

Attitude towards violence, moral character and Emotional dysregulation among young adults

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Abstract

This study examined links between attitudes toward violence, moral character, and emotional dysregulation in young adults and tested whether moral character and emotional dysregulation predict violent attitudes. Using a correlational design, data were collected from 211 young adults (18–25 years) in Lahore via convenience sampling. Participants completed the Attitudes Toward Violence Scale, Moral Identity Scale, and Emotional Dysregulation Questionnaire. Analyses included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and hierarchical regression. Moral character was negatively associated with attitudes toward violence, whereas emotional dysregulation was positively associated. Regression results showed moral character as a negative predictor and emotional dysregulation as a positive predictor of violent attitudes after controlling for demographics. Findings highlight the role of moral development and emotion regulation in shaping violent attitudes and support prevention and intervention efforts for young adults.

Keywords: attitudes toward violence, moral character, emotional dysregulation, moral identity, young adults

1. Introduction

Violence is a pervasive global phenomenon that poses serious threats to individual well-being, social stability, and public health. It manifests in various forms, including physical aggression, emotional harm, interpersonal conflict, and societal unrest, and disproportionately affects young adults during critical stages of psychological and social

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development. According to global health and social science research, violence contributes not only to physical injury and mortality but also to long-term psychological consequences such as emotional distress, maladaptive coping strategies, and impaired social functioning. Understanding the psychological mechanisms that underlie attitudes toward violence is therefore essential for developing effective preventive and intervention strategies, particularly among young adults who are navigating identity formation, autonomy, and emotional regulation.

Attitudes toward violence refer to cognitive, emotional, and evaluative dispositions that justify, normalize, or endorse the use of violence in interpersonal or social contexts. These attitudes are widely recognized as important precursors to aggressive and violent behaviors, as individuals who view violence as acceptable or justified are more likely to engage in such behaviors when confronted with stress, conflict, or provocation. Prior research indicates that attitudes toward violence are shaped by multiple factors, including socialization processes, cultural norms, emotional functioning, and moral development. Social learning perspectives emphasize that violent attitudes are often acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement, particularly within family systems, peer groups, and media environments where violence is modeled or legitimized. Exposure to violence during formative years may gradually reduce sensitivity to harm and foster beliefs that aggression is an effective means of problem solving or self-assertion.

One psychological construct that plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward violence is moral character. Moral character encompasses stable moral traits such as empathy, honesty, fairness, compassion, and care for others, which guide individuals' judgments and behaviors across situations. From a moral identity perspective, these traits become central to one's self-concept and influence behavior through internalized moral standards. Person with a high morals are more likely to experience moral emotions such as guilt and shame when engaging in or witnessing harm, thereby inhibiting violent tendencies. Conversely, deficits in moral character may weaken internal restraints against aggression, increasing tolerance for violence and moral disengagement.

The development of moral character has been extensively discussed in classical and contemporary psychological theories. Kohlberg's view of moral growth says that people go through stages of moral thinking ranging from self-interest-based judgments to principled reasoning grounded in justice and ethical values. Although moral reasoning continues to evolve across the lifespan, adolescence and early adulthood represent particularly important periods for moral consolidation. Similarly, moral identity theory

conceptualizes morality as an integral component of the self, emphasizing that individuals who internalize moral traits are more likely to act consistently with ethical standards. When moral identity is weak or underdeveloped, individuals may display reduced empathy and heightened acceptance of behaviors that harm others, including violence.

Alongside moral character, emotional dysregulation has emerged as a key psychological factor associated with violent attitudes and behaviors. Emotional dysregulation refers to difficulties in understanding, accepting, and managing emotional experiences in adaptive ways. Individuals who struggle with emotional regulation often experience intense negative emotions, impulsivity, and reduced behavioral control, making them more vulnerable to aggressive responses under stress. Research consistently demonstrates that emotional dysregulation is linked to hostility, anger, aggression, and externalizing behaviors across both clinical and community samples.

Theoretical models of emotional dysregulation emphasize that it is not merely the presence of strong emotions but the inability to regulate them effectively that contributes to maladaptive outcomes. The Gratz and Roemer model shows some important aspects of emotional dysregulation, such as not being aware of your emotions, not accepting your emotional reactions, not having many adaptive regulation techniques available, and having trouble controlling your behavior when you're upset. When individuals are unable to manage intense emotions such as frustration or anger, violence may be perceived as an immediate, albeit maladaptive, coping mechanism to reduce emotional distress. This aligns with the General Aggression Model, which explains how personal factors, including emotional states and cognitive appraisals, interact with situational triggers to influence aggressive behavior.

Importantly, moral character and emotional dysregulation are closely interconnected. Moral functioning relies not only on cognitive reasoning but also on the regulation of moral emotions such as empathy, guilt, and shame. Emotional dysregulation may impair the experience or expression of these moral emotions, thereby weakening moral constraints on behavior. When emotional regulation is compromised, individuals may struggle to act in accordance with their moral values, increasing susceptibility to violent attitudes. Despite this conceptual overlap, existing research has largely examined moral character and emotional dysregulation in isolation, rather than within an integrated framework.

The majority of empirical studies exploring attitudes toward violence, moral character, and emotional dysregulation conducted in Western contexts, may not be

applicable to non-Western societies. In countries such as Pakistan, where cultural norms, social structures, and exposure to violence may differ substantially, empirical evidence remains scarce. Indigenous research has often focused on violence in relation to substance use, trauma, or criminal behavior, with limited attention to the combined influence of moral and emotional processes on violent attitudes among the general young adult population. This gap is particularly concerning given the increasing exposure of young adults to social stressors, economic pressures, and media-based violence, all of which may shape emotional and moral development.

Both the development of psychological theory and the improvement of applied practices depend on addressing the gap in western and non-western contexts. Understanding how moral character and emotional dysregulation contribute to attitudes toward violence can aid in the design of preventive interventions, counseling programs, and educational initiatives aimed at promoting emotional competence and moral development. Such insights are valuable for psychologists, educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals working to reduce violence and foster healthier coping strategies among young adults.

Therefore, the study seeks to examine the relationship between attitudes toward violence, moral character, and emotional dysregulation among young adults. Additionally, it aims to investigate whether moral character and emotional dysregulation serve as significant predictors of violent attitudes. By integrating moral and emotional dimensions within a single analytical framework and focusing on a Pakistani young adult sample, this study contributes to both the theoretical and applied literature. The findings are expected to provide evidence-based insights that can inform intervention strategies, support mental health practices, and contribute to policy development focused on violence prevention and youth well-being.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

It is a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationships among attitudes toward violence, moral character, and emotional dysregulation in young adults. This design was considered appropriate as it allowed the assessment of associations between study variables and the examination of moral character and emotional dysregulation as predictors of attitudes toward violence without manipulation of variables.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

The study sample consisted of 211 young adults (107 males and 104 females) aged between 18 and 25 years ($M = 21.64$, $SD = 2.03$). Participants were recruited from Lahore using a convenience sampling technique. Individuals from diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from higher secondary education to postgraduate level, were included in the study. Data were collected through both online and paper-based questionnaires.

Participants included were above 18 year as and able to self-report. Individuals reporting serious psychological or physical impairments that could interfere with questionnaire completion were excluded from the study.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Demographic Information Form

A self-developed demographic information form was used to obtain background information, including age, gender, education level, marital status, and father's living status. This information was collected to describe the sample and control for demographic variables during analysis.

2.3.2 Attitudes Toward Violence Scale

Attitudes toward violence were assessed using the Attitudes Toward Violence Scale (ATV) developed by Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995). The scale consists of 20 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of violent attitudes. The scale comprises three subscales: Corporal Punishment, Crime and War, and Partner Violence. In the present study, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$).

2.3.3 Moral Identity Scale

Moral character was measured using the Moral Identity Scale developed by Aquino and Reed (2002). The instrument includes 10 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale and assesses two dimensions of moral identity: Internalization and Symbolization. Higher scores reflect stronger moral identity. The scale showed acceptable reliability in the current sample ($\alpha = .74$).

2.3.4 Emotional Dysregulation Questionnaire

Emotional dysregulation was assessed using the Emotional Dysregulation Questionnaire (EDQ) developed by Gill et al. (2019). The scale consists of 40 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale and measures multiple dimensions of emotional dysregulation, including emotional engagement, emotional interference, and emotional response styles. Higher scores indicate greater emotional dysregulation. In the present study, the scale demonstrated good to excellent internal consistency (α range = .77-.88).

2.4 Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Department of Applied Psychology, Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore. Permission to use standardized instruments was secured from the respective authors. The goal of the study was explained to the participants, who were also given confidentiality guarantees and told that they might leave the study at any moment without incurring any fees. Before the data was collected, informed permission was gathered. Questionnaires were administered either online via Google Forms or in printed format. Upon completion, participants were thanked for their voluntary participation.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and major study variables. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine relationships among attitudes toward violence, moral character, and emotional dysregulation. Multiple hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether moral character and emotional dysregulation predicted attitudes toward violence after controlling for demographic variables. Statistical significance was evaluated at an alpha level of $p < .05$.

3. Results

3.1 Preliminary Analyses

Psychometric characteristics and distribution of research variables were examined before hypothesis testing. For attitudes towards violence, moral character, and emotional dysregulation and their subscales, descriptive statistics were calculated, including means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, and reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha).

Skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within acceptable range (± 1.96), indicating a nearly normally distributed data set. Reliability analysis

demonstrated satisfactory to good internal consistency for all measures used in the study, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .71 to .88. These findings suggest that the instruments employed were reliable and suitable for subsequent inferential analyses.

Table 1 presents the psychometric properties of the major study variables, including the Attitudes Toward Violence Scale, Moral Identity Scale, and Emotional Dysregulation Questionnaire.

Table 1: Psychometric Properties of Major Study Variables in the Sample (N = 211)

Variable	K	M	SD	α	Skewness	Kurtosis
ATV	20	76.13	20.1	0.73	0.49	0.02
CP	6	18.84	9	0.72	0.36	-0.73
CW	7	36.03	6.46	0.73	-0.24	-0.34
PV	4	10.8	6.6	0.72	0.68	-0.63
Internalization	5	28.14	5.51	0.78	-0.45	-0.96
Symbolization	5	23.14	6.2	0.74	-0.16	0.04
EDQ (total)	40	122.4	21.44	0.71	0.05	-0.1
EE-D	5	12.75	4.52	0.73	0.34	-0.46
EE-A	5	10.25	4.12	0.76	0.7	0.17
EE-C	5	16.82	4.17	0.74	0.07	-0.5
EI-A	5	17.84	4.39	0.74	-0.14	-0.75
EI-B	5	16.97	5.26	0.73	-0.3	-0.58
ER-A	5	18.58	4.58	0.73	-0.31	-0.6
ER-E	5	12.8	5.55	0.73	0.4	-0.61
ER-I	5	16.8	5.69	0.72	-0.33	-0.7

Note: ATV = Attitudes Toward Violence Scale, CP = Corporal Punishment, CW = Crime and War, PV = Partner Violence, I = internalization, S = symbolization, EDQ= Emotional dysregulation questionnaire, EDQ subscales = EE-D = Emotional engagement - Detrimental attitude to emotions; EE-A = Emotional engagement - Low emotional attunement; EE-C = Emotional engagement - Low emotional control; EI-A = Emotional interference - Reduced attention capacity; EI-B = Emotional interference -Reduced behavioral control; ER-A = Emotional response style - Avoidant; ER-E = Emotional response style - Externalizing; ER-I = Emotional response style - Internalizing, M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation, f = frequency, % = percentage

3.2 Correlation Analysis

To examine the relationships among age, gender, attitudes toward violence, moral character, and emotional dysregulation, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was performed.

Table 2: Pearson Correlations Among Key Study Variables (N = 211)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Attitudes Toward Violence (ATV)	–						
2. Gender	.33**	–					
3. Internalization	-.29**	-.17*	–				
4. Symbolization	.24**	-.05	.24**	–			
5. Emotional Dysregulation (EDQ Total)	.26**	-.14*	.22	.22**	–		
6. EE-D	.50*	.17*	.32*	.21*	.51*	–	
7. ER-E	.40*	.03	.26*	.18*	.56*	.39*	–

Note. Gender was coded 1 = male, 2 = female. ATV = Attitudes Toward Violence; EDQ = Emotional Dysregulation Questionnaire; EE-D = Emotional engagement – detrimental attitudes to emotions; ER-E = Emotional response style – externalizing. $p < .05$, $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Pearson product-moment correlations (Table 2) showed that attitudes toward violence (ATV) were significantly associated with gender ($r = .33$, $p < .01$); given the coding (1 = male, 2 = female), this indicates higher ATV scores among females. ATV was negatively correlated with internalization ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$), suggesting that stronger internal moral identity is linked with lower endorsement of violent attitudes, whereas symbolization was positively related to ATV ($r = .24$, $p < .01$). Consistent with the study model, emotional dysregulation (EDQ total) was positively associated with ATV ($r = .26$, $p < .01$). Among the retained subscales, EE-D showed the strongest positive association with ATV ($r = .50$, $p < .05$), and ER-E was also positively related ($r = .40$, $p < .05$), indicating that maladaptive emotional attitudes and externalizing emotional responses are linked with greater endorsement of violent attitudes.

3.3 Regression Analysis

Multiple Hierarchical Linear Regression showing Moral Character and Emotion

To test whether moral character and emotional dysregulation predicted attitudes toward violence, multiple hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted. Age and gender were entered as control variables in the first step, followed by moral identity dimensions in the second step, and emotional dysregulation dimensions in the third step.

In Model 1, demographic variables accounted for a small but significant proportion of variance in attitudes toward violence. Gender emerged as a significant predictor, whereas age did not contribute significantly.

Table 3: Dysregulation as Predictors of Attitudes towards violence among young adults. (N= 211)

ATV	Factor I CP		Factor II CW		Factor III PV	
Predictors	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Model	0.11		0.03		0.13	
Age		0.3		0.07	0.03	0.03
Gender					0.16	0.16
Model II	0.24		0.14		0.33	
Internalization						
Symbolization		-0.27		-0.31	0.2	0.2
Model III	0.37		0.23		0.2	
EE-D		0.34		0.14	0.21	0.21
EE-A		-0.02		-0.17	0.04	0.04
EE-C		-0.1		-0.06 .12	0.03	0.03
EI-A		-0.02		-0.08	-0.07	-0.07
EI-B		0.02		0.08	0.17	0.17
ER-A		-0.09		0.11	-0.04	-0.04
ER-E		0.12		0.06	0.24	0.24
ER-I		-0.01			0.03	0.03

*Note: ATV = Attitudes Toward Violence Scale, CP = Corporal Punishment, CW = Crime and War, PV = Partner Violence, I = internalization, S = symbolization, EDQ= Emotional dysregulation questionnaire, EDQ subscales = EE-D = Emotional engagement - Detrimental attitude to emotions; EE-A = Emotional engagement - Low emotional attunement; EE-C = Emotional engagement - Low emotional control; EI-A = Emotional interference - Reduced attention capacity; EI-B = Emotional interference -Reduced behavioral control; ER-A = Emotional response style - Avoidant; ER-E = Emotional response style - Externalizing; ER-I = Emotional response style - Internalizing, M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation, f = frequency, % = percentage, *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001*

In Model 2, the inclusion of moral identity significantly improved the model. Both internalization and symbolization emerged as significant negative predictors of attitudes toward violence, indicating that higher levels of moral character were associated with lower endorsement of violent attitudes.

In Model 3, emotional dysregulation dimensions were added to the model, resulting in a further significant increase in explained variance. Among the emotional dysregulation dimensions, detrimental attitudes toward emotions emerged as a significant positive predictor of attitudes toward violence. Overall, moral character remained a significant negative predictor, while emotional dysregulation functioned as a significant positive predictor of violent attitudes after controlling for demographic factors.

Separate regression analyses conducted for the subscales of attitudes toward violence (corporal punishment, crime and war, and partner violence) revealed a similar pattern of findings. Moral character consistently acted as a protective factor, whereas emotional dysregulation, particularly externalizing, and maladaptive emotional responses—was associated with higher endorsement of violent attitudes. **Table 3** presents the results of the hierarchical regression analyses, detailing the contribution of moral character and emotional dysregulation as predictors of attitudes toward violence among young adults.

3.4 Summary of Findings

Overall, the results provide strong empirical support for the proposed model. Moral character demonstrated a consistent **protective effect**, while emotional dysregulation emerged as a **risk factor** for attitudes toward violence. These findings underscore the importance of emotional regulation and moral development in understanding violent attitudes during young adulthood.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between attitudes toward violence, moral character, and emotional dysregulation among young adults, with the additional aim of identifying moral character and emotional dysregulation as predictors of violent attitudes. Overall, the findings provide convincing empirical support for the proposed framework and underscore the value of both moral and emotional processes in shaping attitudes toward violence during early adulthood.

Consistent with the first hypothesis, the results demonstrated a significant negative relationship between moral character and attitudes toward violence. Young adults who reported higher levels of moral identity—reflected through internalization and symbolization of moral traits—were less likely to endorse violent attitudes. This study is consistent with moral identity theory, which holds that when moral features are

important to one's self-concept, people are more inclined to govern their behavior based on ethical principles. Individuals with a strong moral compass are more sensitive to moral feelings like empathy and remorse, which operate as internal restraints on destructive and aggressive behavior.

These results also support developmental theories of morality, such as Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which states that one's moral thinking undergoes further evolution in the years between childhood and maturity. Individuals who fail to consolidate moral principles during this period may remain vulnerable to justifying violence as an acceptable response to conflict. The present results suggest that deficiencies in moral character weaken ethical boundaries and increase tolerance for violent attitudes across interpersonal and social contexts.

In line with the second hypothesis, emotional dysregulation was found to be positively associated with attitudes toward violence and emerged as a significant positive predictor in regression analyses. Young adults who experienced greater difficulty in managing emotional responses were more likely to endorse violent attitudes. This finding is consistent with emotion regulation models that associate emotional dysregulation with impulsivity, reduced behavioral control, and heightened emotional reactivity. When individuals are unable to regulate intense emotions such as anger or frustration, they may perceive violence as a maladaptive yet immediate strategy for emotional relief.

The findings are further supported by the General Aggression Model, which explains how emotional arousal and affective dysregulation interact with situational stressors to influence aggressive cognition and behavior. Emotional dysregulation limits an individual's capacity for cognitive reappraisal and self-control, thereby increasing the likelihood of endorsing violent responses. The identification of detrimental attitudes toward emotions and externalizing emotional responses as significant predictors reinforces the central role of maladaptive emotional processing in violent attitudes.

Importantly, the results highlight the interconnected nature of moral character and emotional dysregulation. Moral functioning relies not only on cognitive moral reasoning but also on the regulation of moral emotions such as empathy, guilt, and shame. Emotional dysregulation may impair the experience or expression of these emotions, reducing concern for others' suffering and weakening moral inhibition. Consequently, individuals with emotional regulation difficulties may struggle to translate moral values into behavior, increasing acceptance of violence even in the presence of some moral awareness.

Gender differences observed in the study revealed that males reported higher endorsement of violent attitudes compared to females, although the effect size was modest. This finding is consistent with previous literature documenting gender-based differences in aggression-related attitudes. Age, however, was not significantly related to attitudes toward violence, moral character, or emotional dysregulation, suggesting that within a narrow age range, emotional and moral factors exert a stronger influence than chronological age.

From an applied perspective, the findings offer important implications for violence prevention and intervention strategies. Programs targeting violent attitudes among young adults should incorporate components that strengthen emotional regulation skills, such as emotional awareness, distress tolerance, and adaptive coping strategies. Additionally, interventions that foster moral development – through empathy training, ethical reflection, and value-based education – may enhance internal moral restraints against violence. Addressing emotional and moral dimensions simultaneously may be particularly effective in reducing violent attitudes.

The study also adds to the current literature by presenting actual data from a non-Western setting. By focusing on Pakistani young adults, the findings extend the applicability of theories related to moral character and emotional dysregulation across cultural settings and address a significant gap in indigenous research.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The reliance on self-report measures and the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations. Furthermore, the use of convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of the findings.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that moral character serves as a protective factor, while emotional dysregulation functions as a risk factor for attitudes toward violence among young adults. By integrating moral and emotional dimensions within a single framework, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of violent attitudes and offers valuable directions for research, practice, and policy aimed at violence prevention.

5. Conclusion

The present study investigated the link between attitudes toward violence, moral character, and emotional dysregulation among young adults. The findings demonstrated that moral character was significantly and negatively associated with attitudes toward violence, whereas emotional dysregulation showed a significant positive association.

Moreover, moral character emerged as a protective predictor, while emotional dysregulation functioned as a risk factor for the endorsement of violent attitudes. These results reveal the importance of emotional and moral processes in understanding violent attitudes during early adulthood. By integrating moral identity and emotional regulation within a single framework, the study contributes to a more comprehensive psychological understanding of violence and emphasizes the need to address both emotional competence and moral development in efforts aimed at reducing violence among young adults.

6. Implications and Limitations

The findings of this study support existing models of moral identity and emotional regulation by demonstrating their combined influence on attitudes toward violence. The study extends prior research by integrating moral and emotional dimensions within a unified predictive framework, particularly within a non-Western context. This contributes to the broader literature on violence by highlighting the relevance of psychological factors beyond behavioral and environmental explanations.

The findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing violent attitudes among young adults should incorporate strategies that enhance emotional regulation skills, such as emotional awareness, distress tolerance, and adaptive coping. Additionally, programs that promote moral development—through empathy training, ethical reflection, and value-based education—may strengthen internal moral restraints against violence. These insights may inform counseling practices, educational initiatives, and policy development focused on youth violence prevention.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The self-report measures may have introduced response bias. Also, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Furthermore, the use of convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research should use longitudinal designs and take bigger samples. They are also advised to employ mixed-method approach to better examine the dynamic interplay between moral character, emotional dysregulation, and attitudes toward violence.

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