

STONEWALLING AND EMOTIONAL NEGLECT AS INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE IN GENERATION Z ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Background: To shed light on the nature of interpersonal violence (IPV) among adolescents and young adults (AYA) in the era of Generation Z. **Methods:** The authors review the literature to provide an understanding of what the research literature has to say about the nature of IPV perpetration among AYA in the age of Generation Z.

Aims: The aim of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the nature of the phenomenon of stonewalling and emotional neglect as a type of interpersonal violence in romantic relationships of Generation Z (18–29 years old).

Method: Ten Pakistani university students and young professionals were sampled using purposive sampling and interviewed semi-structuredly. Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis was used for analysing data.

Results: Four major themes were found: (1) Some digital connectivity is being weaponized, (2) Withdrawal is somatic and psychological, (3) Withdrawal's boundary-punishment split, (4) Sociocultural emotional neglect normalization. Results show that the relational behaviour that is typical of a digitally mediated environment in Generation Z is a practice of power and control, it leaves physical and psychological traces and is systemically misinterpreted as normal relational behaviour.

Conclusion: The findings added to the current IPV framework by focusing non-physical, technologically mediated harm as a primary (and not a secondary) construct of a youth romantic violence framework. Psychoeducational intervention, relationship literacy programming and institutional mental health policy implications are discussed.

Introduction

Traditional conceptualizations of intimate partner violence (IPV) have focussed on more

visible physical and sexual violence, resulting in the lack of theorisation and recognition of many

of the psychologically harmful behaviours. For Generation Z (c. 1997-2012), who's relationalities are largely mediated through digital technologies, these gaps are not only pedagogical but also have real-world implications for recognition, naming and seeking remedy from harmful relational experiences.

Stonewalling – the intentional, prolonged lack of communication during, or after, an argument – is one of the behaviors that fall into this conceptual blind spot, and emotional neglect – repeatedly failing to meet an emotional need – is another, often used as a way of controlling a relationship. Although the “continuum of harm” in a romantic relationship has been increasingly recognized, and the continuum of emotional neglect and stonewalling as a form of non-physical violence has been examined, neither of these are examined systematically as a primary construct of youth romantic violence (YRV) in its own right (Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020; Gibbs et al., 2020).

This gap is particularly significant for the generation of 'Z'. Gen Z is the first generation of true “digital natives” (Mag-atas, 2025), who have expectations that revolve around the constant availability of the other, including: messages that are read at the same time, the presence of the other at any moment, and the assumption of emotional availability. In this of course hybrid reality, the purposeful withdrawal from communication takes new meaning. Patrons who are “left on read” when a partner is active, however, don't get left on read, they get left on the read. This does not feel like a simple “missed message” situation, but rather an intentional erasure, which is what emerging neuroscientific evidence demonstrates: social exclusion triggers the same neural mechanisms as physical pain (Eisenberger, 2012).

This study thus aims to answer the following questions: What is the perception of the Gen-Z about stonewalling and emotional neglect in romantic relationships and how do they perceive these as interpersonal violence in Pakistan? The study involved the collection of rich first person descriptions of their experiences by ten young adults using a qualitative phenomenological

approach and subjected them to a reflexive thematic analysis. The aim isn't just to provide a description of how common these acts are, but to shed light on the experiential, sociocultural and technological processes by which they are harmful – and how they make it invisible.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on three lines of theory that are interrelated. First, coercive control theory (Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007) treats psychological IPV less as an isolated event of miscommunication than as an ongoing form of power. First, coercive control theory (Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007) considers psychological IPV not to be isolated cases of poor communication, but rather a pattern of control over a partner. In this context, stonewalling is a unilateral action that eliminates the other person's ability to solve the problem and to get him or her's validation (Stark, 2007).

Secondly, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, Ainsworth et al., 1978) provides an insight into the way that young adults are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of stonewalling. Insecure attachment styles are particularly the anxious-preoccupied style in which people engage with attachment behaviors in hyperactivation, making them extremely sensitive to the threat of abandonment. If a stonewall partner can also be seen online, but does not respond, this triggers “protest behaviors” that involve an increasing number of bids for connection that the withdrawn partner can then use as proof of the other person's instability.

Third, the study is grounded in an understanding of the neurobiology of social rejection (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2015). Using neuroimaging, previous research consistently has demonstrated activation of brain regions involved with the affective aspect of physical pain, namely the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) and anterior insula (aI), in experiences of social exclusion. Withdrawal from communication for a generation used to instant feedback and responsiveness leads to sustained activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis,

increased cortisol levels and the cumulative physiological consequences referred to as "emotional exhaustion" in contemporary literature (Tandoğan & Ak, 2025).

Literature Review

The New Definition of Interpersonal Violence: Physical Acts as Patterns of Psychological

Previously, the focus of IPV studies has been overwhelmingly on physical and sexual violence. Emotional or psychological abuse was recognized as a co-occurring type of abuse but was not often studied as a separate form of violence with unique mechanisms and effects, apart from the other types of abuse (Dardis et al., 2015). This is changing – a little. Over the last decade, there have been multiple meta-analytic and systematic reviews that have consistently shown psychological IPV's great prevalence and ability to predict adverse mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and lowered self-esteem, which can be comparable to and in some instances even stronger than that of physical abuse (Keelér & Sigurvinsdóttir, 2021; Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020).

Coercive control theory (Stark, 2007) has been especially important for the development of this conceptualization, suggesting a focus on the overall process of entrapment and domination that underlies abusive relationships rather than on isolated acts of violence. In this context, communicative withdrawal is not passive inaction, but rather an active control tool, a strategy that disregards conflict resolution and extends the withdrawal of affect. This deprives the partner of his or her ability to control the relational climate, strengthens the unilateral control of the perpetrator, and, over time, leads to a loss of the victim's relational sense.

Conceptual Definition and Empirical Evidence of Stonewalling

Stonewalling originally referred to a study that Gottman and Levenson (1988) conducted in their lab that identified 4 negative communication patterns that led to divorce, in addition to criticism, contempt and defensiveness, stonewalling was one such pattern.

In 1992, Gottman came up with the theory that the stonewalling response was mostly a physiologically triggered response of emotional flooding – predominantly in male partners during high-conflict situations. Later research has challenged this view, however, showing that "stonewalling" is often a deliberate tactic, not an automatic response to the situation, and that it can be used as a punitive measure, whereas time-outs are more likely to be enacted as a functional way of managing time (Brinig & Allen, 2000; Schrodt et al., 2014).

In the context of Indonesian relationships, Asyraf (2025) found that "silent treatment" was one of the factors that caused communicative dysfunctions, as the participants explained that the "silent treatment" was used explicitly to punish the partners for their transgression, to demonstrate dominance in the emotional hierarchy of the relationship, and to make the partner give in without having to face him/her verbally. Most importantly, this was found to be part of a larger culture of harm in which the assumptions made were one-sided, emotions were invalidated, and what the author called "passive-aggressive digital posting" occurred.

Emotional Neglect: The Violence of Consistent Absence

Emotional neglect is one of the difference between stonewalling and lack of it in relationships is that it is an ambient, chronic nature. Emotional neglect is the constant absence of affective responsiveness, validation and attunement across the relational field as compared to stonewalling, which marks specific events in the conflict process. In the qualitative study conducted by De Sousa et al. (2023) with 39 youth ages 15–22, emotional neglect was a deliberate strategy for controlling the relationship, rather than an unintended omission of emotional support, validation, and responsiveness, rather, the partners manipulated their way of withdrawing such support in order to keep the young people to follow the rules. When this instrumentality is the mechanism used as a tool of control, from poor

communication it becomes interpersonal violence.

Emotional neglect is well researched and is a transgenerational issue. In the mixed-methods study, which involved in-depth interviews with 17 young women as well as a longitudinal cohort of more than 3,000 participants, Barnes et al. (2022) uncovered a 'loop of loneliness' that made young adult women more vulnerable to IPV because of childhood experiences of maltreatment, institutional silencing and social isolation. In particular, the childhood maltreatment was a predictor of increased loneliness in school-age children (OR: 1.90 and 2.35 for females and males, respectively) and increased loneliness was, in turn, a predictor of IPVA victimization (OR: 1.63 and 1.76 for females and males, respectively). This intergenerational pathway implies that schemas of worthlessness, being silenced, and unlovability from earlier neglected relationships is reactivated by the emotional neglect of childhood adulthood relationships.

Digital Mediated IPV & Generation Z

Intimate partner violence that is enabled by technology, or "technology-facilitated intimate partner violence" (TFIPV), is a unique realm of possible studies, characterized by its use of technology to act out surveillance, coercive control, harassment and emotional manipulation (Henry et al., 2020). In a well documented, narrative review of the specific use of standard digital communication platforms for controlling victims, specifically Generation Z, Melvin and Dasgupta (2025) outlined how platforms such as messaging apps, location sharing apps and social media platforms have been used as tools for control, allowing an abuser to carry out surveillance on a victim 24 hours a day, while also having the power of non-response.

Attachment, Gender, and Sociocultural Normalization

This intersection of stonewalling, emotional neglect, and culturally constructionalized and socialized relational scripts accounts for the persisting unrecognized aspect of these stances as forms of IPV. For the Z generation, Vulnerability

Management through Stonewalling could be an approach for coping with vulnerability in line with norms of hegemonic masculinity, which encourages women to suppress rather than express their feelings, but allows them to control them when it counts (Lorente-Anguis et al., 2025). Generational expectations for women to perform most relational emotional labour means from Generation Z's perspective that when a man withdraws, something is added to the relational pain due to a structuring power imbalance wherein his man is now making occasional and weak bids for her which seem to affect her wellbeing.

Another mechanism of normalization occurs when therapy terms and concepts, like "boundary setting" and "needing space" for example, are strategically misapplied as methods in the guise of reasonable punishment (stonewalling) as Asyraf (2025) writes, like the term normalizing facilitation or the term normalizing behavior. This linguistic camouflage can be especially confusing within a generation more psychologically aware than earlier generations, but with a lack of a relationally oriented experiential or critical orientation.

During emerging adulthood, romantic relationships are a key part of the development of emotional, identity, and future relationship patterns. However, for Generation Z, who have grown up in an era in which interpersonal encounters have become more mediated by digital communication, social media, and new relationship norms, subtle forms of interpersonal violence have become more difficult to recognize and to take action about. Of these, stonewalling and emotional neglect are psychologically harmful behaviours which can lead to loss of trust, emotional security and satisfaction in the relationship without leaving an obvious mark of abuse.

Although emotional abuse is recognised as an important public health problem, there is little understanding of the mechanisms by which the behaviours of stonewalling and emotional neglect could be considered interpersonal violence in Generation Z romantic relationships. Current studies have tended to focus on quantitative

methods and measures of occurrence or consequences of these behaviors, rather than understanding how these interpersonal situations are interpreted, experienced and made meaning of by individuals. This is especially significant as emotional neglect and ongoing withdrawal can become a normal and routine occurrence, get overlooked, or be misunderstood by young adults, which makes it less likely that it will be noticed and acted upon. Recognizing this gap, the current qualitative and phenomenological study proposes to examine the nature of the phenomenon of stonewalling and emotional neglect as interpersonal violence that occurs in the romantic relationship of young adults in the age group 18-29 years. The impact of lived experiences is explored in the study, providing a deeper understanding of these complex interpersonal processes and a contribution to the development of culturally sensitive prevention and intervention strategies.

Research Objectives

The study aimed at achieving the following:

1. To elicit lived experience of stonewalling and emotional neglect in young people (Generation Z) in romantic relationships.
2. To investigate how digital technology helps to amplify and mediate communicative withdrawal.
3. To explore participants' understanding of these behaviors as examples of interpersonal violence and how they think of them in this regard.
4. To recognize and challenge the social and cultural environments that normalize and/or mask the recognition of emotional neglect as harmful.
5. To develop themes which are theory-driven, research-informed and that build on existing IPV frameworks to include non-physical aspects of digitally mediated violence.

Methodology

Research Design

This research adopted a qualitative research design with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to gain insight into the lived experiences of people from the Generation

Z age group in the context of stonewalling and emotional neglect in romantic relationships. When the purpose of a study is to explore and document how people experience, interpret and give meaning to their personal lives as opposed to measuring a phenomenon's frequency or prevalence, a phenomenological design should be used (Smith et al., 2009). The current study aimed to explore participants' experiences, understandings, and interpretations of emotional withdrawal, communicative stonewalling, and emotional neglect in the context of their romantic relationships. The phenomenological approach allowed for the exploration of participants' subjective reality and their perceptions of the meanings that were given to these interpersonal experiences.

The epistemological perspective used in the study was interpretivist, as this approach assumes that reality is socially constructed and that the experiences of the participants in the study are affected by their individual contexts, beliefs and interactions. The study therefore focused on rich descriptions of the experiences of the participants rather than objective measurement and causal explanation.

Study Setting

The study conducted among the students and fresh graduates of National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad and other public and private universities and colleges of Pakistan. Data collection involved semi-structured and/or in-depth interviews, face-to-face or via secure online platforms as per participants availability and preference. The university context was chosen as emerging adults in this context tend to have had more experiences of romantic relationships and to be able to provide rich descriptions of interpersonal experiences relevant to the study.

Study Population

The target group included young adults (18-29 years) studying or just about to graduate from the universities/ colleges in Pakistan. The population was chosen because this developmental stage is a time when romantic relationship is important in

the psychosocial development, identity formation and emotional health. It was expected that participants would have had at least one romantic relationship to give significant insight into the phenomenon being studied.

The sample size and sampling technique. Sample size and sampling technique.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to recruit those who had first-hand experience of the phenomenon being studied. This sampling method is commonly used in phenomenological studies as it allows for selecting information-rich cases that can yield rich descriptions of lived experiences (Patton, 2015). The principle of informational sufficiency (Malterud et al., 2016) was used to determine the number of participants: The recruitment continued until the information density and richness were obtained and not until it was possible to reach a statistical representativeness target.

Sample Size

The final sample was made up of 10 participants (6 females and 4 males) with an average age of 23.4 years (age range 18-29 years). All participants were undergraduate or graduate students or had just recently finished their undergraduate or graduate degrees. Eight participants self-identified as heterosexual, and two participants as sexual minorities. Seven of the participants were

in an on-going or recent romantic relationship.

Inclusion Criteria

For participation: The subjects included those who:

- Defines themselves as part of Generation Z (18-29 years).
- They were in the process of studies or had recently completed education from any Pakistani college or university.
- Had been in at least one romantic relationship in the last 2 years that lasted for three months or more.
- Reported to have felt the following in a romantic relationship: emotional withdrawals, communicative stonewalling, and/or emotional neglect.
- Are willing to give informed consent and to engage in an in-depth interview.

Exclusion Criteria

They were excluded if they:

- We were having a crisis of the mind – a clinical crisis in need of immediate clinical intervention.
- Could not or would not give informed consent.
- Lacked firsthand experience of phenomenon researched.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Profile

Participant	Age	Gender	Relationship Status	Duration of Experience	Mode of Interview
P1	22	Woman	Past relationship	~ 8 months	Video call
P2	24	Man	Past relationship	~ 14 months	Face-to-face
P3	19	Woman	Current relationship	~ 5 months	Video call
P4	26	Man	Past relationship	~ 18 months	Face-to-face
P5	28	Woman	Past relationship	~ 2 years	Face-to-face

P6	20	Woman	Current relationship	~6 months	Video call
P7	25	Man	Past relationship	~22 months	Face-to-face
P8	23	Woman	Past relationship	~10 months	Video call
P9	27	Woman	Past relationship	~2.5 years	Face-to-face
P10	21	Man	Current relationship	~7 months	Video call

Study Procedure

An ethical approval was given by the appropriate institutional review committee before data collection began. The sample was selected through purposive sampling in terms of network in the university and referral. Persons interested in joining were screened by applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Participants were given an information sheet outlining the research project, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures and participants' right to withdraw at any time without detrimental consequences. Subjects gave informed consent prior to the interviews. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to collect data, including questions that prompted participants to share their experiences of stonewalling and emotional neglect in romantic relationships. Interviews were conducted for about 45-60 minutes, audio-recorded with the consent of interviewees, and then verbatim transcribed for analysis. The researcher used reflexivity notes throughout the data collection process to recognize his own assumptions and to increase the credibility of the results.

Data Collection: Interview Protocol

From January to March 2026, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held that typically last

for 45–70 minutes. Interviews were carried out in English and Urdu language as per the choice of the participants and the Urdu interviews were professionally translated and then back translated to render conceptual equivalences. The interviews were conducted with the consent of the interviewees and have been audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A round of member-checking was done with transcripts before analysis, and none were requested.

Interview guide was compiled in five thematic domains, not proposed to fill with strictly categorical answers but rather to get in more depth the phenomenological issue. The focus of site one was on participants' conceptions of healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns. In Domain two, direct experience of communicative withdrawal (both stonewalling and 'ghosting') was explored. The digital aspect of relational harm, which encompassed experiences of surveillance, selective non-response and exclusion through social media, was explored in domain three. In domain four, somatic and psychological reactions to withdrawal were examined. In domain 5, the participants' conceptions of these experiences as being normal or harmful relational behaviors were explored. The analytical procedure that was used is reflexive thematic analysis.

Table 2

Interview Guide: Core Questions by Domain

Domain	Core Questions	Probe Example
Domain 1: Relational Conceptualizations	What does a healthy relationship look like to you? What role does communication play in your ideal partnership?	Have your views on this changed over time?
Domain 2: Experiences of Withdrawal	Describe a time when a partner became silent or withdrew during or after a conflict. What happened? What did it feel like?	How long did it last? What eventually ended it?
Domain 3: Digital Mediation	How do apps and social media change the way you experience conflict or distance in a relationship? What does it mean when you can see a partner is active online but they are not responding to you?	Have you ever used or experienced location tracking in a relationship?
Domain 4: Somatic & Psychological Impact	When someone withdraws from you, what happens in your body? In your mind? Did you ever question your own memory or perception of events during periods of silence?	Did you seek support from anyone? What happened?
Domain 5: Meaning-Making & Recognition	How do you distinguish between someone needing space versus using silence to hurt you? Do you consider these experiences a form of harm or violence? Why or why not?	What would have helped you recognize this sooner?

Data analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) was used for the analysis of the interview transcripts. (1) familiarization with data, (2) initial code generation, (3) construction of candidate themes, (4) theme review and refinement, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) production of the final report. Prior to their meeting to discuss divergent interpretations and reconcile them, both researchers coordinated the result of their different coding independently—this method is similar to independent analyst triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The first coding was of an inductive nature and line-by-line, resulting in 187 discrete codes in the

10 transcripts. Codes were then clustered into 23 initial subthemes, which were then analyzed, combined, and consolidated into four broad themes in an iterative process of discussion. In creating a thematic map, the relationships between codes, subthemes and themes were visualised. The items of the codebook, with dictionary definitions and indicative extracts of these data is included in its entirety on the Results section.

Reflexivity and Quality Criteria

In qualitative research, the researcher is the key instrument of the analysis and his/her positionality needs to be clearly stated. The researchers are two mid-20th century, Pakistani

women. The common locational ground both helped to establish rapport and was conducive to interpretive depth, but also resulted in confirmation bias. To dampen these effects, both researchers documented interpretive decisions in a reflexive journal both during data collection and during data analysis, making explicit instances of how these decisions and their consequences affected their data analysis.

The quality was judged by the four criteria from Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was supported by member-checking and peer debriefing. "Thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of the actions of participants, setting of actions, and analyses of actions provide for transferability. To manage dependability, an audit trail of analytical decisions was used. The use of independent coding and/or the documenting of reflexive practice supported confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection ethical approval was granted from the NUML Department of

Psychology Research Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. The potentially re-traumatizing content of the interviews was addressed by utilizing a pre-interview wellbeing check, trauma-informed interviewing technique, which emphasized the choices and agency of the participant and allowed for a chance to step away and/or rest at anytime during the interview, and finally by conducting a post-interview debrief that included information on mental health resources. Throughout, the participants are identified using pseudonymous codes (P1-P10).

Results

The ten interview transcripts were thematically analysed and resulted in four main themes with two to three subthemes within each theme and 23 preliminary subthemes of which 187 were initial codes. The presentation of the thematic structure is as follows, followed by detailed descriptions of the themes and extracts of data for illustration.

Codebook Overview

Table 3

Master Codebook: Initial Codes, Subthemes, and Themes

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Initial Codes	N Participants	N References
Theme 1: Weaponization of Digital Connectivity	1.1 Active Presence as Tool of Exclusion	Active status visibility; read receipts as signals; selective response; digital erasure; 'seen' without reply	9/10	34
	1.2 Surveillance Without Support	Story view without reply; location tracking; social media monitoring; watch without engage	7/10	27
	1.3 Ghosting as Terminal Stonewalling	Complete withdrawal of presence; unanswered calls; sudden account blocking; 'slow fade'	8/10	31

Theme 2: Somatic and Psychological Harm	2.1 Physiological Distress Response	Heart racing; chest tightness; stomach dropping; hypervigilance; physical anxiety; sleep disruption	8/10	29
	2.2 Reality Distortion and Gaslighting	Self-doubt; memory questioning; 'going crazy'; narrative rewriting by partner; confusion about events	7/10	24
	2.3 Cumulative Mental Health Erosion	Anxiety persistence; trauma bonding; emotional exhaustion; fight-or-flight chronicity; low self-worth	9/10	38
Theme 3: Boundary– Punishment Duality	3.1 Misrecognition of Violence as Healthy Boundaries	Therapy-speak weaponization; 'needing space'; self-regulation framing; confusion re. intent	8/10	26
	3.2 Punitive Silence as Control	Silence to force apology; conditional return; power over emotional climate; withholding to punish	9/10	35
Theme 4: Sociocultural Normalization	4.1 Screaming Match Bias	Invisible harm; no physical marks; peer invalidation; institutional dismissal; 'just drama'	8/10	22
	4.2 Normalized Digital Withdrawal	Modern love framing; 'ghosting is normal'; peers' similar experiences; generational acceptance	7/10	19
	4.3 Developmental Pressures to Stay	Fear of peer judgment; desire to be in a relationship; hope for change; emotional dependence	6/10	17

Theme 1: The Weaponization of Digital Connectivity

The most prevalent and distinctive findings from the data relates to the specific means by which the relational lives of the Generation Z were being shaped as psychologically injurious technologies. Participants reported a relationship landscape where digital technologies set up for connection - messaging apps and social media platforms, location sharing features - had been "weaponized" to frame exclusion, surveillance, and control. This was done using three interrelated processes of weaponization.

Subtheme 1.1: Active Presence as a Tool of Exclusion

A partnership's public online presence in nine of ten cases was clearly communicated as an intentional act of communication, an indication of one partner's desire to connect with the world, while the other did not. It was seen as being more than simply being 'cold', and was described by the participants as a deliberate act of 'erasure'.

Footsteps split it out between 'author and scene'. We'd be arguing about one thing and he'd just walk away. That little green 'Active Now' indicator on Instagram has been on me for hours. He was talking to the outside world! I was being purged. It was a digital statement in a loud voice that had been made for me, and I did not exist in his reality anymore. (P1, age 22)

Language of P1's is more specific that "purged" instead of "ignored", captures an important phenomenological distinction. The experience was at no time one of lack, but one of conscious exclusion, that is exclusion that is done in openness. P10 also spoke about how the mobile phone shifted from a communication device to "a device of dread" with each notification having to be viewed for the partner's response:

Their own 'active' sighting of him was all I saw when I was spinning out of time. My cell phone went from being a means for me to connect to a source of fear. Each time I retrieved it I was hoping it would live. He took advantage of my need to connect with me. The "digitally native" thing he knew was how to use it! (P10, age 21)

Subtheme 1.2: Surveillance Without Support

Seven participants wrote about an experience of being watched but not seen and came up with something of a paradox in a similar way during interviews. The partners who continued to passively monitor the participants' digital activity, and followed them up by watching stories, location updates, and checking online status were unresponsive to direct bids for emotional touch.

It happened with each of my stories as soon as I posted them and my husband would respond in only a few minutes. However, he did not respond to my silly emails for three days! It was a sort of presence-less surveillance. It haunted me constantly in a state of alertness, constantly of stress; they were here, it did not want me to be here too. (P6, age 20)

This relationship pattern corresponds to Melvin and Dasgupta's (2025) description of TFIPV as a "surveillance-without-support" pattern: the aggressor has information about their target's emotional availability and how they conduct themselves in their daily lives, while the victim systematically withholds emotional availability in the relationship. This imbalanced structure is not mere chance but a functional one that shapes who is the one who exercises unilateral authority about engaging relations.

Subtheme 1.3: Ghosting as Terminal Stonewalling

Eight individuals talked (or talked about) about ghosting in their experience, and they were all perceived as the extreme point on a spectrum of communicative disengagement. Participants had no "one-off" experience of ghosting, but actually visited it as a sustained attack on their sense of relational reality, where there was no point of orientation within communication.

No silences are only about a lack of talking. It means you're also not able to resolve anything. You will not be able to move on, understand what has transpired or get closure. It's simply... hanging out in limbo forever. (P9, age 27)

Theme 2: Somatic and Psychological Manifestations of Withdrawal

Another dominant theme was the long-term consequences of prolonged communicative

withdrawal, both physiologic and psychologic. Accompanied by other cultural framings of emotional pain as lower priority than physical pain, participants talked of experiences involving stonewalling and neglect that wounded their body, their thinking process and mental health. Whereas this theme was aimed at providing empirical support for neurobiological explanations of social rejection pain.

Subtheme 2.1: Physiological Distress Response

Eight participants reported somatic responses to stonewalling (embodied responses) that included threat response aspects of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) that occurred prior to thinking processing. The participants included very vivid expression in their accounts of these experiences. *What had happened was organic; my body knew it and my brain hadn't even gotten a wait at all. When the stonewalling started, my heart would beat faster and there was a lump in my throat. Left on read for us isn't just an inconvenience. It is hurt, damage or injury.* (P2, age 24)

The neuroimaging studies provide direct evidence of P2's somatic specificity (when we experience social rejection pain, we activate the circuits the same ones that are activated by noxious experiences) and also with P2's explicit proposition that digital non-response is physical trauma. The descriptions that participants made were not metaphorical pain, but simply the phenomenological experience of a real neurobiological stress response.

Subtheme 2.2: Reality Distortion and Gaslighting

A second psychological effect of prolonged withdrawal was described by seven participants: an erosion of the perception of the relationship that they relate to. Those with verbal or communicative feedback reported feeling engaged in what they described as a forced process of questioning themselves as they worked through their feelings of hurt, harm, and how their conflict was operating when they were stonewalled, wondering, "Is this the true nature of the conflict or am I wrong during many of the instances?"

Everything you said in this argument is very quiet, if you're not careful you may think, 'Did I say that?' 'Where did that come from? What happened there? Nothing is acknowledged, no feedback of what even goes on, you begin to doubt yourself, all the way to thinking that you're imagining things. The partner doesn't even have to say a single word for the skirmish to affect you. (P4, age 26)

This account embodies Bhattacharjee and Gopal's (2022) notion of reality alteration, in which the rule of communication is withdrawn, making a victim lose his epistemological confidence. The non-verbal person does not have to assert anything or cynically admit that the victim's information is faulty, just the lack of acknowledgment is enough to bring upon reality questioning that makes up part of gaslighting.

Subtheme 2.3: Erosion of Mental Health, Cumulative

Nine participants reported psychological effects that had emerged over time during the relationship as opposed to a particular event, in keeping with psychological chronic stress theoretical models of IPV. Participants spoke of continuing anxieties, emotional exhaustion, chronic hypervigilance, and in a few instances, trauma bonding, beyond the relationship.

I had been getting into a fight or flight situation for two years. After I made my escape at last, I was given the direction to 'just do what makes me feel better'. But it had been when I shutdown that my brain had been rewired. I knew I'd be sore each and every day. Emotional isolation—a scientifically attested factually serious threat to mental health. It must be addressd in a serious manner. (P9, age 27)

When he 'goes cold' his buddies will say, 'Come on, come on relax, you're fine, it's a rough patch'. However no one states that when an individual shouts at their other. We don't treat the silent damaging "bruises" with credibility – they are invisible and no one hears them. (P5, age 28)

Theme 3: The Boundary–Punishment Duality

In addition, a third theme emerged on the almost complete difficulty that was experienced by participants when trying to differentiate between two behaviours that though similar in the

phenomenological aspects were very different in a normative sense, namely with reference to the exercise of communicative boundaries – in the form of a request for time and space for regulating emotions in order to re-engage – and the punitive use of silence as a coercive relational instrument. This confusion was not an accident, but a vital part of participants' experiences that allowed the continued survival of harm by giving perpetrators ideologically-sanctioned justification for their violence and making it impossible for victims to identify their experiences as violent.

Subtheme 3.1: Misrecognition Through Therapeutic Language

8 of the participants explained that they started to see the stonewalling behaviour as boundary setting as an expectation in the beginning rather than indicating a dysfunction and were less likely to seek support. Often the appropriation of therapeutic language by the partner was explicit, leading to this misrecognition.

I used to squirm internally about how his silence, was 'he needs space he is not being intrusive,' that was a healthy boundary to put in place, I would say to myself. But I can tell you what a healthy boundary is – it is not a boundary that is damaging to the other person, it is a boundary that is protecting you! He wasn't being careful so as not to say it. It was making me feel like I'm about to get my comeuppance. Not only did he use the same wording, but the entire language. (P3, age 19)

P3's central idea, delineating boundary from stonewalling is the directionality and intent of the behavior is a key factor, parallels Stark's 2007 definition, describing coercive control as behaviour that is targeted at the partner, and not at self control. Because this rhetoric of "therapy" is the language of the mentally literate generation, it's especially dangerous to allow this language to become a weaponized tool used for psychological assaults.

Subtheme 3.2: Punitive Silence as Control

Nine participants identified – retroactively, with varying degrees of awareness – that their partner's silence had been manipulative and was designed to accomplish compliance or apology, or capitulation. In hindsight, the way the

mechanism worked was clear; indeed, I suspect I would have described it from that point of view, even in the moment. I think in retrospect it was all clear, and I believe I would have made that clear at the time as well.

I knew that silence would prevail until he determined the punishment needed to have been enough, or until I have broken first (not necessarily incurred) and apologized. It was an inner-personal relationship in which he dominated the emotions. He imposed it on her with listening. (P7, age 25)

The 'emotional weather' was the meteorological turn of phrase that repeatedly featured across various participant responses, all relating to the one person's control of the relationship 'weather'. It is the conscious experience of chronic relational uncertainty, where the victim is always faced with an unpredictable threat that can't be foreseen, negotiated or resolved, but just endured, it exists within a time-limit until the aggressor decides to change it.

Theme 4: Sociocultural Normalization of Emotional Neglect

The fourth theme looked at the wider sociocultural ecology in which stonewalling and emotional neglect become invisible, unrecognized and perpetuated. This study revealed three interlocking ideas of normalization: a cultural ideology that favors explicit conflicts over unintentional harm, the normalizing of digital retreats related to the modern romantic life, and developmental literature that taxes Generation Z to embrace relational harm.

Subtheme 4.1: Screaming Match Bias

Eight participants described a social lack of recognition of relational harm – if a problem is obviously visible to others (raise of voice, physical altercation, threatening messages), it is socially recognized as serious; if a problem is not visible (no name calling, physical harm, threatening messages) it is not seen as a problem and is dismissed and tagged as "relationship drama." This asymmetric experience creates secondary victimization: the lack of external confirmation of harm further adds to the victim's doubt about

himself and their need for help-seeking is diminished.

Everyone around me says, that's not OKAY, when he screams at me. If he just disapproaches, is silent for a week, don't ask me that's the way he communicates.' If the silence didn't do something, I mean, to me, every single day of that week! However, the invisible bruises are as real. There is no person who doesn't validate them. (P5, age 28)

Subtheme 4.2: Normalized Digital Withdrawal

Seven participants talked of a normalisation within generations of behaviours related to withdrawal from relationship dynamics that are often now seen as an integral part of contemporary romance, not as harm. Within some participants' social circles, typical experiences of ghosting, read and ignore or extended non-response pervaded, and these were used to put participants at ease and prevented them from thinking critically about these experiences.

To us, it is just a form of 'modern love'— the rate of digital connection – when people don't talk to you anymore. We remain in those cycles, not understanding that a still, firm voice can echo through the room—blazing as much or more as yelling. (P8, age 23)

Subtheme 4.3: Developmental Impacts to Stay "Buddy"

For six participants, a main reason for remaining in relationships that involved frequent emotional withdrawal was developmental pressures related to being at a particular developmental level: hopes of maintaining a relationship consistent with the norms of their peers; fears of social repercussions if they were to end a relationship; or the hope that the partner would change. The results which are similar to the results found by Stephenson et al. (2021), which found that a key motivation for tolerating abusive partner behaviours among young GBMSM was relational belonging.

I stayed on board because there's no better thing than to be in a relationship (even a bad one) than to be the one who couldn't do it. When we're our age everyone's out there doing something! The last thing you would want is to be the one with the fail. So you tune yourself

into the normal behavior of the world you are subjected to. So you normalize everything that's happening to you. (P3, age 19)

Figure 1 (Thematic Map)

Note. The corresponding authors of this paper provide a thematic map which shows the linkages between the four main themes, sub-themes, and the code clusters used to create the themes at the beginning of the paper.

Discussion

The current research aims to investigate the perception and experiences of the Generation Z intergenerational population with interpersonal violence, particularly in terms of stonewalling and emotional neglect within romantic relationships. The results provide four substantive answers to the existing body of literature.

Harmful Infrastructure in the Digital Realm

Perhaps the most striking inter-generational observation is that of the phenomenology of communicative withdrawal rooted in the use of digital technology. But before smartphones and social media sites existed, stonewalling meant nothing more than missing the opportunity for communication. All of these are signifiers of continued presence, and a backdrop for Generation Z's withdrawal. Such a background makes the pause or lack of response evident, purposeful and exclusionary.

Relational silence lies in the deep neural structure of the brain.

Lieberman and Eisenberger (2015) find evidence in their neuroimaging studies that social exclusion is responsible for the activation of neural systems that are same as that involved in physical pain; the somatic accounts reported by the participants offer a basis for the experiential evidence for this activation. No one spoke of metaphorical suffering—no one reported the phenomenon of accelerated heartbeat or throat closure, or their heightened vigilance or their disruptions of sleep—that would be the phenomenological manifestation of an authentic activation of the autonomic nervous system.

These responses are of the chronic type typically occurring over weeks and months of relational uncertainty, congruent with the concepts of 'allostatic load' and 'accumulated physiological consequence of repeated psychological stress.

The Therapeutic Language Problem

The duality theme of boundary–punishment illuminates one of the most timely forms of harm normalization; the act of strategically appropriating the therapeutic/psychological discourse of self-help to support punitive stonewalling. This observation supports the work of Asyraf (2025) in his findings about the mis-use of concepts like “setting boundaries” in relationships between members of the Pakistani Gen-Z culture and extends to the Indonesian context as it is not a uniquely Pakistani phenomenon, but part of psychologically literate peer culture.

Sociocultural Normalization and the

Limitations of Existing Support Structures

In the sociocultural normalization theme, it becomes evident that relational harms can be recognized as such only as "non-physical" harms, and that the system of institutions through which these young adults may go to seek recognition and support for relational harms are also poorly equipped to recognize non-physical IPV as harm. This finding is somewhat similar to Barnes et al. (2022) who documented the silencing of institutions, and applied to the digital realm of emotional abuse.

The “screaming match bias”, the cultural perception of the higher value for visible rather than invisible warfare, is not only a problem in the eyes of the public, it is a clinical and institutional problem. When mental health workers alongside school counselors and student support services use the same hierarchy, the endless circles of loneliness as outlined by Barnes et al. (2022) are played out within the institution. This not only needs to be done through public education, but professional development for the person working with the young adult in a clinical and education arena.

Implication

Based on the results of this study, it is hoped that researchers and others will gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of stonewalling and emotional neglect as an interpersonal form of violence that occurs in romantic relationships within Generation Z. Findings could help create culturally responsive relationship education curricula, psychological interventions, and counselling to help foster healthy relationships and emotional health and prevent emotional abuse among young people.

Limitations

It is important to note a few sources of limited. There are several restrictions of the present study that need to be recognized. First, the entire sample is from a context of a university in the city of Islamabad, Pakistan, which cannot be regarded as representative of Generation Z at large, nationally or internationally. The particular sociocultural environment (gender norms, digital usage, and call-and-response scripts derived from Pakistani cultural norms) could have been part of the variables affecting findings which are not apparent in the study researcher's eyes. Second, the sample of 10 was also adequate for this phenomenological study, but limited the scope of the experiences that could be attained. Future research with greater samples from different geographical and cultural groups would add significantly to the data base. Third, the study only included retrospective accounts, and stories of this nature have been shown through numerous studies to be prone to reconstruction bias and the influence of present-day relational circumstances on past-oriented story accounts.

Recommendations

These findings suggest four areas for future research. First, direct sequential studies, following the psychological effects of stonewalling and emotional neglect from early young age to midlife would overcome the current evidence base based on cross-sectional and retrospective evidence. Second, mixed-methods research that technological methodologies (such as hormonal testing – cortisol, HRV) are juxtaposed with other research methodologies

(qualitative) would permit the direct testing of the neurobiological claims in the claims contextualized as implicit within the participants' accounts. Third, more empirical reports of relationships intervention research on the effectiveness of relationship literacy programs specifically developed for the context of a boundary-punishment duality relationship in digitally mediated relationships are needed. Fourth, comparative cross-cultural research would confirm if the specific forms of digital mechanisms found in this study are universal to the relational experience of the particular generation of Gen Z or form particular cultures unique to that generation.

Conclusion

In this study, I have suggested that stonewalling and emotional neglect in romantic relationships can be regarded as an interpersonal form of violence and argued that the effects of this violence are felt at both the neurological and psychological level, and that this violence is typically concealed by cultures, institutions, and discourses that render it invisible. These are not forms of harm perpetuated by the digitally mediated relational landscape that is the lived world of Generation Z, but rather so are the instruments, the amplifications, and the norming processes that it affords.

The concept of safe relationships is not just about not experiencing physical violence for many Gen Z's. Needs relational values that are identified by Mag-atas (2025) as defining aspects of the Generation Z's self-expressed: emotional safety, trust, and mutual understanding. A partner's constant presence cues in a phone screen and his or her "selective" lack of response erode these foundations in a systematic way and bring similarly lifelike and lasting and serious consequences, just as "printable" does.

The four themes of the study roboticization, somatic and psychological harm, border-punishment duality, and sociocultural normalization are combined into a framework that explains the phenomenon of emotional absence as a structure of violence. This framework, based on lived experiences of

Pakistani Generation Z individuals, provides the foundation to reconsider the way IPV is conceptualized, the psychoeducational intervention, and the institutional response that would be capable of dealing with the relational lives of the new world in the twenty-one century.

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