

Traditional Masculinity and Psychological Distress among Married Men: Mediating Role of Experiential Avoidance

Iqra Bano

MSCP, Lahore Garrison University, Lahore, Pakistan, iiqrabano47@gmail.com

Abdul Raffay Saleem

Senior Lecturer, Lahore Garrison University, Lahore, Pakistan, abdulraffaysaleem2025@gmail.com

Abstract

This current study aimed to investigate the mediating role of experiential avoidance on the association between traditional masculinity and psychological distress among married men in Pakistan. The following hypotheses were formulated: the positive relationship between traditional masculinity, experiential avoidance, and psychological distress; the mediation effect of experiential avoidance on the relation between traditional masculinity and psychological distress; the greater level of all three variables in rural men compared to urban men. It is a correlational study with cross-sectional design. Purposive sampling with screening questions was used to recruit $N = 250$ married men aged from 20 to 55 years old in urban ($n = 145$) and rural ($n = 105$) settings. The tools included a demographic information form, the Gender Role Strain Scale for Men (Arshad & Shahed, 2021), the Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (Gámez et al., 2014), and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2002). All the scales demonstrated adequate reliability ($\alpha = .86$ to $.90$). Traditional masculinity, experiential avoidance, and psychological distress were found to be significantly and positively correlated ($r_s = .19$ to $.31$, $p < .01$). Experiential Avoidance played a mediating role between Traditional Masculinity and Psychological Distress. Independent Sample T-test shows higher levels of Traditional Masculinity and Experiential Avoidance in rural participants as compared to urban participants. Therefore, the results of the study creates awareness among people and mental health professionals about the way our Traditional Masculinity beliefs are related to Experiential avoidance which ultimately leads to Psychological Distress among married men.

Keywords: Traditional Masculinity, Experiential Avoidance, Psychological Distress, Mediation

Introduction

Masculine ideologies refer to the beliefs that define appropriate behaviors for men. The beliefs usually emphasize emotional self-control, independence, strength, and success, among others, and discourage men from doing things considered “feminine” by the culture (Singley, 2022). These beliefs are acquired early in life through socialization in the family environment, by caretakers, and other cultural institutions, and when internalized, such beliefs negatively affect the attitudes, behaviors, and wellbeing of men (Rivera, 2019). The process of masculine socialization is also associated with emotional restriction and poor help-seeking behaviors (Mahalik et al., 2003). Conformity to masculine norms has been found through meta-analysis to be associated with psychological well-being of individuals (Wong et al., 2017), and through review to be associated with poor help-seeking behavior and psychological distress (Mokhelepa & Sumbane, 2025), with internalizing problems (Mancini et al., 2025), and male suicide (Galvez-Sánchez et al., 2025).

Masculinity in Pakistan is related to the provider role, decision-making, protection, headship, control, power, and honor. The norms associated with these characteristics vary by region and culture in Pakistan (Aurat Foundation, 2016). The media in Pakistan typically depicts men in a traditional manner which involves emotional repression and dominance (Shahwar et al., 2025). Previous research on masculinity ideology in Pakistan has revealed that males tend to be more supportive of traditional values, specifically the male privilege and restricted emotionality, than females (Imtiaz & Kamal, 2024); a scale has been devised for use in Pakistan (Imtiaz & Kamal, 2023).

The concept of experiential avoidance implies efforts to escape or alter the occurrence of undesirable private experiences, including unwanted thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, and situations evoking them (Hayes et al., 1996). While avoidance can help cope with unwanted private events temporarily, it prevents emotional processing and maintains psychopathology (Hayes-Skelton & Eustis, 2020; Wang et al., 2024). Additionally, experiential avoidance has been considered an intermediary variable between risk factors and problem behaviors (Kingston et al., 2010). Experiential avoidance has been explored in connection with the prolonged grief of bereaved emerging adults in Pakistan (Farooqui et al., 2025), but not with masculinity.

Psychological distress represents an overall mental health burden involving emotional and psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and stress, and does not always entail a psychiatric disorder (Malik et al., 2025; Nosè et al., 2025). Kessler et al. (2002) defined psychological distress as a general continuum of anxious and depressive symptoms.

There are three associations between these factors. First, traditional masculine norms are correlated with psychological distress (Mancini et al., 2025; Mokhwelepa & Sumbane, 2025). Second, norms of emotional restraint inhibit vulnerability disclosure and help seeking (Chandra & Himawan, 2025) and thus can prompt men to suppress distressful states; in turn, suppression strategies have been shown to mediate the association between masculinity ideology and men's depressive symptoms (Genuchi et al., 2025). Third, experiential avoidance is associated with higher psychological distress, for instance, among patients with cancer experiencing posttraumatic symptoms (Aliche & Idemudia, 2025). The relationships above were studied jointly by Spendelov and Joubert (2018) in 120 adult men, and experiential avoidance was found to mediate the connection between gender role conflict and psychological distress, specifically concerning restrictive emotionality.

There are three theoretical models used as a foundation for the research described herein. The model of Gender Role Strain Paradigm suggests that masculinity ideology is a socially constructed belief system, not a personality characteristic, and the rigid adherence to it causes stress (Pleck, 1995). Gender Role Conflict Theory states that the rigidity of patriarchal socialization causes gender role conflict and restrictions of emotionality, and the suppression of emotions results in poor emotional well-being (O'Neil et al., 1986; O'Neil, 2008). The model of Acceptance and Commitment Theory claims that the constant experiential avoidance causes the decrease of psychological flexibility and prevents values-based behavior (Hayes et al., 1996, 2004). Thus, based on the models described above, the following pathway was suggested to be researched: traditional masculinity (gender role strain) → experiential avoidance → psychological distress.

Despite the above, several gaps exist. The use of mediation by avoidance for the effects of masculine role stress and distress in men has been explored in previous studies such as Genuchi et al. (2025) and Spendelov and Joubert (2018). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, avoidance has not been tested in terms of Pakistani men. Masculinity in Pakistan has previously been studied focusing mainly on measuring gender role stress and masculinity ideology scales (Arshad & Shahed, 2021; Imtiaz & Kamal, 2023), exploring the concepts of masculinity ideologies amongst both men and women adults (Imtiaz & Kamal, 2024), or exploring experiential avoidance during grief (Farooqui et al., 2025). The role of providers and being the head of the family is what Pakistani culture values in married men, and Pakistani culture varies from one region to another (Aurat Foundation, 2016); however, there is no information regarding whether experiential avoidance mediates the relation between masculine gender role stress and psychological distress for married men and whether this differs for urban and rural men. They can be useful for (a) theory, as they allow testing the Gender Role Strain Paradigm, Gender Role Conflict Theory, and the acceptance-based model collectively in a collectivistic cultural setting (Hayes et al., 1996; O'Neil, 2008; Pleck, 1995); (b) clinical practice, as they will allow to identify the modifiable risk factor of experiential avoidance for the development of acceptance-based interventions and the need for brief screening in distressed males (Hayes-Skelton & Eustis, 2020; Kessler et al., 2002); and (c) public policy, by developing culturally sensitive programs aimed at reducing stigma and fostering help-seeking behavior in men (Mokhwelepa & Sumbane, 2025; Vogel & Heath, 2016).

Several studies on traditional masculinity have examined the themes of help-seeking and mental well-being. Using a cross-sectional design involving 115 Chinese–Indonesian young men aged between 18 and 25 years, Chandra and Himawan (2025) discovered that masculine beliefs explained 11.4% of the variance of attitudes towards seeking help, with unwillingness to seek help being attributed to restrictive emotionality and toughness. Scoping review of 82 studies came to the conclusion that higher adherence to masculine norms was associated with decreased probability of seeking psychological help and getting treatment; however, the authors noted that in most of the studies there was a deficit approach to masculinity (Burns et al., 2025).

In a systematic review involving adults men, Mokhwelepa and Sumbane (2025) stated that self-sufficiency and emotional stoicism had negative relationships with help-seeking attitudes and mental distress but at the same time resilience and mental toughness were beneficial only in specific contexts. Self-compassion failed to significantly weaken the impact of masculine norms on help-seeking attitudes in young adult males (Singh & Debbarna, 2025). Emotional control, toughness and self-reliance, which belong to masculine norms, were associated with suicide ideation and suicide attempts among vulnerable men (Galvez-Sánchez et al., 2025).

However, the correlation between masculine norms and symptoms of distress has also been demonstrated by other research studies. Restrictive masculinity was found to correlate with depressive symptoms in a sample of 1,008 young adults where 45.5% of individuals had those symptoms (Noel et al., 2025). Toxic masculinity was found to be strongly correlated with poor mental well-being, depression, as well as anxiety but not self-esteem in young adult men (Haritha & Lokesh, 2024). It was discovered, through a review of the literature on Sub-Saharan Africa, that both stoicism and self-reliance may serve as risk and protective factors while the prevailing type of masculinity in that region involves silence about mental well-being issues (Folorunsho, 2025). A high level of psychological distress, anxiety, and depression was found in a group of 1,766 Italian students aged 18–25 years old who were poorer in terms of mental well-being than males (Nosè et al., 2025).

According to Imtiaz and Kamal (2024), a survey conducted among 441 adults aged between 19 and 51 years in Pakistan revealed that the men had more masculine attitudes compared to women, especially in terms of male privilege and emotionality restriction, suggesting that there is cultural encouragement of emotional restriction of Pakistani males. Research conducted in Pakistan on experiential avoidance has mainly been conducted on other populations. Experiential avoidance has been found to be strongly and positively associated with prolonged grief symptoms in a study involving 200 bereaved young adults in Karachi (Farooqui et al., 2025). According to Abbas et al. (2024), among 300 private sector faculty members in Islamabad, experiential avoidance mediated the effect of downward envy and abusive supervision on turnover intentions.

Other studies of experiential avoidance have been conducted outside of Pakistan to explore its mediating role in various outcomes. Experiential avoidance mediated the relationship between psychological resilience and the fulfillment and thwarting of psychological needs in 506 Turkish individuals amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Dursun et al., 2022), as well as the relationship between dispositional mindfulness and problematic smartphone use in 434 Indian adults, with an indirect effect of 24.4% (Felix et al., 2024). Experiential avoidance and resilience were tested as mediators of the influence of post-traumatic stress on quality of life in cancer patients by Aliche and Idemudia (2025). Of particular relevance to the current study, however, are the studies conducted by Spendelov and Joubert (2018), who found that experiential

avoidance mediated the impact of gender role conflict patterns on psychological distress based on the analysis of data collected from 120 adult men, and Genuchi et al. (2025) who demonstrated that thought suppression strategies mediated the influence of traditional masculinity ideology on externalized depression.

All these studies, taken as a whole, indicate consistent relationships between masculine norms, unwillingness to ask for help, and psychological problems (Burns et al., 2025; Mokhwelepa & Sumbane, 2025), as well as demonstrate the possibility of functioning of the experiential avoidance mechanism as an intervening factor (Felix et al., 2024; Spindelw & Joubert, 2018).

However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, such an intervening pathway has not been investigated before within the Pakistani sample of men, and there were no Pakistani studies combining the factors which are explored in current study (Farooqui et al., 2025; Imtiaz & Kamal, 2024).

Rationale

The rationale for the current study is based on the socio-cultural environment in Pakistan, where men are supposed to be providers and family leaders. The married men from the age group of 20 to 55 years bear maximum socio-economic responsibility in the provision of the mentioned roles, but little has been investigated about their perception of masculinity and mental well-being. There were local studies which had explored the ideology of masculinity in a broader age group of adults (Imtiaz & Kamal, 2024) or experiential avoidance regardless of masculinity (Farooqui et al., 2025). Experiential avoidance has previously been found to be a mediator between masculine role conflict and psychological distress in other samples (Spindelw & Joubert, 2018). This pathway has yet to be studied among married men in Pakistan, according to the knowledge of the authors. Additionally, since there is regional variation within Pakistan with regard to masculine norms (Aurat Foundation, 2016), this study compares urban and rural married men.

Objectives

- To determine the relationship between traditional masculinity, experiential avoidance, and psychological distress among married men.
- To determine the relationship between traditional masculinity and experiential avoidance among married men.
- To determine the relationship between experiential avoidance and psychological distress among married men.
- To determine the mediation effect of experiential avoidance in the relationship between traditional masculinity and psychological distress among married men.
- To determine the difference between urban and rural married men with regard to traditional masculinity, experiential avoidance, and psychological distress.

Hypotheses

H1: There is likely to be a significant positive relationship between traditional masculinity, experiential avoidance, and psychological distress among married men (Mancini et al., 2025; Mokhwelepa & Sumbane, 2025).

H2: Traditional masculinity is likely to be a significant positive predictor of experiential avoidance among married men (Chandra & Himawan, 2025; Spindelw & Joubert, 2018).

H3: Experiential avoidance is likely to be a significant positive predictor of psychological distress among married men (Aliche & Idemudia, 2025; Hayes-Skelton & Eustis, 2020).

H4: Experiential avoidance is likely to mediate the relationship between traditional masculinity and psychological distress (Genuchi et al., 2025; Spindelw & Joubert, 2018).

H5: Traditional masculinity, experiential avoidance, and psychological distress are likely to be significantly higher among rural participants than among urban participants (Aurat Foundation, 2016).

Method

Research Design

A correlational study with a cross-sectional research design was used in this study.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

A sample of $N = 250$ married males, comprising of males from urban ($n = 145$) and rural ($n = 105$) regions of Pakistan, was collected for the study through purposive sampling along with screening questions. Sample selection criteria used were as follows.

Inclusion Criteria

- Participants consisted of married Pakistani males between the ages of 20 and 55 years.
- Males living in urban or rural areas of Pakistan were chosen for the study.

- Participants who were married for at least a year, hence ensuring stability in marital dynamics.

Exclusion Criteria

- Divorced, widowed, or separated individuals were excluded, since only married individuals were taken into account for the current study.
- Sample consisted of individuals who did not go through any major traumatic experience within six months prior to the research.
- Males undergoing intensive therapy for emotional regulation were excluded.
- Individuals with chronic substance dependence, affecting emotional processing, were excluded from the sample.

Table I

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (N = 250)

Variable	f	%	M	SD
Age (years)			33.56	9.33
Duration of marriage	76	30.4		
1–5 years				
6–10 years	77	30.8		
11–15 years	58	23.2		
More than 15 years	39	15.6		
Employment status	99	39.6		
Employed				
Business owner	132	52.8		
Unemployed	19	7.6		
Education	84	33.6		
Matric	48	19.2		
Intermediate	46	18.4		
Undergraduate	72	28.8		
Postgraduate				
Monthly income	19	7.6		
No income	81	32.4		
Below 40k	64	25.6		
41–70k	50	20.0		
71–100k	36	14.4		
Above 100k				
Family structure	101	40.4		
Nuclear family	149	59.6		
Joint family				
Residence	145	58.0		
Urban	105	42.0		
Rural				

Assessment Measures

Demographic Information Sheet

A demographic data sheet was used to collect individual demographic data from participants, including age, education, years of marriage, employment, monthly income, family, and place of residence.

Gender Role Strain Scale for Men (GRSS-M)

The GRSS-M is a self-report scale comprising 25 items designed by Arshad and Shahed (2021) to measure psychological strain associated with pressure to comply with culturally validated norms of masculinity in the context of Pakistan. The items pertain to experiences such as financial and work-related stressors, family and marital pressures, and difficulties in seeking help and sharing personal problems. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale (0 = none of the time, 4 = all of the time) according to the frequency with which the particular experience elicits distress in the respondent. Item scores are summed up to produce a final score between 0 and 100. Thus, in the current research, traditional masculinity is operationalized in terms of masculine gender role strain. The internal consistency coefficient of this scale was .86 in the present sample.

Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ)

The BEAQ (Gámez et al., 2014) is a 15-item questionnaire that assesses experiential avoidance and is based on the Multidimensional Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (62 items; Gámez et al., 2011). The respondents evaluate statements in terms of their frequency of occurrence on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), and their sum provides the total score from 15 to 90; higher scores mean a high level of experiential avoidance. The alpha coefficient was .89 in the current study.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)

The K10 (Kessler et al., 2002) is a screening scale that detects non-specific psychological distress through 10 symptoms of anxiety and depression. Participants estimate how often they have had those symptoms during the previous 30 days on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (all of the time); total scores can range between 10 and 50, and higher scores mean higher distress levels. Commonly applied cut-offs divide the K10 scale into four categories: 10–19 – low distress; 20–24 – mild distress; 25–29 – moderate distress; 30–50 – severe distress. This scale is a screening measure, not a diagnostic one. The alpha coefficient was .90 in the current study.

Procedure

Permission for using the scales was obtained from the respective scale developers (Arshad & Shahed, 2021; Gámez et al., 2014; Kessler et al., 2002). Following this, data collection was initiated. An informed consent form was distributed to each participant, who signed it after understanding the nature of the research. The participants received sufficient instructions and were provided ample time to complete the questionnaires without being in haste, taking around 10 to 15 minutes to complete. They were told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point of time and were thanked after completion of the questionnaires. All the collected data was then analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Ethical Considerations

The research followed ethical considerations by maintaining academic integrity, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Permissions for instruments were taken and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw.

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability, Pearson product moment correlation, mediation analysis (Hayes' PROCESS macro, Model 4, with bootstrapping), and independent-samples t tests (with Cohen's d) were used to analyze the data (Cohen, 1988; Hayes, 2018).

Results

The current study aimed to examine the relationships among traditional masculinity, experiential avoidance, and psychological distress among married men, following the mediation approach used with men by Spendelow and Joubert (2018).

Descriptive Statistics and Psychometric Properties

This section provides the descriptive statistics and reliability estimates of the GRSS-M (Arshad & Shahed, 2021), the BEAQ (Gámez et al., 2014), and the K10 (Kessler et al., 2002).

Table 2

Psychometric Properties of Scales; Traditional Masculinity, Experiential Avoidance, Psychological Distress (N=260)

Scales	K	M	SD	Actual Range	Potential Range	Cronbach's α
GRSS-M	25	58.79	15.75	21-92	0-100	.86
BEAQ	15	61.13	14.63	26-85	15-90	.89
K10	10	31.71	9.60	13-49	10-50	.90

Note. $N = 250$. GRSS-M = Gender Role Strain Scale for Men, BEAQ = Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire, K10 = Kessler Psychological Distress Scale

Table 2 that all the scales had good internal reliability, as their alpha values ranged between .86 and .90 and were higher than the commonly used value of .70. The average score on GRSS-M ($M = 58.79$, $SD = 15.75$) was higher than the midpoint of the scale (50), the average score on BEAQ ($M = 61.13$, $SD = 14.63$) was higher than the midpoint of the scale (52.5), and the average K10 score ($M = 31.71$, $SD = 9.60$) was in the 30–50 range of severe distress (Kessler et al., 2002). However, since the K10 is a screening measure and the participants were selected purposefully, this result suggests a high degree of self-reported distress among this sample and should not be considered as a clinical estimate of prevalence.

Table 3

Correlations among Traditional Masculinity, Experiential Avoidance, and Psychological Distress (N = 250)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Traditional masculinity (GRSS-M)	—		
2. Experiential avoidance (BEAQ)	.270**	—	
3. Psychological distress (K10)	.189**	.312**	—

Note. ** $p < .01$

Table 3 reveals that there was a positive correlation between the concept of traditional masculinity (masculine gender role strain) and experiential avoidance ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) and psychological distress ($r = .19$, $p < .01$), as well as a positive correlation between experiential avoidance and psychological distress ($r = .31$, $p < .01$). Thus, it can be assumed that masculine gender role strain was

Table 4

Mediation analysis for Traditional Masculinity and Psychological Distress with mediating role of Experiential Avoidance

Antecedents	Consequents					
	Experiential Avoidance			Psychological Distress		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Traditional Masculinity	<i>a</i>	.27	.06	.11	.04	.07
Experiential Avoidance						
Constant		46.38	3.46		16.36	2.93
	$R^2=$	.07			$R^2=$	.11
	$F=$	19.52			$F=$	15.17

$$p = .00 \quad p = .00$$

Note. $N = 25$. *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Table 5

GBootstrapped Indirect Effect of Traditional Masculinity on Psychological Distress via Experiential Avoidance

Indirect effect of X and Y	Unstandardized path	SE	Upper Bound	Lower Bound
TM → EA → PD	.05	.03	.02	.08

Note. $N = 250$. TM = Traditional Masculinity, EA = Experiential Avoidance, PD = Psychological

Distress

Traditi

onal masculinity had a significant relationship with experiential avoidance (path a: $B = .25$, $SE = .06$, $\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), providing evidence for H2. Experiential avoidance had a significant relationship with psychological distress when traditional masculinity was controlled (path b: $B = .18$, $SE = .04$, $\beta = .28$, $p < .001$), providing evidence for H3. The total effect of traditional masculinity on psychological distress was significant (path c: $\beta = .19$, $p = .003$). However, when experiential avoidance was included in the model, the direct effect (path c') was not significant at .05 significance level ($B = .07$, $SE = .04$, $\beta = .11$, $p = .07$). Traditional masculinity had an indirect effect (path ab) on psychological distress through experiential avoidance that was significant and positive (effect = .05, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.02, .08]), as the confidence interval did not include zero (Hayes, 2018). Thus, H4 was supported. Traditional masculinity had an explanation rate of 7% of the variance in experiential avoidance, while both traditional masculinity and experiential avoidance explained 11% of the variance in psychological distress.

Table 6

Independent Samples t-Test Results for Urban and Rural Participants on Study Variables (N= 250)

Scales	Urban ($n=145$)		Rural ($n=105$)		$t(248)$	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
TM	57.08	17.29	61.14	13.06	-.72	.003	-.26
EA	60.61	16.11	61.86	12.34	-1.2	.002	-.09
PD	31.85	9.33	31.51	10.00	.36	.28	

Note. $N = 250$. ** $p < .01$, TM = Traditional Masculinity, EA = Experiential Avoidance, PD = Psychological Distress.

Significantly higher levels of masculinity strain were found among rural men ($M = 61.14$, $SD = 13.06$) compared to urban men ($M = 57.08$, $SD = 17.29$), $t(248) = -2.02$, $p = .044$, $d = -0.26$, small effect (Cohen, 1988) and same for experiential avoidance $t(248) = -0.67$, $p = .51$, $d = -0.09$. There were no differences between urban and rural men in psychological distress, $t(248) = 0.28$, $p = .78$, $d = 0.04$. Hence, hypothesis five was partially confirmed.

Discussion

This current study investigated the associations between traditional masculinity (as measured by masculine gender role strain), experiential avoidance, and psychological distress in married Pakistani men, and if experiential avoidance mediates the association between traditional masculinity and psychological distress as per the Gender Role Strain Paradigm as well as previous mediations (Pleck, 1995; Spendelov & Joubert, 2018). There were positive and significant correlations among all the three variables. Experiential avoidance had a significant indirect effect on the association between traditional masculinity and psychological distress, while there was no significant direct effect at the .05 level. The participants from rural areas experienced higher masculinity strain as compared to those from the urban area, while there was no significant difference between the two groups with regard to experiential avoidance and psychological distress (Pleck, 1995; Spendelov & Joubert, 2018).

The mean GRSS-M score was greater than the midpoint of the scale, implying a moderate extent of strain from masculine role expectations in this sample. According to the Aurat Foundation (2016), norms that view Pakistani men as providers, decision makers, and protectors are linked to ideas of control, power, and honor in the culture. A substantial number of the participants had an income less than 40,000 PKR (32.4%) or no income at all (7.6%), which could lead to strain for men expected to fulfill the provider role, even though income was not assessed as a predictor in the current study. The mean K10 score was in the severe distress category. Nonetheless, K10 is a screening measure and not a diagnostic one; the sample consisted of purposely selected participants through screening questions, and there were no Pakistani norms available to compare with (Aurat Foundation, 2016).

Positive association between traditional masculinity and experiential avoidance ($r = .27$) was found to be consistent with the understanding that norms of emotional repression may discourage expression of vulnerability and seeking help (Chandra & Himawan, 2025), leading men to avoid distressing internal experiences. This finding supports the Gender Role Conflict Theory positing the connection between strict masculine socialization and reduced emotionality (O'Neil, 2008). Positive yet low association between traditional masculinity and psychological distress ($r = .19$) is consistent with previous research on the connection between norms of masculinity and internalizing problems and distress (Mancini et al., 2025; Mokhwelepa & Sumbane, 2025). The strongest association was registered between experiential avoidance and psychological distress ($r = .31$). It confirms the acceptance-based view that while avoidance or suppression of unpleasant internal experiences may provide temporary relief, it inhibits the proper emotional processing and maintains psychological problems (Hayes et al., 1996; Hayes-Skelton & Eustis, 2020).

The mediation analysis results confirm the predicted pathway: the effect of masculine role strain on psychological distress was positive and statistically significant through greater experiential avoidance. This finding is in line with the studies by Spendelov and Joubert (2018) who found that experiential avoidance mediated the relationship between gender role conflict and psychological distress among men, and by Genuchi et al. (2025) who demonstrated that thought suppression strategies mediated the link between traditional masculinity ideology and depressive symptoms. The direct effect of traditional masculinity on psychological distress was not significant after introducing experiential avoidance as a mediator ($p = .07$). It is consistent with full mediation. Nevertheless, this finding needs to be interpreted carefully. Non-significance of the direct effect does not prove that the direct effect is equal to zero. In addition, the value of the direct effect coefficient ($\beta = .11$) is relatively high in comparison with the value of the total effect ($\beta = .19$). Moreover, in this case only 7% and 11% of variance of experiential avoidance and psychological distress were explained by these models. Since the data are cross-sectional, the obtained results reveal statistical associations that correspond to the predicted model. Temporal order and causality can

The other aspect that needs consideration pertains to the measurement issue. Specifically, the GRSS-M measures how frequently men experience stress because of their adherence to masculine roles and not how much they believe in traditional masculine norms (Arshad & Shahed, 2021; Pleck, 1995). Thus, the concepts of strain and psychological distress could be somewhat similar. Moreover, given that all measures were self-reported, it is possible that the shared method variance could have biased the results.

Men from rural areas experienced more traditional masculinity strain than those from urban areas, although the effect size ($d = -0.26$) and statistical power were marginal ($p = .044$). This result is consistent with the theory that masculine norms are different depending on the region/culture in Pakistan (Aurat Foundation, 2016), although the current data does not explain why this difference exists. As for experiential avoidance and psychological distress, no differences emerged between rural and urban men, thus, H5 was confirmed for only traditional masculinity.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research demonstrates that one of the possible mediators of the link between masculinity role strain and psychological distress among married Pakistani men can be experiential avoidance. The research needs to be replicated using longitudinal methodology and measurements of masculinity ideology (Hayes, 2018; Spendelov & Joubert, 2018).

Limitations and Suggestions

There are several limitations of the research. Firstly, cross-sectional design does not allow drawing any conclusions regarding causal or temporal relationships between traditional masculinity, experiential avoidance, and psychological distress (Hayes, 2018). Secondly, purposive, non-probability sampling with screening questions makes it impossible to randomly select the participants and, consequently, reduces the possibility of generalizing the findings to all married men in Pakistan. Thirdly, all instruments were self-report measures, which means that the findings are prone to social desirability bias, as men might underreport their distress due to adherence to masculine norms (Mahalik et al., 2003; Vogel & Heath, 2016), and to shared method variance. Fourthly, only married men aged 20-55 participated in the study. Five, there is an under-representation of the number of geographic areas represented in the sample, and these data fail to take into account tribal, linguistic, and provincial variations in masculinity in Pakistan. Six, the GRSS-M scales measure strain associated with masculine role expectations and not endorsement of traditional masculinity.

Further research may incorporate longitudinal studies that will attempt to uncover the pathways between traditional masculinity, experiential avoidance, and psychological distress. Probability sampling should be done with greater age ranges that include bachelors and divorcees and involve individuals from various subcultures from different provinces, tribes, and languages of Pakistan. Self-reporting and qualitative interviewing should be done together to minimize social desirability bias. Additional transdiagnostic variables should be assessed in order to increase knowledge on how psychological distress arises, and the effect of acceptance-based interventions in reducing experiential avoidance in Pakistani men should be tested (Hayes et al., 1996; Spendelov & Joubert, 2018).

Implications

Theoretically, the results can be explained in light of the Gender Role Strain Paradigm and Gender Role Conflict Theory, and experiential avoidance could be considered one of the processes through which masculine role strain contributes to distress among married males in the collectivistic culture. Clinically, treatment of men suffering from distress can be facilitated by dealing with experiential avoidance of their inner experience along with treatment of their symptoms. Acceptance-based treatments that specifically address experiential avoidance and psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 1996) can be tested among Pakistani men, as well as working with restrictive emotionality and thought suppression. Screening for distress (K10, for example) along with assessment of masculine role strain and avoidance can help to detect men in need of assistance.

From the cultural point of view, the results highlight the stereotypes related to the connection between emotional sensitivity and men's weakness that were linked to stress and discomfort of both urban and rural participants. At the social level, such public campaigns that involve encouragement of men to seek help (Vogel & Heath, 2016), more varied portrayal of men with emotions in media (Shahwar et al., 2025), and seminars on adaptive emotion regulation in community settings could mitigate the stigma of men's distress. Such conclusions should be regarded provisionally.

Conflict of Interest

No financial and/or non-financial conflict of interest exists for the authors of the manuscript in relation to the subject and/or material covered in the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data used to support the findings of this research can be made available on request from the corresponding author.

Funding Details

No funding has been received for this research.

References

- Aliche, C. J., & Idemudia, E. S. (2025). Impact of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on health-related quality of life of cancer patients: Role of experiential avoidance and psychological resilience. *Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.13129/2282-1619/mjcp-4859>
- Arshad, H., & Shahed, S. (2021). Development and validation of Gender Role Strain Scale for Men. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research*, 36(1), 115–133. <https://doi.org/10.33824/PJPR.2021.36.1.08>
- Aurat Foundation. (2016). *Masculinity in Pakistan: A formative research study*. Aurat Foundation/Information Services Foundation. <https://af.org.pk/gep/images/GEP%20Gender%20Studies/Masculinity%20in%20Pakistan.pdf>
- Chandra, R. T., & Himawan, K. K. (2025). Born to be tough: Traditional masculinity ideology and help-seeking attitude in Chinese–Indonesian men. *Psychological Research on Urban Society*, 8(1), 38–54. <https://doi.org/10.7454/proust.v8i1.1191>
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Farooqui, M., Maroof, D. A., & Abbas, H. (2025). The impact of prolonged grief disorder on experiential avoidance in parentally bereaved emerging adults and the moderating role of coping skills. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 13(2), 112–124. <https://doi.org/10.52131/pjhss.2025.v13i1.2738>
- Galvez-Sánchez, C. M., Camacho-Ruiz, J. A., Castelli, L., & Limiñana-Gras, R. M. (2025). Exploring the role of masculinity in male suicide: A systematic review. *Psychiatry International*, 6(1), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/psychiatryint6010002>
- Gámez, W., Chmielewski, M., Kotov, R., Ruggero, C., & Watson, D. (2011). Development of a measure of experiential avoidance: The multidimensional experiential avoidance questionnaire. *Psychological Assessment*, 23(3), 692–713. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023242>
- Gámez, W., Chmielewski, M., Kotov, R., Ruggero, C., Suzuki, N., & Watson, D. (2014). The Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire: Development and initial validation. *Psychological Assessment*, 26(1), 35–45. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034473>
- Genuchi, M. C., Olliffe, J. L., Rice, S. M., & Kealy, D. (2025). Thought suppression strategies as mediators between traditional masculinity ideology and externalized depressive symptoms in men. *Current Psychology*, 44(8), 6646–6661. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-025-07542-3>
- Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Hayes, S. C., Wilson, K. G., Gifford, E. V., Follette, V. M., & Strosahl, K. (1996). Experiential avoidance and behavioral disorders: A functional dimensional approach to diagnosis and treatment. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 64(6), 1152–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.64.6.1152>
- Hayes, S. C., Wilson, K. G., Gifford, E. V., Follette, V. M., & Strosahl, K. (2004). Measuring experiential avoidance: A preliminary test of a working model. *The Psychological Record*, 54(4), 553–578. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03395492>
- Hayes-Skelton, S. A., & Eustis, E. H. (2020). Experiential avoidance. In J. S. Abramowitz & S. M. Blakey (Eds.), *Clinical handbook of fear and*

- anxiety: Maintenance processes and treatment mechanisms (pp. 115–131). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000150-007>
- Imtiaz, S., & Kamal, A. (2023). Masculinity ideologies scale: Development and validation for Pakistani context. *International Journal of Psychological and Behavioural Research*, 3(1), 20–48. <https://doi.org/10.37605/ijpbr.v3i1.31>
- Imtiaz, S., & Kamal, A. (2024). Masculinity ideologies of adult Pakistani men and women. *Foundation University Journal of Psychology*, 8(1), 56–64. <https://doi.org/10.33897/fujp.v8i1.727>
- Kessler, R. C., Andrews, G., Colpe, L. J., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D. K., Normand, S.-L. T., Walters, E. E., & Zaslavsky, A. M. (2002). Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32(6), 959–976. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291702006074>
- Kingston, J., Clarke, S., & Remington, B. (2010). Experiential avoidance and problem behavior: A mediational analysis. *Behavior Modification*, 34(2), 145–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145445510362575>
- Mahalik, J. R., Good, G. E., & Englar-Carlson, M. (2003). Masculinity scripts, presenting concerns, and help seeking: Implications for practice and training. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 34(2), 123–131. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.34.2.123>
- Malik, M., Rehman, H., Hussain, A., Hashmi, A., Al-Sunaidar, K. A., Balogh, G., Gajdacs, M., & Jamshed, S. (2025). Psychological burden and coping strategies among Pakistani adults: A cross-sectional survey study. *Epidemiologia*, 6(3), Article 30. <https://doi.org/10.3390/epidemiologia6030030>
- Mancini, V. O., Ditzer, J., & Preece, D. A. (2025). Internalizing symptoms in men: The role of masculine norms, alexithymia, and emotion regulation. *Sex Roles*, 91, Article 71. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-025-01234-5>
- Mokhwelepa, L. W., & Sumbane, G. O. (2025). Men's mental health matters: The impact of traditional masculinity norms on men's willingness to seek mental health support: A systematic review of literature. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 19(3), Article 15579883251321670. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15579883251321670>
- Nosè, M., Turrini, G., Muriago, G., Bado, M., Cristofalo, D., Sartori, R., Tedeschi, F., & Barbui, C. (2025). Psychological distress and well-being in university and high school students: A cross-sectional study in Italy. *BMJ Open*, 15(8), Article e101446. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2025-101446>
- O'Neil, J. M. (2008). Summarizing 25 years of research on men's gender role conflict using the Gender Role Conflict Scale: New research paradigms and clinical implications. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 36(3), 358–445. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000008317057>
- O'Neil, J. M., Helms, B. J., Gable, R. K., David, L., & Wrightsman, L. S. (1986). Gender Role Conflict Scale: College men's fear of femininity. *Sex Roles*, 14(5–6), 335–350. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00287583>
- Pleck, J. H. (1995). The gender role strain paradigm: An update. In R. F. Levant & W. S. Pollack (Eds.), *A new psychology of men* (pp. 11–32). Basic Books.
- Rivera, A. (2019). Traditional masculinity: A review of toxicity rooted in social norms and gender socialization. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 43(1), E1–E10. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ANS.0000000000000284>
- Shahwar, D., Hashmat, S., & Vincent, Z. (2025). Masculinity depicted by Pakistani media industry: A review. *Human Nature Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(2), 78–94. <https://doi.org/10.71016/hnjss/a74k9c53>
- Singley, C. (2022, April 23). *What is traditional masculine ideology (TMI)?* Men & Masculinities 101. <https://www.division51.net/blog/masculinity-101whatistraditional-masculine-ideology>
- Spendelov, J. S., & Joubert, H. E. (2018). Does experiential avoidance mediate the relationship between gender role conflict and psychological distress? *American Journal of Men's Health*, 12(4), 688–695. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988317748123>
- Vogel, D. L., & Heath, P. J. (2016). Men, masculinities, and help-seeking patterns. In Y. J. Wong & S. R. Wester (Eds.), *APA handbook of men and masculinities* (pp. 685–707). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14594-031>
- Wang, Y., Tian, J., & Yang, Q. (2024). Experiential avoidance process model: A review of the mechanism for the generation and maintenance of avoidance behavior. *Psychiatry and Clinical Psychopharmacology*, 34(2), 179–190. <https://doi.org/10.5152/pcp.2024.23777>
- Wong, Y. J., Ho, M. H. R., Wang, S. Y., & Miller, I. S. K. (2017). Meta-analyses of the relationship between conformity to masculine norms and mental health-related outcomes. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(1), 80–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000176>