



NAVIGATING THE DIVIDE: A GENERATIONAL SHIFT IN PROBLEM PERCEPTION AND COPING NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY PAKISTANI SOCIETY

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Abstract

Background: Contemporary Pakistani society is undergoing rapid socio-economic and cultural transformation, producing increasing divergence between older and younger generations in how problems are perceived and managed. These differences are particularly visible in coping narratives, mental health interpretations, and family-based decision-making systems.

Objective: This narrative review synthesizes interdisciplinary literature to examine how generational cohorts in Pakistan construct problem perception and coping frameworks, and how these are shaped by structural transformations including economic precarity, family system transitions, and digital media exposure.

Methods: A structured narrative synthesis was conducted on peer-reviewed literature (2019–2026) sourced from PsycINFO, PubMed, Google Scholar, and HEC-recognized journals. The analysis followed thematic coding procedures focusing on generational coping, mental health discourse, family systems, and socio-economic stressors.

Results: Findings indicate a structural shift from collectivist, endurance-based coping frameworks (e.g., *sabr*, familial compromise, relational obligation) among older cohorts toward individualized, psychologically oriented coping frameworks emphasizing boundaries, emotional validation, and financial autonomy among younger cohorts. These differences are not purely attitudinal but emerge from interacting structural conditions including inflationary pressure, weakening joint family systems, gender role renegotiation, and digital exposure to global psychological discourses.

Conclusion: Generational divergence in Pakistan reflects historically situated adaptations rather than cultural erosion. Effective intervention requires culturally integrated mental health frameworks, intergenerational dialogue mechanisms, and structural policy responses addressing economic insecurity and youth vulnerability.

Keywords: Pakistan; generational change; coping narratives; cultural psychology; mental health; family systems; social transformation

Introduction

Pakistan stands at a complex socio-cultural crossroads. A country with a median age of approximately 22 years, it is home to one of the most youthful populations in South Asia, yet



it remains deeply embedded in centuries-old cultural and familial traditions (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2023). The rapid pace of urbanization, economic volatility, digital connectivity, and changing gender dynamics has produced a society in which the values and lived experiences of successive generations are increasingly misaligned. These misalignments manifest most acutely in how problems are perceived, communicated, and managed what may be termed the terrain of problem perception and coping narratives.

Historically, Pakistani society has operated within a collectivist framework wherein individual problems were subsumed within communal and familial structures (Hasan & Khalid, 2020). Older generations were socialized into a worldview that valorized patience, self-sacrifice, and deference to family elders, particularly in matters of marriage, career, and financial decision-making. However, rising inflation Pakistan's consumer price index rose to a historic high of over 38% in May 2023 (State Bank of Pakistan, 2023) compounded by unemployment, housing insecurity, and social media exposure to global standards of living, has fundamentally altered the context within which younger Pakistanis navigate their daily realities.

The shift from joint to nuclear family systems in urban Pakistan has further amplified this generational divide. While joint families historically served as social safety nets and problem-buffering institutions, the fragmentation of these structures has left younger individuals with fewer communal coping resources but greater expectations of personal self-reliance (Rehman & Fatima, 2021). Simultaneously, increasing mental health awareness fueled in part by social media campaigns and NGO activity has introduced new vocabularies of suffering and recovery that often conflict with traditional cultural narratives.

This paper addresses a pressing and understudied question: How do problem perception and coping narratives differ across generations in Pakistan, and what structural and cultural forces explain this divergence? Through a narrative review of recent literature (2019–2026) with an emphasis on Pakistani and South Asian scholarship, this paper critically examines these differences and discusses their implications for mental health policy, intergenerational communication, and social cohesion in contemporary Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is informed by three interconnected theoretical perspectives. First, Karl Mannheim's (1923) theory of generations posits that cohorts sharing formative historical experiences develop distinct "generational consciousnesses" shared orientations toward social problems, authority, and change. Applied to Pakistan, this framework illuminates why older and younger cohorts do not merely differ in opinion but inhabit structurally different social worlds. Second, Hofstede's (1980) collectivism-individualism continuum provides a cultural lens through which to understand the normative shift occurring in Pakistani society: from deeply collectivist coping orientations toward more individualist frameworks, driven by urbanization and global media exposure. Third, socio-economic stress models particularly the work of Pearlin et al. (1981) on stressor proliferation help explain how macroeconomic pressures such as inflation and unemployment do not affect all generations equally; rather, they interact with life-stage vulnerabilities to produce distinctive patterns of distress and coping. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that generational differences in Pakistan are not reducible to attitudinal gaps but are produced at the intersection of historical experience, cultural transformation, and structural economic change.

Methodology

This study adopts a narrative review approach, synthesizing peer-reviewed literature published between 2019 and 2026, with a primary focus on Pakistani and South Asian contexts. Literature was identified through electronic database searches of PsycINFO, PubMed, Google Scholar,



and HEC (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan) recognized journals using the following search terms: "generational differences Pakistan," "mental health coping Pakistan," "intergenerational conflict South Asia," "family systems Pakistan," "youth stress Pakistan," and "digital media mental health Pakistan." Inclusion criteria required that studies address at least one of the following: generational or cohort-based differences in coping, mental health attitudes, or family dynamics in Pakistan or comparable South Asian contexts; socio-economic determinants of psychological well-being in Pakistan; or social media influences on mental health among Pakistani youth. Studies focusing exclusively on clinical populations or biological determinants of mental illness were excluded. A total of 18 primary sources were selected for synthesis. Due to the limited availability of large-scale Pakistani empirical studies on this topic, theoretically relevant international literature was incorporated where explicitly justified by contextual comparability.

Literature Review

Generational Differences in South Asian and Pakistani Contexts

Generational theory, originating in the work of Karl Mannheim (1923) and later operationalized through widely used generational typologies, posits that cohorts sharing formative historical experiences develop distinct psychological orientations. In the Pakistani context, Siddiqui and Shah (2022) applied a modified generational framework to examine attitudinal differences between individuals aged over 50 and those below 35, finding statistically significant differences in emotional expression, tolerance for ambiguity, and reliance on family-based versus individual problem-solving strategies. The older cohort demonstrated higher endorsement of collectivist coping, while the younger cohort showed greater preference for individualized emotional processing.

In a broader South Asian analysis, Singh et al. (2020) identified urbanization and formal education as primary drivers of intergenerational value divergence in India and Pakistan, noting that educated urban youth in both countries show markedly different attitudes toward marriage, career aspirations, and mental health-seeking behavior than their rural or less-educated counterparts. This pattern is replicated in Pakistani studies focusing on university-educated populations (Ali & Asghar, 2021).

Collectively, these studies suggest that generational differences in Pakistan are not isolated psychological phenomena but are embedded within broader socio-economic transformations urbanization, educational expansion, and structural economic change that systematically reshape how successive cohorts understand and respond to adversity.

Mental Health Awareness and Help-Seeking Behavior in Pakistan

Pakistan carries a significant mental health burden, with an estimated 34 million people affected by mental illness, yet fewer than 500 trained psychiatrists serve a population exceeding 220 million (Gadit & Khalid, 2019). Traditional cultural frameworks have long stigmatized mental illness as a spiritual failing or moral weakness, leading to reliance on faith healers, family mediation, and stoic endurance rather than professional intervention (Khan et al., 2020). Younger Pakistanis, however, are increasingly exposed to psychoeducational content through social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, fundamentally reshaping their understanding of mental distress.

A study by Naeem et al. (2021) conducted across three Pakistani universities found that over 60% of respondents aged 18–25 identified social media as their primary source of mental health information, and over 45% reported discussing psychological concepts such as anxiety, depression, and boundaries with peers. In contrast, interviews with respondents aged above 50 revealed almost universal dismissal of psychological terminology in favor of religious or moral



frameworks for explaining distress. More recently, Shahid and Mirza (2024) found that online mental health literacy campaigns in Pakistan were significantly more effective at shifting stigma attitudes among university-educated youth than among adults over 45, underscoring the generational asymmetry in mental health conceptualization.

This divergence in conceptual vocabulary directly shapes what problems are perceived as legitimate and what coping strategies are considered appropriate. The younger generation's adoption of clinical language does not simply reflect exposure to Western psychology; it represents a reframing of longstanding experiences of distress that have always existed but lacked legitimate public expression.

Taken together, the mental health literature indicates that the generational gap is not merely about differing tolerances for hardship, but about fundamentally different frameworks for recognizing, naming, and legitimizing distress a distinction with profound implications for both clinical practice and public health policy in Pakistan.

Financial Stress, Economic Precarity, and Youth in Pakistan

Pakistan's economic deterioration has disproportionately impacted younger cohorts. Youth unemployment in Pakistan stood at approximately 7.9% officially in 2022, though informal estimates suggest substantially higher rates when accounting for underemployment and informal sector workers (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023). Raza and Qureshi (2022) found in a study of 600 young urban Pakistanis that financial insecurity was the most frequently cited source of stress, surpassing relationship and family problems. Critically, financial stress was also linked to relational conflict particularly intergenerational conflict as young adults found themselves unable to meet culturally expected milestones such as marriage by a certain age, home ownership, or financial support for parents.

The older generation's advice to younger Pakistanis often centering on frugality, compromise, and delayed gratification was frequently experienced by young respondents not as practical guidance but as evidence of a potential disconnect rooted in differing socio-economic experiences (Raza & Qureshi, 2022). Malik and Iqbal (2025) further documented that among Pakistani millennials, financial anxiety was significantly correlated with reduced life satisfaction and increased family conflict, particularly in households where intergenerational financial expectations remained rooted in pre-inflation norms.

Changing Family Systems: From Joint to Nuclear

The dissolution of the joint family system in urban Pakistan has been well-documented. According to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM, 2021), the proportion of households classified as nuclear families in urban areas rose from 51% in 2005 to 67% in 2020. Rehman and Fatima (2021) argue that this structural shift has created a paradox: younger Pakistanis are simultaneously expected to uphold collectivist values while living in structural conditions nuclear families, urban anonymity, economic individualism that make collectivist coping increasingly untenable.

This structural-normative mismatch is further compounded by changing gender dynamics. The rising participation of women in the formal labor force from 22% in 2010 to 28% in 2022 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022) has introduced new sources of intergenerational tension around role expectations, financial autonomy, and marital decision-making. Hussain and Baig (2023) found that young Pakistani women with formal employment reported significantly higher rates of intergenerational conflict than their non-employed counterparts, as their economic independence challenged traditional narratives about female submission and financial dependence.



Across these thematic domains, a coherent pattern emerges: the generational divide in Pakistan is not reducible to any single variable but results from the convergence of structural economic change, family system transformation, evolving gender norms, and shifting epistemic frameworks for understanding distress. Each factor reinforces the others, producing a compound generational divergence that cannot be adequately addressed through piecemeal interventions.

Generational Comparison in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis

The Older Generation: Sabr, Collective Honor, and Relational Endurance

For Pakistanis born roughly between 1945 and 1970 who came of age in a newly independent nation shaped by partition trauma, Cold War geopolitics, and predominantly agrarian or early industrial economies the dominant coping paradigm was collectivist resilience. Problems were understood as tests of faith (azmaish) to be endured through patience (sabr), prayer, and community solidarity (Siddiqui & Shah, 2022). Psychological distress was rarely articulated in clinical terms; rather, it was absorbed within the rhythms of family obligation, religious observance, and social performance.

This generation's coping narratives are inseparable from structures of family honor (izzat) and social reputation. Marital dissatisfaction, financial difficulty, or mental illness were problems to be managed internally, within the family, rather than exposed to professional scrutiny or public discourse. The logic of relational endurance staying in difficult marriages, tolerating abusive work conditions, suppressing individual aspirations for family welfare was not merely normative pressure but a genuine survival strategy in a context where social capital and family networks were the primary safety nets (Khan et al., 2020).

It is critical to recognize that these coping mechanisms were functional adaptations to specific historical conditions, not simply expressions of cultural rigidity. The older generation's emphasis on compromise was not irrational; it reflected the reality that individual exit from family or marital systems carried severe social, economic, and physical consequences in mid-twentieth-century Pakistan, particularly for women.

The Younger Generation: Boundaries, Well-being, and Financial Independence

Contemporary young Pakistanis those born roughly between 1990 and 2005 have come of age in a radically different landscape: persistent economic instability, smartphone ubiquity, global cultural flows, democratized education, and a nascent but growing mental health discourse. Their problem perception frameworks reflect this altered context. Problems are increasingly understood through a psychological lexicon anxiety, depression, toxic relationships, emotional abuse, burnout rather than purely religious or moral terms (Naeem et al., 2021).

The concept of personal boundaries largely absent from traditional Pakistani cultural discourse has emerged as a central organizing principle in younger Pakistanis' relational and coping narratives. Boundary-setting represents both a psychological strategy and a form of social resistance: a refusal to absorb familial or societal demands at the cost of individual well-being. This shift has been simultaneously celebrated as a sign of psychological health and condemned by older generations as selfishness or ingratitude (Ali & Asghar, 2021).

Financial independence occupies a central place in young Pakistanis' coping aspirations. In contrast to their parents' generation, many young urban Pakistanis regard economic self-sufficiency as a prerequisite for psychological well-being, relational equality, and personal dignity. Yet the structural barriers to this independence including high graduate unemployment rates, soaring housing costs, and an underdeveloped formal financial safety net create chronic frustration and what Raza and Qureshi (2022) term the aspiration-reality gap.



Why does this difference exist? The answer lies not in a moral failure of either generation but in the structural transformation of Pakistani society. The coping strategies valorized by the older generation were coherent responses to the conditions of their youth. The younger generation's divergent coping frameworks are equally coherent responses to their conditions they are simply different conditions. The intergenerational conflict is therefore fundamentally a conflict between two historically situated rationalities, both internally coherent but increasingly incompatible.

Discussion

The Gap Between Traditional Advice and Modern Pakistani Realities

One of the most significant sources of intergenerational friction in contemporary Pakistan is the persistent dispensing of traditional coping advice "adjust karo," "sabr karo," "family ki izzat ka khayal karo" within contexts that have materially changed. When a young person earning PKR 35,000 monthly is advised by a parent who purchased a home in the 1980s for a fraction of today's cost to "save more" or "be patient," the advice may reflect a potential disconnect rooted in differing socio-economic experiences rather than a lack of care (Raza & Qureshi, 2022). This produces both practical friction and psychological harm, as young Pakistanis may internalize the implied message that their difficulties are personal failures rather than structural realities.

The impact of Pakistan's inflation crisis on relational dynamics cannot be overstated. Raza and Qureshi (2022) found that financial stress was the most commonly cited cause of marital conflict in their sample of young urban couples, with 71% reporting that financial tensions had significantly damaged relationship quality. The older generation's narrative of endurance was forged when economic hardship, while real, existed within a context of lower basic commodity prices, stable informal employment, and stronger family financial support networks conditions that no longer obtain for most young urban Pakistanis.

Changing Gender Roles and Intergenerational Conflict

The evolution of gender roles in Pakistan represents one of the most contested sites of intergenerational difference. The older generation's problem perception framework in relation to women was largely organized around the concept of patience within marriage an orientation grounded in both religious teaching and practical necessity in a context where women had minimal economic alternatives. The younger generation, shaped by feminist discourse, economic participation, and digital exposure to global gender norms, increasingly frames marital unhappiness as a legitimate psychological problem warranting resolution rather than endurance (Hussain & Baig, 2023).

This shift is not without ambivalence. Many young Pakistani women report experiencing what Hussain and Baig (2023) describe as a double bind: they have absorbed both the traditional collectivist values of their upbringing and the individualist self-care narratives of global digital culture, creating chronic internal conflict about the legitimacy of their own needs. This double bind is itself a distinctive coping challenge that neither the older generation's framework nor Western individualist psychology fully addresses.

Social Media and the Reconstruction of Coping Narratives

Social media's role in reshaping problem perception among young Pakistanis is paradoxical. On one hand, digital platforms have democratized access to mental health information, reduced stigma among certain populations, and created communities of mutual support that partially compensate for the erosion of joint family networks (Naeem et al., 2021). On the other hand, social media's algorithmic tendency to surface idealized representations of life dramatically exacerbates the aspiration-reality gap that characterizes young Pakistanis' experience of



economic precarity. Ahmed et al. (2024) found that higher social media use among Pakistani university students was significantly associated with increased social comparison, lower self-esteem, and greater reported loneliness paradoxically, the very outcomes that social media mental health content claims to address.

Furthermore, social media has introduced coping concepts that, while clinically meaningful, are sometimes deployed in intergenerational discourse in ways that may pathologize normal cultural practices or intergenerational authority. This creates a challenge for mental health professionals: how to validate young Pakistanis' psychological distress without inadvertently undermining genuinely valuable cultural resources such as communal resilience, spiritual coping, and relational interdependence.

Limitations

This review is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, as a narrative review, it does not employ systematic review methodology or meta-analytic synthesis; findings are therefore subject to the selection biases inherent in narrative approaches. Second, the existing Pakistani literature on this topic is heavily concentrated in urban, educated, and university-based populations; generalizability to rural, lower-income, or less-educated Pakistani communities is therefore limited. Third, the scarcity of large-scale, nationally representative empirical studies on generational coping differences in Pakistan required reliance on smaller studies, qualitative data, and extrapolation from broader South Asian research, reducing the precision of some claims. Fourth, the generational categories employed in this review "older" and "younger" are necessarily broad; significant intra-generational variation exists based on gender, class, region, and religiosity that a single review cannot fully capture. Future empirical research employing mixed methods, larger samples, and rural-urban comparative designs would substantially strengthen the evidence base.

Implications

For Pakistani Society and Intergenerational Relations

The generational divergence in problem perception identified in this review calls for intentional efforts at intergenerational dialogue in Pakistani families, communities, and institutions. Such dialogue must be premised on the recognition that different generational coping frameworks are not reflections of moral superiority or inferiority but of historically conditioned rationalities. Community-based platforms through mosques, educational institutions, and local organizations could facilitate structured conversations that honor both the wisdom embedded in traditional coping narratives and the legitimate contemporary needs of younger Pakistanis.

For Mental Health Policy and Practice in Pakistan

Pakistan urgently requires a culturally situated mental health policy framework that neither imports Western individualist models uncritically nor dismisses genuine psychological distress in deference to cultural tradition. Clinicians and counselors practicing in Pakistan must develop competencies in navigating the collectivist-individualist therapeutic dilemma: how to honor relational and spiritual dimensions of coping while validating the real costs of collectivist coping in contexts of structural inequality and changing gender norms. The national Mental Health Policy of 2003 remains severely outdated; a revised framework incorporating generational and economic dimensions of mental distress is long overdue (Gadit & Khalid, 2019).

For Education and Future Research

Pakistani educational institutions have an important role in developing emotional and financial literacy among young people while simultaneously fostering appreciation for the adaptive



wisdom embedded in cultural traditions. Psychoeducational curricula that critically examine rather than simply endorse or reject traditional coping strategies could significantly reduce the polarization between generational frameworks. Future research should prioritize large-scale quantitative studies with nationally representative Pakistani samples, longitudinal designs, and qualitative research that gives voice to the lived intergenerational tensions described in this review. Particular attention should be paid to rural-urban and class-based variations, as existing literature is heavily biased toward educated urban samples.

Conclusion

This review has demonstrated that the generational divide in problem perception and coping narratives in Pakistan is neither superficial nor merely attitudinal. It is structurally produced by the intersection of economic crisis, family system transformation, global digital exposure, and evolving gender norms. The older generation's emphasis on sabr, collective endurance, and relational loyalty reflects a historically coherent adaptation to conditions that have significantly changed. The younger generation's focus on boundaries, mental health, and financial independence reflects an equally coherent adaptation to a radically transformed and in many respects more precarious socio-economic reality.

The central insight of this paper is that the issue is not an unwillingness to adjust, but a transformation in the conditions within which adjustment must occur. Pakistani society stands at a pivotal moment: it can either allow this generational divergence to deepen into social fragmentation, or it can foster the kind of culturally grounded, structurally informed dialogue that integrates the adaptive wisdom of both generational frameworks. Achieving this integration will require collective honesty about changing realities, institutional support for mental health, and economic policies that address the material precarity driving much of the distress experienced by young Pakistanis today.

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