



**CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL NEGLECT, SELF-ESTEEM, AND DEPRESSION
AMONG YOUNG ADULTS**

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ABSTRACT

Emerging young adulthood is a developmental stage that is marked by enhanced self-awareness, exploration of identity and elevated sensitivity in terms of emotional aspects and thus young adults are highly susceptible to the psychological effects of early life experiences. Emotional neglect in childhood has progressively been linked to negative psychological consequences, especially on self-esteem and a causal factor of depressive symptoms. This research examined how the relationship between childhood emotional neglect, self-esteem and depression among young adults in Pakistan were related. A sample of 320 participants aged 18-25 years of different universities in Pakistan was recruited using convenience sampling. The patients were given the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II). Correlation analyses showed pivotal negative correlation between childhood emotional neglect and self esteem, and pivotal positive correlation between childhood emotional neglect and depression. Moreover, the self-esteem was revealed to have a significant negative relationship with depression. Regression findings showed that emotional neglect as a child was a strong predictor of depression and self-esteem with a significant percentage of variance in depressive symptoms being attributed to emotional neglect. Self-esteem was also a key psychological variable that was related to depression. These results emphasize the importance of early emotional experiences in determining the psychological well-being among young adults. The findings show that emotional neglect should be identified and addressed along with indicating the necessity of university-based mental health intervention and awareness initiatives to improve the sense of self-esteem and mitigate depression in young adults.

Keywords: childhood emotional neglect, self-esteem, depression, young adults

Introduction

The period of adolescence is a developmental stage, which is highly vulnerable to psychological distress and mental health issues as it is a critical period of identity exploration, emotional instability, and growing independence (Arnett et al., 2014). At this age, people face various changes, such as educational stress, job confusion, and changing social connections, which may increase underlying psychological vulnerabilities (Watson et al., 2025). Therefore, negative childhood experiences are of great importance in the development of emotional functioning and mental health in young adulthood.

Childhood emotional neglect (CEN) is one of these negative experiences that have been becoming more and more important as a type of maltreatment, despite having been underrecognized. Emotional neglect can be defined as the ongoing inability of caregivers to offer emotional support, responsiveness, and validation needed to achieve healthy



psychological development (Spinazzola et al., 2014; Gama et al., 2021). Emotional neglect is the least noticeable type of abuse, thus underreported, but the psychological impacts of such abuse are severe and long-lasting (Wilk et al., 2024). Modern studies have established that emotional neglect has a close relationship with emotional dysregulation, poor interpersonal functioning, and vulnerability to internalizing disorders (Infurna et al., 2015).

This is significant due to the developmental effects of emotional neglect, where childhood is a vulnerable moment in development as it is the time of self-concept and emotional regulation ability formation. By not addressing the emotional needs of a child, the caregivers might make the child internalize the feelings of rejection, unworthiness, and emotional invalidation. The beliefs internalized continue into adulthood and shape the way a person views themselves and others (Urrohmi & Safaria, 2025). This early exposure interferes with the formation of adaptive coping strategies and puts an individual at risk of experiencing psychological distress during adulthood.

Self-esteem is one of the most crucial psychological concepts affected by childhood emotional neglect and is the general assessment of a person in terms of their value and merit. The development of self-esteem occurs during the initial interpersonal interactions, especially among those with primary caregivers, and is a major factor in psychological well- (Orth et al., 2019). Emotionally neglected individuals are not provided with the needed emotional validation to build a favorable self-concept, which leads to the habitually low self- (Calaresi et al., 2025). Negative emotional consequences such as anxiety, social withdrawal, and depressive symptoms have always been associated with low self-esteem.

Recent empirical investigations have also added a strong correlation of emotional neglect of children at childhood and low self-esteem. An example is that it has been shown that being exposed to neglectful settings increases the likelihood of developing negative self-perceptions and self-critical tendencies, which continue into adulthood and affect emotional (Duan et al., 2025). The trends are especially worrying in emerging adulthood where self-esteem is of utmost importance in identity building and social adaptation.

Depression is another significant psychological impact related to childhood emotional neglect, a highly widespread mental health condition that can be defined by the constant feeling of sadness, hopelessness, and dysfunction. Young adults experience depression that is becoming a rising public health issue, leading to rising rates of depression worldwide (Lippard & Nemeroff, 2019). Emotional neglect is also suggested as a highly important predictor of depressive symptoms because of its long-term effects on emotional processing and cognitive functioning (Mandelli et al., 2015). Maladaptive cognitive schemas such as worthlessness and hopelessness as key characteristics of depression are common in individuals who are emotionally neglected.

Moreover, longitudinal studies have shown that emotional neglect during early life leads to changes in stress response mechanisms and emotional regulation, predisposing them to depression in adulthood (Humphreys et al., 2020; Bueso-Izquierdo et al., 2025). These results imply that emotional neglect not just influences the psychological functioning, but can also have neurobiological consequences, further supporting its influence on mental health outcomes.

A number of theoretical models offer detailed explanation of the connection between depression, emotional neglect in childhood and self-esteem. According to the Attachment Theory that was developed by John Bowlby, early experiences with caregivers determine inner working model of self and others, which in turn determine emotional security and interpersonal relations (Bowlby, 1988). When emotionally neglected, children tend to adopt insecure



attachment styles which cause them to have problems in emotional regulation and they become prone to depression.

On the same note, the Cognitive Theory of Depression by Aaron T. Beck, is the model that explains how negative experiences at an early age lead to the development of negative cognitive schemas. This theory holds that emotionally neglected individuals tend to develop dysfunctional beliefs regarding themselves, the world, and future, and are predisposed to symptoms of depression (Beck, 1976). Such dysfunctional thoughts tend to be reinforced in the long run resulting in long term emotional torment.

Also, Sociometer Theory, which was proposed by Mark R. Leary, treats self-esteem as a mental measure of social acceptance and belongingness (Leary et al., 1995). This process is distorted by emotional neglect that deprives people of emotional confirmation and lowers self-esteem and sensitivity to being socially rejected. This, on its part, leads to emotional distress and depressive symptoms.

The recent empirical studies also highlighted the mediating effect of self-esteem in the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and depression. Research has shown that individual who undergo emotional neglect tend to have low self-esteem, which further predisposes them to prevalence of depressive symptoms (Hu et al., 2025). Equally, studies have indicated that self-esteem is a critical psychological process that determines mental health consequences later in life by implicating the early negative events (Gathier et al., 2024). These results indicate the need to focus on self-esteem during interventions to decrease the depressive levels in people with a past history of emotional neglect.

Although the amount of research on the topic has been increasing in the global community, a major gap in the research conducted in the study of the psychological effect of emotional neglect of children in the Pakistani context has been identified. Pakistan marks traditional values of obedience, esteem of authority, and physical needs satisfaction, and emotional expression and validation might be disregarded or downplayed (Rizvi & Najam, 2015). Consequently, emotional neglect practices could become normalized and not labeled as abusive, which contributes to under-detecting emotional neglect as a type of childhood adversity (Riaz et al., 2021). Such normalization may obstruct awareness and postpone psychological intervention, thus heightening the potential of emotional and mental wellbeing problems in young adults in the long term (Shafique et al., 2025).

Considering such cultural dynamics, there is a strong necessity of empirical studies that investigate the psychological impact of emotional neglect among Pakistanis. Thus, the current research seeks to examine the correlation between childhood emotional neglect, self-esteem and depression among young adults in Pakistan. Investigating these variables, the research aims to add to the current literature and offer culturally applicable information that can guide mental health practices and interventions (Saleem et al., 2021). Moreover, knowledge about the mediating effect of self-esteem can be used to create specific treatment strategies to improve emotional strength and facilitate psychological health in young adults (Chinawa, 2025).

Objectives of the Study

The current study has the following objectives:

1. To investigate the connection between childhood emotional neglect, self-esteem and depression among young adults
2. To evaluate the predictive role of childhood emotional neglect and self-esteem in explaining depression among young adults.

Hypotheses

Based on the evidences, the present research hypotheses that:



1. There would be a negative association between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Self-Esteem among Young Adults
2. There would be a positive association between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Depression among Young Adults
3. Childhood Emotional Neglect and Self-esteem would be a significant predictor of Depression among Young Adults

Rationale of the study

Childhood emotional neglect (CEN) is a comparatively under-researched type of childhood adversity that is not well recognized by most non-Western societies, such as in Pakistan. Parenting practices in Pakistani culture tend to be more obedient, more respectful to elders, more focused on satisfying physical needs, and less focused on emotional expression, validation, and open communication. This tends to downplay or misinterpret the emotional needs of children, and even the emotionally neglectful actions might not be viewed as detrimental. This is a cultural normalization that turns emotional neglect to a silent but widespread problem that may have long-term psychological effects.

Family setups in collectivistic cultures like Pakistan are generally hierarchical and children are supposed to adhere to the wishes of their parents without voicing what bothers them emotionally. Social stigma of mental health can make emotional expression discouraged and discussing personal distress may be discouraged. As a result, emotionally neglected children might internalize their emotions, which will result in emotional regulation problems and a sense of self later in life. These early events can greatly contribute to the growth of self esteem because individuals that lack proper emotional support might grow up believing that they are inadequate, rejected and have little self esteem.

Adulthood emergence is an important stage during which one is not reliant but rather independent and starts developing a strong sense of identity. In the case of Pakistani youth adults, this stage is usually coupled with scholastic stress, career confusion and social pressures that may intensify underlying psychological vulnerabilities. In this scenario, unresolved childhood emotional neglect can take the shapes of low self esteem and vulnerability to depression. Since the awareness of mental health is in its infancy in Pakistan, not every person can understand the relationship between childhood emotional experiences and the new psychological challenges.

Although the number of studies on the issue of childhood adversity has increased globally, there is a significant gap in empirical studies investigating the problem of childhood emotional neglect in the Pakistani context. The majority of local research has concentrated on the more apparent types of abuse and emotional neglect is a poorly researched phenomenon, as it is subtle and culturally acceptable. This knowledge gap of the literature restricts the comprehension of the impact of emotional neglect on the psychological outcomes of the self-esteem and depression in Pakistani young adults.

Moreover, access to mental health services in Pakistan remains limited and there is no intervention culturally sensitive to face the effects of early emotional experiences. Considering the potential of self-esteem as a possible bridge between emotional neglect and depression is especially significant in this regard as it can be used to inform specific intervention strategies to enhance the psychological well-being.

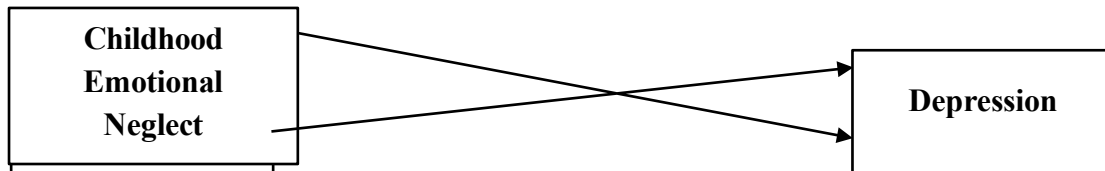
Thus, this research will focus on exploring the correlation among childhood emotional neglect, self-esteem and depression among young adults in Pakistan. Dwelling upon this culturally topical problem, the research aims to add to the current literature and increase awareness on

the psychological effects of emotional neglect. The results can also be used to develop culturally relevant mental health services, foster emotional intelligence, and healthier parenting behaviors in the Pakistani society.

Conceptual Model

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Research



METHODS

Sample

A quantitative correlational research design was adopted for the present study. The participants were 320 young adults (18-25 years old) sampled by convenience in different universities in Pakistan. The age group was chosen because it is a stage of emerging adulthood and an especially critical period in terms of the long-term impacts of childhood experiences. Both male and female participants with a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds were included to increase the generalizability of the results.

Instruments

Demographic Sheet

A demographic information sheet was used to collect data regarding participants' age, gender, university type, and residential background (urban/rural).

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ – Emotional Neglect Subscale)

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) is a commonly used self-report measure designed by Bernstein et al. (2003) to determine the childhood trauma exposure. In the present study, the subscale of Emotional Neglect was used to assess perceived emotional neglect in childhood. The subscale comprises of 5 items that measure the absence of emotional care, attention and care by caregivers. The answer to the response is captured on a 5-point Likert scale of 1 (never true) to 5 (very often true) and a higher score on this would imply an increased degree of emotional neglect. The Childhood trauma questionnaire has shown excellent psychometric qualities among various populations, with good internal consistency and construct validity. Emotional Neglect subscale had good internal consistency with a Cronbach alpha of 0.86.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

Rosenberg (1965) created the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), which is a popular instrument of measuring self-esteem all over the world. It is a set of 10 items that measure the general feeling of self worthiness and self acceptance of a person. The participants will answer on a 4 point Likert scale between 1 (strongly disagree) and 4 (strongly agree). An increase in score indicates an increase in self-esteem. The scale is highly validated and has high reliability in various cultural settings. The RSES in the present research had a high internal consistency of 0.88.

Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II)

Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) is a self-report instrument created by Beck et al. (1996) to determine the level of depressive symptoms severity. It contains 21 items. Each item has a 4-point scale of 0 to 3 with higher scores reflecting higher degrees of depression. It has shown



great reliability and validity across different cultural settings including the young adult populations (Wang and Gorenstein, 2013; Huang et al., 2020). The BDI-II had very good internal consistency in the current research with a Cronbach alpha of 0.86-0.93.

Procedure

The data were gathered using direct method on students in various universities and institutions of higher learning in Pakistan. Formal permission was sought before data collection in an official authority letter by the Department of Psychology to seek permission of concerned academic administrations. The research was based on voluntarily participation and respondents were made to understand that their information was only to be used in research. All respondents were informed and made to give consent before questionnaires were administered. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity in the course of the research. Participants aged 18-25 years were given the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and Beck Depression Inventory-II(BDI-II). Clear guidelines were given and the researcher answered any questions in the collection of data. Participants were also made aware of the fact that they would not suffer any consequences in case they decided to drop out of the study at any time. All respondents were allowed around 15-20 minutes to fill out the questionnaires. At the end, the participants were acknowledged to have cooperated, and those who would want to know the results were assured that they would be provided with the findings on request.

RESULTS

Table 1

Demographics Profile

Respondent's Characteristics	N	%	M (SD)
Age			20.63 (1.92)
Gender	Male	128	40.0
	Female	192	60.0
University Type	Public	170	53.1
	Private	150	46.9
Residence	Rural	210	65.6
	Urban	110	34.4

Demographics indicates that the mean age of the participants was 20.63 years (SD = 1.92). Female participants (60.0%) were slightly higher in number than male participants (40.0%). The sample was almost evenly distributed across public (53.1%) and private (46.9%) universities. The majority of participants belonged to rural areas (65.6%), while 34.4% were from urban areas.



Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Analysis

Variables	M	SD	Childhood Neglect	Emotional Self-Esteem	Depression
Childhood Neglect	17.82	5.43	-		
Self-Esteem	21.65	4.88	-0.48**	-	
Depression	26.91	10.27	0.52**	-0.55**	-

p < .01

The Pearson correlation analysis is presented in Table 2. Self-esteem ($r = -0.48$, $p < .01$) showed a significant negative correlation with childhood emotional neglect, indicating that higher levels of emotional neglect are linked with lower self-esteem among young adults. Depression ($r = 0.52$, $p < .01$) showed a significant positive correlation with childhood emotional neglect, suggesting that increased emotional neglect is linked with higher depressive symptoms. Furthermore, self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated with depression ($r = -0.55$, $p < .01$), describing that individuals with lower self-esteem prone to experience higher levels of depression.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Depression among Young Adults

	B	SE	β	t	p	CI
Constant	18.47	3.92		4.71	0.00**	10.75 – 26.19
Childhood Emotional Neglect	0.89	0.11	0.46	8.09	0.00**	0.67 – 1.11
Self-Esteem	-0.72	0.09	-0.41	-7.88	0.00**	-0.90 – -0.54
R ²	0.47**					
ΔR^2	0.18					
F	64.32					

p < .01; CI for Confidence Interval

Table 3 presents the findings of multiple regression analysis for predicting depression among young adults. The model including childhood emotional neglect and self-esteem accounted for 47% of the variance in depression. Both predictors were found to be statistically significant. Childhood emotional neglect stated as a significant positive predictor of depression ($B = 0.89$, $\beta = 0.46$, $p < .001$), while self-esteem was a significant negative predictor ($B = -0.72$, $\beta = -0.41$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that higher emotional neglect increases depressive symptoms, whereas higher self-esteem reduces depression among young adults.

DISCUSSION

The issue of childhood emotional neglect (CEN) as a major but largely underestimated source of early adversity with potentially severe consequences on psychological functioning during young adulthood has emerged as a topic of increasing recognition (Spinazzola et al., 2014; Gama et al., 2021). Emotional neglect denies people the necessary emotional validation and



support, which play a crucial role in normal psychological development and self-concept building (Infurna et al., 2015). The results of the current research were supposed to examine the correlation between childhood emotional neglect, self-esteem, and depression in young adults and offer empirical data to support the hypotheses.

As per the first hypothesis, the results of this study revealed that childhood emotional neglect was significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem of young adults. The given finding aligns with the previous studies indicating that the former children, who become emotionally neglected, are prone to the development of negative self-images and low self-esteem (Calaresi et al., 2025; Duan et al., 2025; Urrohmi & Safaria, 2025). Emotional neglect restricts the chances to get emotional affirmation and validation and results in internalizing the thoughts of incompetence and worthlessness. Hellfeldt et al. (2025) also discovered in a study conducted recently that emotional neglect was strongly correlated with a low level of self-esteem and self-criticism among young populations. All these findings support the idea that early deprivation of emotions disturbs the formation of a positive self-concept, which proves the first hypothesis of the current research.

Results of the second hypothesis indicated that there was a significant correlation between emotional neglect during childhood and depression in young adults. This finding is justified by an increasing number of studies that recognize emotional neglect as a potent predictor of depressive symptoms among young adults (Mandelli et al., 2015; Humphreys et al., 2020; Bueso-Izquierdo et al., 2025). Maladaptive emotional processing and cognitive distortions (hopelessness and worthlessness) are key characteristics of depression, which are brought about by emotional neglect. In addition, Nanni et al. (2012) propose that people who have a past history of emotional neglect are at higher risk of developing chronic depressive symptoms because of the lack of emotional regulation. These results correspond with the current research and prove the second hypothesis acceptance.

In addition, correlation analysis revealed in results that self-esteem was negatively correlated with depression, implying that people with low self-esteem are more prone to develop more depressive symptoms. Such an observation can be aligned with the prior research which emphasizes the importance of low self-esteem as one of the most important vulnerability aspects of depression (Orth et al., 2019; Sowislo and Orth, 2013; Masselink et al., 2017). Low self-esteem leads to more negative self evaluation and maladaptive cognition that predisposes the individual to depression. This relationship is also supported by a research of Zhou et al. (2018), which showed that low self-esteem leads to depressive symptoms in the long term. These results support the value of self-esteem as an essential psychological aspect of mental health outcomes.

Concerning the third hypothesis, the regression analysis revealed that emotional neglect in childhood was a significant predictor of depression and self-esteem of young adults. This result can be discussed in relation to the current literature that emotional neglect is a key predictor of psychological distress and maladaptive self-concept (Lippard & Nemeroff, 2019; Watson et al., 2025). This predictive quality of emotional neglect could be explained by the fact that it has long-term effects on emotional development, cognitive functioning and interpersonal relationships. Patients with a past history of emotional neglect in childhood are prone to problems in emotional regulation and can also develop dysfunctional coping behaviors, which also lead to depressive symptoms.

The results of the current research can also be interpreted by the light of the existing theoretical frameworks. According to the Attachment Theory, emotionally neglecting conditions cause insecure attachment patterns, which negatively affect emotional control and predisposition to



depression (Bowlby, 1988). On the same note, Cognitive Theory of Depression describes those negative experiences in early life e.g. emotional neglect, lead to the formation of negative cognitive schemas that predispose people to depression (Beck, 1976). These theoretical approaches offer a solid basis on the relationships observed in the current study.

Altogether, the findings of this research point to the high importance of childhood emotional neglect to develop self-esteem and depression in young adults. These results underscore the significance of early emotional caregiving and the necessity of psychological interventions to help deal with emotional neglect and its effects in the long-term. To advance emotional well-being in young adults, universities and mental health professionals should consider using awareness programs, counseling services, and resilience-building interventions to enhance emotional well-being.

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the association between childhood emotional neglect, self-esteem, and depression among young adults. The findings revealed that childhood emotional neglect was significantly related with lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression. Additionally, regression analyses confirmed that emotional neglect is significantly predicting both self-esteem and depression, thereby supporting the proposed hypotheses.

These findings highlight the profound psychological impact of emotional neglect, which, despite being less visible than other forms of abuse, has long-lasting effects on mental health and self-concept. This research underscores the significance of recognizing emotional neglect as a critical factor in psychological well-being, particularly in the context of emerging adulthood.

Furthermore, the results emphasize the need for culturally sensitive mental health interventions in Pakistan, where emotional needs are often overlooked or minimized. Promoting awareness about emotional neglect and its consequences can help in early identification and prevention of mental health problems. Interventions focusing on enhancing self-esteem and emotional resilience may be particularly effective in mitigating the adverse effects of emotional neglect. In conclusion, the present research contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the significant role of childhood emotional neglect in influencing psychological outcomes among young adults. Addressing emotional neglect through awareness, early intervention, and psychological support can play a crucial role in improving in wellbeing of this population.

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