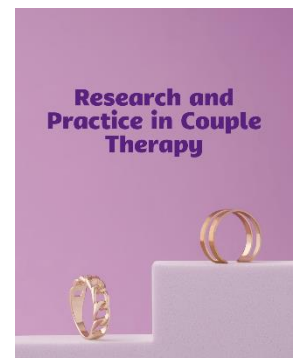




Marital Harmony as Predicted by Affective Attunement and Emotional Containment

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the predictive roles of affective attunement and emotional containment in marital harmony among married individuals in Pakistan. Using a correlational descriptive design, 425 married participants from urban regions of Pakistan were selected based on Krejcie and Morgan's sample size table through stratified random sampling. Standardized questionnaires were used to assess the three variables: marital harmony, affective attunement, and emotional containment. Data were analyzed using SPSS-27, applying descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression. All parametric assumptions—including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity—were verified prior to inferential analysis. The results showed that both affective attunement ($r = .61, p < .01$) and emotional containment ($r = .53, p < .01$) were significantly and positively correlated with marital harmony. Multiple regression analysis revealed that the two predictors jointly accounted for 46% of the variance in marital harmony ($R^2 = .46, F(2, 422) = 179.24, p < .001$). Affective attunement ($\beta = .49, t = 8.87, p < .001$) and emotional containment ($\beta = .36, t = 7.43, p < .001$) were both statistically significant predictors, with affective attunement showing a slightly stronger effect. The findings emphasize the crucial roles of emotional alignment and self-regulation in sustaining marital harmony. Specifically, affective attunement and emotional containment contribute significantly to relational satisfaction and stability. These insights have important implications for marital counseling and psychoeducational interventions focused on enhancing emotional competencies in couples.

Keywords: Marital harmony; Affective attunement; Emotional containment; Relationship quality; Emotional regulation.

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Introduction

The foundation of a stable and fulfilling marital relationship lies not only in mutual affection but also in the couple's emotional synchronization and regulatory capacities. Among various constructs explored in marital and relational psychology, marital harmony stands out as a critical indicator of relational quality, reflecting emotional congruence, mutual respect, shared values, and the ability to resolve conflicts constructively. Scholars have emphasized that affective and regulatory dimensions of intimacy—such as affective attunement and emotional containment—are pivotal in shaping long-term relational satisfaction and psychological well-being (Cotton et al., 2024; Fazari et al., 2024). Despite the conceptual clarity of these constructs, empirical research exploring their joint influence on marital harmony remains limited, especially in non-Western sociocultural contexts. The current study aims to fill this gap by examining the predictive roles of affective attunement and emotional containment in marital harmony among married individuals in Pakistan.

Marital harmony has historically been conceptualized as the subjective sense of peace, emotional intimacy, and reduced conflict within a marriage. It encompasses emotional bonding, effective communication, mutual decision-making, and



alignment in long-term goals (Huang et al., 2024; Pandya, 2025). Recent literature underscores the complexity of this construct by highlighting its interplay with both internal emotional regulation and dyadic emotional synchronization processes. Emotional containment refers to an individual's ability to manage and express emotions in ways that preserve relational stability, while affective attunement denotes a partner's capacity to resonate with, understand, and respond sensitively to the emotional cues of the other (Bijani et al., 2023; Ramadhina et al., 2023). These two variables provide an integrative framework for understanding both intrapersonal and interpersonal emotional functioning in marriage.

The importance of emotional competence in marital settings has been widely validated. For instance, studies reveal that emotional containment skills such as impulse control and emotional restraint are negatively correlated with verbal aggression and positively linked to long-term marital adjustment (Khosravi et al., 2024). Individuals with poor emotion regulation are more likely to exhibit impulsive reactions, defensive withdrawal, or coercive strategies during marital conflicts, which may erode the foundation of relational harmony. In contrast, individuals capable of emotional containment tend to maintain a stable affective climate, which contributes to the perception of safety, predictability, and respect within marriage (Hassankiadeh et al., 2022; Wahyuningsih et al., 2021). Similarly, affective attunement is foundational for emotional validation, trust-building, and empathy. When partners are affectively attuned, they mirror and respond to each other's emotions, which facilitates closeness and reduces the likelihood of emotional misattunement or misunderstanding (Sung & Ki, 2021; Topkaya et al., 2024).

In a study on the predictors of couple burnout among Turkish individuals, lack of emotional reciprocity and sensitivity to emotional needs emerged as core predictors of emotional disconnection and dissatisfaction (Topkaya et al., 2024). Similarly, research on army couples indicated that communication patterns based on attunement were significantly associated with higher levels of marital happiness and emotional resilience, even under stressful conditions such as prolonged separations or role conflict (Ragul, 2023). These findings reinforce the hypothesis that both affective attunement and emotional containment are not merely relational accessories but central components of marital harmony. The growing body of evidence supports the theoretical notion that harmony is sustained when each partner can manage their own emotions while simultaneously tuning into and responding to the emotional landscape of the other.

Moreover, cultural and societal expectations influence how emotional expressions and containment are interpreted within a marital context. In collectivist cultures such as those found in South Asia and the Middle East, marital roles are often framed around family unity, emotional suppression for the sake of social cohesion, and gender-based emotional expectations (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2022; Fazari et al., 2024). In such contexts, emotional containment may be overemphasized, particularly for women, potentially complicating the expression of negative emotions or conflict. However, recent research indicates a shifting paradigm where affective attunement is increasingly recognized as a necessary skill, especially among younger couples seeking egalitarian partnerships and emotional reciprocity (Novak et al., 2021; Yorgason et al., 2024).

Additionally, demographic and contextual variables such as age, duration of marriage, and parenthood can influence the manifestation and significance of emotional processes in marriage. For example, research by Huang et al. (2024) found that marital happiness not only predicted parenting styles but also had a significant indirect impact on children's behavioral adjustment (Huang et al., 2024). Similarly, studies in gerontology have illustrated that long-standing marital relationships characterized by affective synchronization and joint emotion regulation are protective factors against late-life depression and cognitive decline (Cotton et al., 2024; Novak et al., 2021). In another context, findings by Keldal and Kılıç (2023) indicated that early familial models of emotional communication and containment significantly influenced marital timing and expectations in adulthood (Keldal & Kılıç, 2023).

In the context of psychological interventions, understanding the interplay between attunement and containment may help develop targeted approaches to enhance marital functioning. Therapeutic frameworks such as Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT)

and Mindfulness-Based Couple Therapy emphasize these exact mechanisms—teaching couples how to remain emotionally present while self-regulating intense affective states. Pandya’s (2025) work on mindfulness in long-distance marriages suggests that awareness and emotional regulation skills substantially contribute to perceived closeness and marital satisfaction, even in physically disconnected couples (Pandya, 2025). Moreover, recent findings from spiritual and culturally embedded contexts indicate that factors like spiritual well-being and purpose in marriage serve as facilitators of containment and attunement processes, thereby supporting marital harmony (Hassankiadeh et al., 2022; Ramadhina et al., 2023).

Interestingly, happiness—a commonly studied correlate of marital satisfaction—is itself influenced by relational dynamics. Multiple studies have demonstrated that marital harmony contributes positively to overall subjective well-being and psychological resilience, especially in vulnerable groups such as older adults and individuals with chronic illnesses (Babazadeh et al., 2025; Motalebi et al., 2024). For example, in a study on older couples in India, Cotton et al. (2024) found that shared emotional experiences and mutual understanding were positively associated with neurological markers of happiness and cognitive health (Cotton et al., 2024). Similarly, studies among dialysis patients in Iran revealed that emotional stability within marital relationships significantly enhanced their sense of purpose and daily coping capacities (Motalebi et al., 2024). Thus, marital harmony not only sustains the relationship itself but also acts as a buffer against external stressors and internal psychological vulnerabilities.

Finally, the relationship between emotional containment and cultural attitudes toward gender roles has also been brought into academic focus. Khosravi et al. (2024) highlighted the moderating role of gender roles in the relationship between emotional divorce and marital satisfaction, indicating that societal expectations regarding emotional expression and regulation significantly shape relational experiences (Khosravi et al., 2024). Similarly, Sterian et al. (2023) argued that broader sociocultural values related to self-presentation and appearance (e.g., undergoing cosmetic surgery) are indirectly linked to perceived emotional responsiveness and spousal satisfaction (Sterian et al., 2023).

In light of the above, the present study aims to examine the predictive roles of affective attunement and emotional containment in determining levels of marital harmony among a sample of married individuals in Pakistan.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a correlational descriptive research design to examine the predictive relationship between affective attunement, emotional containment, and marital harmony. The study population consisted of married individuals residing in various urban areas of Pakistan. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a sample of 425 participants was selected through stratified random sampling to ensure diversity in gender, age, and marital duration. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently married, aged between 20 and 60 years, and fluent in Urdu or English. All participants voluntarily consented to participate in the study and completed the standardized questionnaires anonymously.

Measures

Marital harmony was assessed using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) developed by Spanier (1976). This widely used instrument evaluates the quality and stability of marital relationships and includes 32 items across four subscales: Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Cohesion, and Affectional Expression. Respondents rate items using Likert-type scales with varying ranges (e.g., from 0 to 5 or 0 to 6), depending on the item. Higher scores reflect greater marital harmony and adjustment, with total scores ranging from 0 to 151. The DAS has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with

Cronbach's alpha reported as 0.96 for the total scale. Its construct and criterion-related validity have been confirmed in multiple studies across different cultural and relational contexts.

Affective attunement was measured using the Emotional Attunement Scale (EAS) developed by Rønnestad, Orlinsky, and Wiseman (2011). This scale evaluates a partner's ability to perceive and respond appropriately to the emotional needs of the other. The EAS consists of 18 items divided into two subscales: Emotional Responsiveness and Emotional Understanding. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating a higher degree of emotional attunement between partners. The scale has shown strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.89$) and has been validated in marital and couple therapy populations, supporting its use in assessing relational affective synchrony.

Emotional containment was assessed using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Couples (ERQ-C) developed by Levesque, Lafontaine, and Bureau (2014). This tool specifically measures partners' ability to regulate and contain their emotional expressions within the context of close relationships. The ERQ-C contains 20 items and includes two subscales: Emotion Suppression and Emotion Reappraisal. Each item is scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores on the relevant subscale indicate greater emotional containment capacity. The ERQ-C has shown strong reliability coefficients ($\alpha = 0.85\text{--}0.91$) and its validity has been established through correlations with relational satisfaction, intimacy, and conflict resolution outcomes in dyadic settings.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic information, including frequency and percentage distributions. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to assess the bivariate relationships between marital harmony and the two predictor variables: affective attunement and emotional containment. Additionally, standard linear regression analysis was used to determine the extent to which affective attunement and emotional containment jointly predicted marital harmony. All assumptions for parametric testing, including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity, were tested and confirmed prior to conducting regression analysis.

Findings and Results

The sample consisted of 425 married individuals, of whom 231 (54.35%) were female and 194 (45.65%) were male. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 59 years, with the majority ($n = 178$, 41.88%) falling within the 30–39 age group. Regarding marital duration, 96 participants (22.59%) reported being married for 1–5 years, 157 (36.94%) for 6–10 years, and 172 (40.47%) for more than 10 years. Most participants ($n = 283$, 66.59%) had at least one child. In terms of education, 198 participants (46.59%) held a bachelor's degree, while 145 (34.12%) had completed postgraduate studies.

Prior to conducting inferential analyses, the assumptions for Pearson correlation and linear regression were examined. Normality of all three continuous variables was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated non-significant results for marital harmony ($p = .065$), affective attunement ($p = .083$), and emotional containment ($p = .058$), suggesting approximate normality. Linearity was confirmed through scatterplots, which showed a linear relationship between predictor and outcome variables. Homoscedasticity was verified by examining residual plots, which indicated no pattern in the distribution of errors. Multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, which were 1.37 for affective attunement and 1.42 for emotional containment, both well below the threshold of 10, confirming the absence of multicollinearity. Therefore, all assumptions were adequately met for conducting parametric analyses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 425)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Marital Harmony	104.73	15.42
Affective Attunement	89.56	12.67
Emotional Containment	86.41	13.58

As shown in Table 1, the mean score for marital harmony was 104.73 (SD = 15.42), indicating a relatively high level of relational satisfaction among participants. Affective attunement had a mean of 89.56 (SD = 12.67), while emotional containment had a mean of 86.41 (SD = 13.58), both suggesting moderate to high levels of emotional skills in the sampled population.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. Marital Harmony	—		
2. Affective Attunement	.61**	—	
3. Emotional Containment	.53**	.47**	—

Table 2 demonstrates that marital harmony was significantly and positively correlated with affective attunement ($r = .61$, $p < .01$) and emotional containment ($r = .53$, $p < .01$). Moreover, affective attunement and emotional containment also showed a moderate correlation ($r = .47$, $p < .01$), indicating that while related, they represent distinct emotional processes within marital relationships.

Table 3. Summary of ANOVA for Linear Regression Predicting Marital Harmony

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	F	p
Regression	12458.36	2	6229.18	.68	.46	.46	179.24	<.001
Residual	14496.52	422	34.34					
Total	26954.88	424						

As shown in Table 3, the overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 422) = 179.24$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .46. This indicates that affective attunement and emotional containment jointly explained 46% of the variance in marital harmony. The adjusted R^2 remained stable at .46, suggesting that the model generalizes well to the broader population.

Table 4. Coefficients for Multiple Regression Predicting Marital Harmony

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t	p
Constant	28.57	4.68	—	6.10	<.001
Affective Attunement	0.71	0.08	.49	8.87	<.001
Emotional Containment	0.52	0.07	.36	7.43	<.001

Table 4 shows that both affective attunement ($\beta = .49$, $t = 8.87$, $p < .001$) and emotional containment ($\beta = .36$, $t = 7.43$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of marital harmony. The unstandardized coefficients indicate that for every one-point increase in affective attunement, marital harmony increases by 0.71 units, while a one-point increase in emotional containment corresponds to a 0.52 unit increase in marital harmony.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that both affective attunement and emotional containment are significant positive predictors of marital harmony among married individuals in Pakistan. Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated that affective attunement had a strong positive correlation with marital harmony, suggesting that when spouses are more emotionally attuned to each other—perceiving, validating, and responding to one another’s emotional needs—there is a greater sense of unity, trust, and relational peace. Similarly, emotional containment was positively associated with marital harmony, indicating that the

ability to regulate one's emotional expressions in a constructive manner during interactions plays a crucial role in sustaining marital stability. The linear regression analysis confirmed that both independent variables significantly predicted marital harmony, with affective attunement showing a slightly stronger predictive power than emotional containment.

These findings align with and extend previous research on the emotional and affective dynamics of marital functioning. In particular, the significant role of affective attunement supports the idea that empathy, sensitivity, and emotional responsiveness are core to a harmonious marriage (Ragul, 2023; Ramadhina et al., 2023). When couples engage in affective attunement, they create a secure emotional environment in which both partners feel seen and heard, thus reducing misunderstandings and emotional distance. This is in line with prior findings that underscore the importance of affective synchrony in fostering marital satisfaction and emotional resilience in times of stress (Sung & Ki, 2021; Topkaya et al., 2024). Especially in collectivist cultures such as Pakistan, where emotional restraint and indirect communication are culturally reinforced, the presence of emotional validation through attunement can be a transformative force in enhancing marital quality.

The strong predictive power of emotional containment also resonates with existing literature highlighting the value of emotional regulation in close relationships. Individuals who are capable of managing negative emotions—such as anger, disappointment, or anxiety—during marital interactions are less likely to engage in destructive conflict behaviors and more likely to adopt collaborative problem-solving strategies (Hassankiadeh et al., 2022; Khosravi et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant in the Pakistani context, where traditional gender norms and intergenerational family dynamics often discourage overt emotional expression, especially among men. In such relational landscapes, the capacity to internally regulate and externally modulate one's emotions becomes an adaptive skill that supports long-term relational harmony.

Moreover, the slightly stronger predictive influence of affective attunement compared to emotional containment suggests that relational harmony is more closely tied to the dyadic experience of being emotionally understood than merely the individual's ability to withhold or manage their affect. While containment protects the relationship from conflict escalation, attunement nurtures connection and emotional intimacy. This observation is consistent with previous findings from studies conducted in diverse settings. For instance, Cotton et al. (2024) demonstrated that emotional connectedness, rather than mere emotional control, was more strongly associated with subjective well-being and brain health in older couples (Cotton et al., 2024). Similarly, Huang et al. (2024) found that affective responsiveness among Chinese couples had a greater impact on marital happiness and parenting effectiveness than other behavioral factors (Huang et al., 2024).

The interplay between affective attunement and emotional containment in fostering marital harmony reflects a dual-layered emotional architecture of healthy relationships—where regulation and responsiveness must co-exist. This is echoed in studies examining mindfulness and marital quality, such as Pandya's (2025) research on long-distance couples, which emphasized that mindfulness-based emotional awareness enhances both self-regulation and attunement to the partner, thereby improving overall marital quality (Pandya, 2025). In this way, affective and regulatory processes function synergistically to sustain relational balance.

These findings also provide empirical support to culturally situated models of marriage, which increasingly acknowledge emotional processes as central to relational outcomes. In Middle Eastern and South Asian societies, where marital success is often judged in terms of stability rather than personal satisfaction, there is a tendency to overlook the emotional dimensions of spousal interaction. However, research such as that by Fazari et al. (2024) and Birni and Eryilmaz (2022) has shown that emotional happiness and marital satisfaction are deeply intertwined even in traditionalist contexts (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2022; Fazari et al., 2024). The present study reinforces this view by showing that even in culturally conservative societies, affective and regulatory emotional competencies play a central role in perceived marital harmony.

The findings are also congruent with previous research highlighting the long-term effects of emotional patterns in marriage. For instance, Novak et al. (2021) emphasized that emotional congruence and responsiveness in older couples predicted better psychological and physical health outcomes, reflecting the cumulative impact of emotional dynamics across the lifespan (Novak et al., 2021). Similarly, the work by Yorgason et al. (2024) suggested that midlife couples who expressed mutual concern and attunement regarding financial planning and emotional stressors reported higher marital harmony and less relational strain (Yorgason et al., 2024). These studies support the idea that emotional processes not only influence momentary relational experiences but also shape long-term marital trajectories.

Importantly, the study also indirectly aligns with literature on happiness, self-esteem, and well-being in married populations. For example, research by Babazadeh et al. (2025) and Motalebi et al. (2024) showed that individuals embedded in emotionally stable marital environments reported higher levels of subjective happiness, emotional well-being, and even better health outcomes (Babazadeh et al., 2025; Motalebi et al., 2024). Given that marital harmony is positively associated with these life outcomes, enhancing attunement and containment could be conceptualized as protective strategies that extend beyond the relationship itself to broader aspects of well-being.

Lastly, gender and cultural considerations merit further discussion. As noted in Keldal and Kılıç's (2023) work on familial and societal influences on marital timing, cultural attitudes and early emotional modeling have long-lasting effects on adult romantic relationships (Keldal & Kılıç, 2023). In a similar vein, the work by Sterian et al. (2023) on appearance-related self-perceptions and their impact on spousal dynamics suggests that emotional expression and containment are often intertwined with sociocultural expectations and values (Sterian et al., 2023). In Pakistan, where traditional family systems and collectivist values remain prominent, understanding the role of culturally shaped emotional behaviors is essential in both academic and therapeutic contexts.

Despite the theoretical and practical significance of the findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study utilized a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to draw causal inferences between variables. Although affective attunement and emotional containment predicted marital harmony, the directionality of these relationships remains uncertain. Second, the reliance on self-report measures may have introduced social desirability bias, especially in a sociocultural context where open discussion of marital issues can be stigmatized. Third, while the sample was adequately powered and diverse within urban Pakistan, the findings may not generalize to rural populations or to other cultural contexts where emotional norms differ. Finally, the study did not account for potential moderating variables such as gender roles, length of marriage, presence of children, or socioeconomic status, which may influence the dynamics studied.

Future studies should consider employing longitudinal designs to explore how affective attunement and emotional containment influence marital harmony over time, particularly across different stages of marriage. Additionally, qualitative or mixed-methods approaches may help capture the cultural nuances and lived experiences underlying these emotional processes. Further research could also examine the mediating or moderating role of factors such as spiritual well-being, attachment styles, or communication patterns. Expanding the research to include diverse cultural settings—such as rural Pakistani regions or South Asian diaspora communities—would enhance the external validity and cultural applicability of the findings. Finally, future studies may benefit from including the perspectives of both spouses to assess dyadic patterns and discrepancies in perception.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for clinical practitioners, counselors, and educators working with couples. Marital therapy programs should emphasize both affective attunement training—such as empathy-building, emotional mirroring, and responsive listening—and emotional regulation strategies to enhance containment during conflict. Couple enrichment workshops can incorporate role-play scenarios and mindfulness exercises to help partners practice real-time

emotional alignment and control. In culturally conservative societies, practitioners must also be sensitive to traditional emotional norms while promoting healthy emotional expression and containment. Educational campaigns, premarital counseling, and family life education programs may integrate these concepts to prepare individuals for emotionally intelligent and harmonious marital relationships.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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