

Dysfunctional Attitudes in Post-COVID Relationships: Pakistan-Malaysia Comparison

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly influenced psychological adjustment and intimate relationships across the globe, with Pakistan and Malaysia presenting unique cultural backdrops for understanding these changes. This quantitative, literature-based study investigates the prevalence and impact of dysfunctional attitudes—such as perfectionism, approval-seeking, and dependency—on relationship satisfaction in post-pandemic populations from both countries. Drawing on recent cross-sectional survey research utilizing the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS-24) and standardized relationship satisfaction indices, our review reveals that both societies experienced significant increases in maladaptive beliefs and declines in relationship quality. Pakistani samples tend to display higher levels of perfectionism and approval-seeking, linked to collective societal and family norms, while Malaysian adults are more prone to dependency-related attitudes shaped by cultural expectations for harmony and emotional support. The results highlight the central role of cognitive vulnerabilities in relationship outcomes after major societal stressors and underscore the urgent need for culturally sensitive counseling, psychoeducation, and public mental health strategies. This synthesis not only adds to cross-cultural psychological literature but also suggests directions for tailored interventions and future empirical research on relationship and cognitive resilience in the post-COVID era.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the psychosocial landscape of individuals and families worldwide, prompting a surge in mental health concerns and challenges to relationship stability (Khan et al., 2021; Sundarasan et al., 2020). Both Pakistan and Malaysia imposed unprecedented restrictions—including nationwide lockdowns, social distancing, and remote work and education—that significantly disrupted daily life and interpersonal connections (Khan et al., 2021; Munir et al., 2021). While these public health measures curbed viral transmission, they also increased psychological stress, loneliness, and uncertainty, providing fertile ground for the activation and exacerbation of dysfunctional attitudes: rigid, maladaptive

beliefs that shape thoughts and interactions within intimate relationships (Weissman & Beck, 1980; Yu et al., 2024).

Dysfunctional attitudes are a central construct in cognitive theory of emotion and depression. They include perfectionism, approval-seeking, and dependency, among other negative self-evaluative patterns (Beck & Bredemeier, 2016). Empirical studies demonstrate their strong association with adverse emotional states and reduced relationship satisfaction, especially under chronic stress or traumatic events (Palmer-Cooper et al., 2023; Hazumi et al., 2022). In South and Southeast Asia, sociocultural factors—such as collective identity, filial obligations, and religious beliefs—may influence the prevalence and expression of

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these attitudes (Fouladgar et al., 2011; Shujja et al., 2023).

Pakistan and Malaysia, both Muslim-majority societies experiencing rapid urbanization, present valuable contexts for understanding how cultural norms interact with dysfunctional attitudes and relationship adjustment during the pandemic era (Munir et al., 2021; Sundarassen et al., 2020). Existing research points to increased anxiety, fear, and social isolation among both populations since the onset of COVID-19, with Pakistani samples reporting greater anxiety linked to job insecurity and family vulnerability, and Malaysian samples showing heightened emotional distress due to prolonged isolation and uncertainty (Khan et al., 2021; Sundarassen et al., 2020; Munir et al., 2021).

Moreover, comparative studies have reported pronounced differences not only in psychological outcomes but also in the social and economic resources available for coping (Munir et al., 2021; Sundarassen et al., 2020). With deficient safety nets and ongoing economic volatility in Pakistan and robust IT-driven education infrastructures in Malaysia, adults in each country may develop divergent cognitive responses to stress, influencing relationship satisfaction and stability in distinct ways.

This study aims to identify the prevalence and nature of dysfunctional attitudes in post-COVID adult populations from both Pakistan and Malaysia, comparing core domains such as perfectionism, approval-seeking, and dependency in overlapping yet culturally distinct settings. Additionally, it assesses the negative association between these maladaptive beliefs and relationship satisfaction while discussing the implications for culturally-informed counseling, psychoeducation, and mental health interventions to mitigate

cognitive vulnerabilities and improve relational well-being in these societies.

Literature Review

Understanding dysfunctional attitudes and their influence on intimate relationships requires engagement with both foundational cognitive theories and culturally specific empirical research. Dysfunctional attitudes, as conceptualized in Beck's cognitive theory of depression, are rigid, negative beliefs about the self, others, and the world that predispose individuals to emotional distress (Beck & Bredemeier, 2016). Weissman and Beck's Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS) remains a primary tool in assessing these cognitive vulnerabilities, with extensive validation across diverse cultural settings (Weissman & Beck, 1980; Fouladgar et al., 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these maladaptive beliefs, creating heightened risk for emotional disorders and deteriorated relationship quality. Several studies link pandemic-induced stress and isolation to increased activation of dysfunctional attitudes and their behavioral manifestations within intimate partnerships (Hazumi et al., 2022; Muraosa et al., 2024; Palmer-Cooper et al., 2023). These effects are modulated by sociocultural factors unique to regional contexts.

In Pakistan, studies reveal a marked prevalence of perfectionism and approval-seeking attitudes, often reflecting collectivist social norms and religious expectations that emphasize family honor and social acceptability (Farzaneh et al., 2011; Shujja et al., 2023). These attitudes contribute to self-critical and externally focused cognitive patterns that exacerbate relational conflicts and decrease satisfaction. For example, Shujja et al. (2023) found that maladaptive coping strategies mediated the relationship

between dysfunctional attitudes and marital dissatisfaction among Pakistani couples.

Conversely, Malaysian research highlights dependency as a more salient dysfunctional attitude domain, influenced by cultural values prioritizing emotional interdependence, harmony, and extended kinship networks (Palmer-Cooper et al., 2023). Malaysian couples often conceptualize relationship satisfaction through the lens of social cohesion, resulting in heightened cognitive sensitivity to disruptions in emotional support systems during the pandemic (Sundarasan et al., 2020).

Cross-cultural validation studies underscore the importance of considering cultural nuances in DAS interpretation and the manifestation of dysfunctional attitudes (Fouladgar et al., 2011; Yu et al., 2024). These differences necessitate culturally tailored mental health interventions to address the specific cognitive and relational dynamics evident in Pakistani and Malaysian couples post-COVID-19.

This literature synthesis establishes the clinical and theoretical framework underpinning our quantitative investigation of dysfunctional attitudes and relationship satisfaction in post-pandemic Pakistan and Malaysia. It elucidates the culturally embedded cognitive patterns and pandemic-related vulnerabilities framing current relational experiences in these populations.

Methodology

The present study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, synthesizing findings from existing validated scales and excerpts from peer-reviewed literature focusing on dysfunctional attitudes and relationship satisfaction in post-COVID populations of Pakistan and Malaysia. This comparative approach allows for the examination of cognitive vulnerabilities and

their associations with relationship outcomes across two culturally distinct but comparably Muslim-majority societies.

Participants in the studies reviewed were adults aged between eighteen and fifty-five years, predominantly married or in committed relationships, residing in urban and semi-urban areas of Pakistan and Malaysia. Sampling methods included stratified convenience sampling to ensure representative variation based on age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status. All participants were screened to ensure consent to participate in relation-based psychological assessments. No qualitative or interview data were used; instead, this study focuses on synthesizing quantitative results from validated psychometric instruments in both contexts.

Primary instruments reported across the reviewed studies include the Dysfunctional Attitude Scale (DAS-24), a widely accepted self-report measure to quantify cognitive distortions in domains such as perfectionism, approval-seeking, and dependency, with demonstrated validity in Pakistani and Malaysian samples (Farzaneh et al., 2011; Shujja et al., 2023). Relationship satisfaction was measured through standardized scales such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) or other culturally validated indices assessing mutual satisfaction and adjustment in intimate partnerships.

Data collection procedures from cited literature adhered to ethical norms including informed consent, confidentiality assurances, and voluntary participation. Data analysis primarily involved descriptive and inferential statistics, including comparisons of mean dysfunctional attitude scores across countries, correlation analyses with relationship satisfaction variables, and regression or mediation modeling to explore

the mechanistic links between cognitive vulnerabilities and relational outcomes.

In this comprehensive synthesis, SPSS and advanced structural equation modeling software have been employed across studies to validate theoretical relationships and control for relevant demographic and pandemic-specific stressors, thereby ensuring the robustness of findings integrated into the current analysis.

Discussion

This study reveals substantial cultural differences and similarities in the expression and impact of dysfunctional attitudes on relationship satisfaction among post-COVID adult populations in Pakistan and Malaysia. Dysfunctional attitudes such as perfectionism, approval-seeking, and dependency significantly negatively influence relationship satisfaction in both countries, confirming the central tenets of Beck's cognitive theory of depression and maladaptive cognition (Beck & Bredemeier, 2016; Weissman & Beck, 1980).

Results indicate that Pakistani adults display higher levels of perfectionism and approval-seeking, behaviors deeply rooted in social norms emphasizing family reputation, religiosity, and interpersonal obligations (Fouladgar et al., 2011; Shujja et al., 2023). Conversely, Malaysian participants exhibit greater dependency-oriented dysfunctional attitudes, consistent with collectivist values prioritizing emotional closeness and social harmony (Palmer-Cooper et al., 2023). These cultural influences modulate the overall dysfunctional cognitive profiles and their relational consequences in each context.

Furthermore, pandemic-related stressors exacerbated dysfunctional attitudes, intensifying relational distress as suggested in recent COVID-19 pandemic mental health literature (Hazumi et al., 2022; Muraosa et al., 2024). Increased isolation, economic

uncertainty, and altered interpersonal communication patterns served as catalysts amplifying maladaptive cognition and challenging relational functioning.

Gender differences emerged with women reporting higher scores on approval-seeking and dependency attitudes, reflecting differential gender role socialization processes that influence cognitive vulnerabilities and emotional expression within intimate relationships (Shujja et al., 2023). This finding aligns with previous cross-cultural psychological research indicating gender-specific cognitive and relational coping patterns.

The data imply potential benefits for integrating culturally responsive cognitive-behavioral strategies in couple's therapy and mental health interventions aimed at reducing dysfunctional attitudes and promoting resilience and relationship satisfaction post-pandemic. Intervention models must be sensitive to culturally embedded cognitive themes to effectively support couples through persistent psychosocial challenges.

Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of how dysfunctional attitudes influence relationship satisfaction in post-COVID adults from Pakistan and Malaysia, highlighting culturally specific cognitive patterns shaped by pandemic-related stressors and sociocultural contexts. The findings demonstrate that dysfunctional attitudes—especially perfectionism, approval-seeking, and dependency—are significant predictors of lower relationship satisfaction in both populations. Pakistani participants' tendencies toward perfectionism and approval-seeking emphasize the role of collective social norms and religiously informed values in shaping maladaptive cognitions that impact relational quality. Malaysian participants' higher

dependency attitudes reflect culturally grounded relational interdependence and emotional harmony concerns.

The pandemic exacerbated these dysfunctional attitudes through increased psychological distress, isolation, and disruption of support networks, thereby intensifying relational dissatisfaction. Gender-specific cognitive vulnerabilities appeared, with women showing elevated approval-seeking and dependency, suggesting that gender role expectations critically shape emotional and cognitive responses to pandemic adversity.

These findings importantly extend cognitive and relational theories by integrating cultural contexts and pandemic-induced psychosocial shifts. They underscore the necessity for mental health professionals to adopt culturally sensitive cognitive-behavioral approaches that address not only dysfunctional attitudes but also the social scripts and values that sustain them. Public health policies and psychoeducational programs should prioritize culturally appropriate interventions to enhance cognitive resilience and relationship quality as part of pandemic recovery efforts.

Future longitudinal research is recommended to trace the trajectories of dysfunctional attitudes and relationship satisfaction, and to evaluate targeted interventions across diverse demographic groups within Pakistan and Malaysia. Such work is vital to inform evidence-based, culturally competent practices that support relational and psychological well-being in an era marked by ongoing global health uncertainties.

This research ultimately reinforces that dysfunctional attitudes represent a critical mechanism through which external stressors like COVID-19 impact intimate relationships, offering actionable insights

into culturally contextualized therapeutic and policy interventions essential for fostering resilient partnerships in South and Southeast Asia.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several key recommendations are proposed to guide future research, clinical practice, and policy-making, aimed at improving relationship satisfaction by addressing dysfunctional attitudes in post-COVID contexts in Pakistan and Malaysia.

First, mental health professionals in both countries should integrate culturally adapted cognitive-behavioral interventions targeting perfectionism, approval-seeking, and dependency among couples. These interventions should be designed to recognize and respect cultural values and norms while promoting adaptive cognitive restructuring and healthier relational patterns. Particularly, therapeutic approaches that address gender-specific cognitive vulnerabilities—such as higher approval-seeking tendencies among women—could enhance treatment efficacy.

Second, there is an imperative to develop and implement psychoeducational programs that raise awareness about dysfunctional attitudes and their impact on relationships, especially in the aftermath of global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health campaigns and community-based workshops may help destigmatize mental health services and provide preventative tools to foster cognitive resilience and relationship satisfaction.

Third, policymakers should allocate appropriate resources and support to establish accessible, affordable mental health services emphasizing couple and family therapy as part of post-pandemic recovery strategies. Incorporating routine screening for dysfunctional attitudes and relationship distress into primary healthcare settings

could aid early identification and timely intervention.

Lastly, future research must prioritize longitudinal and intervention studies to track the evolution of dysfunctional attitudes and their effects on relational outcomes over time. Employing large, representative, and diverse samples—including rural and marginalized populations—will improve generalizability and inform culturally nuanced interventions. Comparing different intervention modalities and their efficacy across cultural groups could yield important insights for evidence-based practice.

By adopting these recommendations, stakeholders can meaningfully contribute to enhancing relational and psychological well-being in Pakistan, Malaysia, and similar socio-cultural contexts facing ongoing and future public health challenges.

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