolonged periods. This theme reflects the duration and continuity of silence following marital conflict.

(a) Extended periods of silence

Extended periods of silence refer to sustained non-communication lasting hours or days following marital conflict. Participants reported intentionally maintaining silence as conflicts remained unresolved. This prolonged withdrawal reduced opportunities for reconciliation and continued interaction. Silence became a dominant mode of interaction during these periods.

“Behas k bd kai din tk khamosh rehti hon r khud bat shoro nhi krti” (F₁, F₄, F₆, F₂)

“Meri khamoshi lamby arsy tk chalti rehti he, aksar kai dino tk” (M₃)

(b) Delayed re-initiation of communication

Delayed re-initiation of communication involves postponing the resumption of dialogue after a conflict has occurred. Participants described waiting for the spouse to initiate conversation or allowing significant time to pass before speaking again. This delay functioned as a continuation of withdrawal even after emotional intensity had reduced. Communication was resumed only when individuals felt emotionally ready or when situational demands required interaction.

“Me dobara bat shoro krny me der krti hon jb tk khud ko ready na samjon” (F₂)

Post-Conflict Withdrawal and Isolation

This theme captures patterns of withdrawal that continue even after the immediate conflict has subsided, leading to prolonged emotional and relational distance between spouses. Post-conflict isolation was described as an intentional reduction in interaction once the argument had cooled down. Participants reported avoiding shared spaces, limiting conversations, and functioning more as individuals than as a couple. Although overt disagreement had ended, engagement remained minimal, reflecting an ongoing pattern of disengagement. Emotional distance following conflict referred to a lingering sense of disconnection despite the absence of visible tension. Participants described feeling less affectionate, less emotionally available, and less connected after disagreements. This subtle distancing affected everyday interactions and delayed the rebuilding of closeness. Even when daily routines resumed, emotional withdrawal often continued beneath the surface.

“Larai k bd me akela rehna pasand krta/krti hon bat cheet kam kr deta/deti hon” (M₃, M₂, F₁, F₄)

“Larai k bd dil se qurbat feel nhi hti, fasla mehsoos hta he” (F₆)

Sociocultural and Familial Context of Stonewalling

Sociocultural norms and family values were identified as significant contextual factors influencing stonewalling behaviors. Silence was often socially reinforced and culturally legitimized. This theme highlights the broader sociocultural and familial influences that shape stonewalling behaviors within marriage. Participants described silence as a socially learned and culturally reinforced response to conflict, rather than solely an individual choice.

(a) Cultural normalization of silence

Cultural normalization of silence refers to the acceptance of silence as an appropriate and expected response during marital conflict. Participants indicated that remaining quiet during disagreements was viewed as a sign of patience, maturity, or respect. Silence was often preferred over open discussion to maintain social harmony. This cultural framing reduced the perceived need for verbal conflict resolution.

“Hamari society me khamosh rehna behter samja jta he khas tor pr aurat k liye” (F₆, F₁)

“Ye sikhaya jata he k khamoshi hi samjdari he bat barhana thk nhi” (M₁)

(b) Family honor and conflict concealment

Family honor and conflict disguise involve suppressing marital disagreements to protect the family's reputation. Participants defined avoiding open expression of conflict to prevent embarrassment or negative judgment from relatives. Silence was used to keep disputes private and hidden. This emphasis on honor discouraged open communication within the marriage.

"Hamen sikhaya gya he k ghr k masly bahir nhi btany chaheay" (F₂)

"Khandan ki ezat k liye larai ko dbana hi behter samja jata he" (M₂)

(c) Social pressure and fear of open expression

Social pressure and fear of open expression refer to the anxiety surrounding possible social criticism or relational consequences if marital conflicts are discussed openly. Participants shared concerns about being viewed as disrespectful or disobedient when expressing disagreement. These fears often led them to suppress their thoughts and regulate their emotions carefully. As a result, remaining silent was perceived as a safer and more socially acceptable choice than speaking openly about conflict.

"Agr me bat kron to mgy badtmeez samja jata he isley khamosh rehti hon" (F₆)

"khul kr bat krny se masly barthy hen" (M₂)

Relational Consequences of Stonewalling

This theme highlights the negative consequences linked to persistent stonewalling and its impact on marital functioning. It underscores how repeated withdrawal and prolonged silence can shape the overall quality of the relationship. Participants explained that ongoing disengagement affected their emotional well-being, disrupted healthy communication patterns, and gradually diminished relationship satisfaction. Over time, these patterns contributed to emotional distance and weakened relational stability.

(a) Relationship strain and emotional harm

Relationship strain and emotional harm describe the psychological distress and tension that developed in response to repeated stonewalling. Participants expressed feelings of hurt, sadness, frustration, and emotional fatigue when silence continued over time. Ongoing withdrawal created a climate of emotional discomfort, contributing to increased relational tension within the marriage. Many participants emphasized that the impact was not sudden; rather, the emotional damage accumulated gradually, intensifying with each unresolved episode of silence.

"Larai se mery dil ko bht takleef hti he" (F₁)

"Larai se Rishta kharab hota he r zehni dbao barhta he" (M₁)

(b) Communication breakdown and unresolved conflict

Communication breakdown and unresolved conflict reflect the difficulty couples experience in effectively addressing marital concerns when silence becomes a recurring response. Participants explained that when communication was avoided, disagreements often remained unsettled rather than resolved. Important issues were postponed or ignored, which led to the same conflicts resurfacing repeatedly over time. The absence of open dialogue disrupted opportunities for constructive problem-solving and limited mutual understanding, gradually deepening frustration and relational strain.

"Bat kiya bger masly hal nhi hty r tention barhti he" (F₁, F₂, F₃)

"Bat na krny ki wja se masly ziyada barthy hen" (M₂)

(c) Erosion of trust and marital satisfaction

Erosion of trust and marital satisfaction reflects a gradual decline in emotional security, mutual confidence, and overall relationship fulfillment. Participants shared that, over time, they began to feel less appreciated, less understood, and emotionally disconnected from their spouses. Ongoing patterns of stonewalling contributed to diminished intimacy and reduced

relational satisfaction. As emotional responsiveness became less consistent, trust within the relationship weakened, leaving partners feeling uncertain about each other's availability and commitment.

"Larai se self-esteem kam ho jati he r Rishta kamzor hta he" (F₆)

"Jb bat cheet khatm ho jye to rishty me sakoon r aitmad khatam ho jata he" (M₃)

The analysis generated seven interconnected themes that together portray stonewalling as a complex and layered experience within marital relationships. The findings suggest that stonewalling cannot be understood merely as visible withdrawal or silence during conflict. Rather, it reflects a deeper process involving emotional disengagement, self-protective coping efforts, and patterns of distancing that may persist over time. Participants' accounts indicated that silence often functioned not only as a reaction to conflict but also as a way of managing overwhelming emotions, shaped by personal regulation needs as well as broader sociocultural expectations. Moreover, when withdrawal continued beyond the immediate conflict, it tended to create emotional distance and disrupt communication, gradually affecting relational closeness and overall marital satisfaction. Taken together, these findings conceptualize stonewalling as a dynamic interaction of behavioral, emotional, temporal, and cultural influences that carry meaningful consequences for marital functioning.

4. Discussion

The current research aimed at conceptualizing stonewalling in married couples by developing a culturally oriented measurement scale. This chapter explains the results compared with existing theoretical concepts, which are mainly the theory of marital interaction and dissolution and attachment theory by Gottman, but also refers to emotion regulation and conflict-avoidance literature. All the themes are interpreted to tell how stonewalling works as a behavioral and emotional process, the reasons it is perpetuated, and the impact it has on marital functioning.

One of the main forms of behavior of the marital conflict is stonewalling. According to Jayakobi and Mun (2021), it is the so-called "Fourth Horseman" when a partner constructs a metaphorical wall and closes all verbal and non-verbal communication. This is mostly instigated by a discrepancy in conflict styles Busby and Holman (2009) discovered that when a Volatile (expressive) partner is coupled with an avoidant partner, stonewalling is enhanced as the avoidant partner encompasses silence as a defense. Bernecker et al. (2018) go further to note that such withdrawal is motivated by avoidance intentions, which are expressed non-verbally by either crossed arms or turning away. Moreover, Ameyaw et al. (2023) and Benjamin and Ha'elyon (2004) note that external stressors, such as job insecurity or family interference, lead to a situation of the so-called silenced reality when the couple feels that their capacity to communicate has been reduced, and thus, the change-oriented conversations cannot be stopped.

Along with the physical silence, stonewalling causes severe emotional withdrawal. According to Baghaei et al. (2024), this is achieved through interpersonal emotion regulation, in which partners suppress emotions to control the climate of the relationship, unconsciously forming a stone wall. This loss of attachments, Makhdoom and Malik (2019) postulate, kills the emotional gratifications of marriage intimacy, passion, and love, culminating in deep loneliness. Conradi et al. (2020) take a biological perspective, demonstrating that physical distance between couples is a measurable indicator of this emotional "shuttering" and anxiety about attachment.

Silence is often a wrong survival and control instrument. Donato et al. (2014) explain the so-called accommodation model, in which partners deescalate conflict to avoid the immediate escalation, but it is frequently an indication of dissatisfaction over the long term. As

Kohli et al. (2015) emphasize, such silence may be frequently adopted as a survival tactic in a high-stress or post-conflict setting to prevent aggression and preserve family harmony. In particular, as Benjamin and Ha'elyon (2004) observe, silence can be employed by women as an emotional labor to help stabilize the family in times of economic crises in an effort to save the climate of the relationship at their own expense.

The findings prove that stonewalling frequently moves beyond the scope of conflict in the short term and turns into long-term silence and slow communication re-establishment. This temporal carrying over is a way of differentiating between momentary withdrawal that is frequently employed to regulate emotions and persistent, dysfunctional patterns. The longitudinal data show that one of the major predictors of diminishing marital satisfaction and instability in relationships is sustained withdrawal (Gottman and Levenson, 2000). Wu et al. (2025) also note that interpretive ambiguity is a result of this persistence, promoted by creating more distance and misunderstanding between spouses.

Withdrawal becomes more extreme, more qualitative as it passes into a fixed and tenacious phase and the effects of withdrawal become more drastic. In the case of well-established couples, historical dissatisfaction indicates an upward trend in demand withdrawal disputes, which can be considered an effective predictor of a chronic instability detector (Donato et al., 2014). Jayakobi and Mun (2021) say that this breakdown is a wall between partners turned into a physical one, and it is a sign of a complete breakdown of the rapport. According to Busby and Holman (2009), this is the dysfunctional conflict style that is known as Hostile, which brings in contempt and constant stonewalling, which predetermines the relationship's failure to a great extent. This steady uninvolved eventually destroys the trust that is essential to the effectiveness of a long-term marital relationship (Makhdoom & Malik, 2019).

Even after conflicts had died down, post-conflict isolation and emotional distance was usually reported. Other researchers have shown that conflict-avoidance impedes relational repair and reconciliation (Harper et al., 2018; Liu & Roloff, 2015). Similar points are raised by Wu et al. (2025) who consider that silence, which goes beyond the limits of interaction, is a contributor to recurrent relational disengagement. The current results support the unresolved withdrawal following conflict to facilitate emotional distance and undermine marital intimacy.

The social and cultural context of the couple suppresses the stonewalling significantly. Ameyaw et al. (2023) realized that such traditional situations as Ghana require the use of silence to uphold the honor of the community. It reflects itself in the results of a study on the Modern Orthodox groups presented by Jackson (2011) where religious and social pressure compels people to keep a flawless image of marriage, thus they are expected to disregard complaints. There is also the influence of modern digital culture according to Putri (2025), the marriage is scary trend is one of the narratives that predisposes young women to join a marriage characterized by avoidant, defensive communication patterns because of the fear of relationship choosing and marriage dissolution that already exists.

The overall outcome of continued withdrawal is the demolition of marital stability. Garcia and Umberson (2019) show that marital strain that can be the result is a direct predictor of psychological distress to both spouses. Makhdoom and Malik (2019) also state that since trust is the binding agent of satisfaction, its destruction via the chronic silence inevitably causes the bond to fall apart. Finally, Jayakobi and Mun (2021) and Ameyaw et al. (2023) conclude that the next stage of stonewalling (it is the default response to conflict) leads to rapport destruction, and the breakdown of relationships becomes very likely.

An examination of participants' accounts highlighted clear gender-related variations in how stonewalling was experienced and expressed. Women generally did not describe themselves as emotionally cold; instead, they emphasized feelings of emotional pain, silence, and distancing during marital disagreements. Many female participants explained that they tended to remain quiet, suppress their feelings, and withdraw emotionally when conflicts intensified, often as a strategy to prevent further escalation. Their silence appeared to stem more from emotional hurt and vulnerability than from indifference or detachment.

In contrast, male participants more frequently reported responding to conflict with visible expressions of anger or frustration, which were often followed by withdrawal. Men described stepping back either physically or verbally after emotionally charged exchanges. Interestingly, however, they were also more likely to report taking the initiative to reopen communication after a dispute, suggesting a comparatively stronger inclination toward re-engagement and reconciliation than their female counterparts. Additionally, women perceived themselves as engaging less in direct confrontation but becoming more emotionally distant over time, whereas men were perceived as more confrontational initially but more willing to re-engage verbally following conflict. These patterns suggest that while both genders engage in stonewalling behaviors, the form, emotional experience, and temporal course of withdrawal differ. Overall, the findings indicate that gender differences in stonewalling are reflected not in the presence or absence of withdrawal, but in how silence, emotional expression, and re-engagement are enacted and experienced within marital conflict.

Limitations and Recommendations

This qualitative study, conducted within the Pakistani sociocultural environment, should be interpreted with caution when covering its findings to contexts beyond collectivistic and honor-oriented marital systems. The cultural emphasis on family reputation, modesty, and relational harmony may have shaped participants' willingness to disclose conflict experiences, thereby introducing potential self-report bias. Sensitivities surrounding marital disharmony could also have influenced how openly individuals expressed their emotional responses and relational behaviors.

Future studies would benefit from longitudinal and dyadic research designs to capture the evolving and reciprocal nature of stonewalling within marital relationships. There is also a need to develop culturally grounded assessment tools that more accurately reflect context-specific expressions of silence and withdrawal. Additionally, culturally responsive marital interventions and communication-based psychoeducational programs are recommended to address silence not only as an emotion regulation strategy but also as a socially embedded and reinforced relational pattern.

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