

Psychosocial and Cognitive Dimensions of Emotional Silence: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Emotional silence, defined as the deliberate suppression of emotions during moments of vulnerability or dissent is an important but underexplored phenomenon in mental health research. Understanding its psychosocial and cognitive dimensions is essential for addressing its long-term implications on individual well-being and interpersonal relationships.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 336 participants across India. The tool assessed five dimensions of emotional silence: Surface behaviour, justification, fear of perception, identity fragility, and emotional risk. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability testing, associations, and correlation analysis.

Results: Fear of perception (M = 3.84, SD = 0.81) and emotional risk (M = 3.72, SD = 0.77) were identified as the strongest parameter of suppression. The overall reliability of the tool was high ($\alpha = 0.83$). Significant associations were observed between suppression risk and education, occupation, marital status, and trauma history ($p < 0.05$). No associations were found with gender or prior emotional training. Correlation analysis identified strong interdependence between dimensions, particularly between fear of perception and identity fragility ($r = 0.69, p < 0.001$).

Conclusion: Emotional silence is a multidimensional and cognitive process, results from social context and personal vulnerabilities. This study proposed a conceptual framework, Pyramid of Emotional Silence to understand the dynamics of silence. Interventions that promote psychological safety and promote healthy emotional expression may help mitigate the negative impacts of suppression on mental health and relationships.

Keywords: Silence, emotion suppression, psychosocial dimensions, identity fragility, fear of perception, emotional risk, psychological safety

INTRODUCTION

Emotional expression plays an important role in interactions among humans, facilitating conflict resolution, empathy, and relational depth. [1]. However, individuals often suppress emotions during moments of vulnerability, dissent, or distress. This phenomenon of emotional silence is not merely a lack of communication but rather a deliberate response resulting from perceived social, psychological, or identity threats [2,3]. Emotional silence manifests across personal, educational, organizational, and therapeutic settings, influencing both relational and individual outcomes [4,5]. While suppression may preserve relationships or prevent conflict in the short term but over time it contributes to stress,

impaired memory, and diminished relational trust [3,6]. Studies on emotion regulation corroborates these findings, indicating that emotional inhibition corresponds with elevated physiological stress and compromised cognitive functioning [6,7,8]. Goffman's theory of impression management highlights the suppression as a strategy for protecting one's identity, and Edmondson's concept of psychological safety underscores the pervasive fear of negative evaluation, even in supportive environments [9,10]. Further, neuroscientific findings demonstrate that social rejection activates neural pathways similar to those of physical pain which reinforces silence as a safer option [11]. Also, from a cognitive psychology perspective, mechanisms such as cognitive dissonance and rationalization help individuals justify emotional suppression to avoid vulnerability [12]. Additionally, decision making theories including prospect theory explain how individuals may perceive emotional losses (e.g., shame, rejection) as more aversive than relational gains which further favour silence [13,14].

Cultural and societal norms also increase complexity to express the emotions. Gender specific expectations often suppress emotional expression by discouraging vulnerability in men and penalizing assertiveness in women [15]. In collectivist cultures, silence can serve to maintain group harmony, and hierarchical dynamics in workplaces or educational contexts can inhibit dissent [16,17]. Moreover, studies in trauma research suggest that early relational invalidation predisposes individuals to emotional shutdown later in life [18,19].

Despite the impact of emotional silence, it is less explored. Why do individuals often perceive the cost of silence as less threatening than the risk of expression? What psychological parameters leads to this choice?

Recognizing these gaps, the present study aims to identify psychosocial and cognitive dimensions of emotional silence and its association to shape the decision to remain silent.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

A cross-sectional, quantitative study was conducted to identify the psychosocial and cognitive dimensions that leads to emotional silence. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling approach. An online survey form was created on google form which was initially shared to the contacts via WhatsApp, Facebook, and email. Further, participants were encouraged to forward it to their networks. Data collection was done between 01 June to 30 June 2025, resulting in 336 complete responses from individuals across different states of India.

Data collection form was included with participant information sheet outlining the study's purpose, followed by an electronic informed consent form. Only those who provided consent for the participation in the study was further could be continued to share the response. Also, confidentiality of the responses was ensured during the study period.

The questionnaire comprised two sections demographics and measures of emotional silence. Section 2 of emotional silence were developed around the five proposed dimensions of the Pyramid of Emotional Silence:

1. Surface Behaviour (B): reflected in hesitation, withdrawal, and avoidance behaviours.
2. Justification (J): included rationalization of silence, timing-based excuses, and self-talk.
3. Fear of Perception (P): measured worry about judgment, rejection, or criticism.
4. Identity Fragility (I): captured internal conflict, threats to self-concept, and fear of incoherence.
5. Emotional Risk (R): assessed anticipated costs of expression and fear of irreversible outcomes.

Also, responses on situational tendencies regarding the likelihood of emotional expression were collected.

STATISTICAL METHODS

Data were exported from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel. Data cleaning was done in Microsoft excel and then analysed using SPSS version 26. The following steps were undertaken:

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarize participant characteristics and subscale scores.

Reliability testing was performed for each dimension using Cronbach's alpha, with $\alpha \geq 0.70$ considered acceptable for internal consistency.

Subscale scores were calculated by averaging the items for each dimension, and an overall suppression risk score was calculated using all the items of all the dimensions by using below formula:

$$\text{EESR} = w1B + w2J + w3P + w4I + w5R$$

Where, EESR is Emotional Expression Suppression Risk

B is Surface Behaviour - How strongly silence is habitual or socially trained

J is Justification: How much one rationalizes not expressing

P is Fear of Perception: Anticipated fear of social/relational consequence

I is Identity Fragility: Risk to self-concept or moral narrative

R is Emotional Risk (R): anticipated costs of expression and fear of irreversible outcomes. Fisher's exact test was used to calculate the associations between suppression scores and demographic variables. Pearson's correlation was used to identify interrelationships between the five suppression dimensions. A two-tailed significance level of $p < 0.05$ was considered.

RESULT

A total of 336 participants completed the survey. The majority were male (64.6%), while 35.4% were female. Most participants were never married (78.3%). Educational attainment was diverse, though the majority reported post-graduation (60.4%) with the largest group in private service (64.6%). A smaller representation came from government service, legal, cooperative, and self-employed categories. Only 8.3% reported having received prior communication on emotions or emotional training, and half of the sample (50.0%) reported experiencing emotional trauma.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 336)

Variable	Category	Participants (N)	%
Gender	Male	217	64.6
	Female	119	35.4
Emotional Training	No	280	83.3
	Yes	28	8.3
	Maybe	28	8.3
Emotional Trauma	Yes	168	50.0
	No	105	31.2
	Maybe	63	18.8

Reliability of Suppression Subscales

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each subscale of the Emotional Silence. Acceptable internal consistency was observed for Surface Behaviour ($\alpha = 0.71$), Justification ($\alpha = 0.73$), and Identity Fragility ($\alpha = 0.74$). The overall suppression scale demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.83$). However, Fear of Perception ($\alpha = 0.59$), Emotional Risk ($\alpha = 0.49$), and Situational Expression Likelihood ($\alpha = 0.60$) showed

only moderate reliability. Further, descriptive analysis of subscales showed that Fear of Perception recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.81$), followed by Emotional Risk ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.77$). Surface Behaviour ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.74$) and Justification ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.79$) were moderate, while Identity Fragility had the lowest mean ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.82$). This shows that concerns about judgment and anticipated risks are the most prominent

influences on suppression behaviour. Table 2 shows the reliability and descriptive statistics of dimensions of suppression.

Table 2: Reliability and Descriptive Statistics of Dimensions of Suppression

Subscale	No. of items	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's α
Surface Behaviour	3	3.45 (0.74)	0.71
Justification	3	3.38 (0.79)	0.73
Fear of Perception	3	3.84 (0.81)	0.59
Identity Fragility	3	3.21 (0.82)	0.74
Emotional Risk	3	3.72 (0.77)	0.49
Situational Expression Likelihood	2	3.30 (0.68)	0.60
Overall Suppression	17	3.52 (0.71)	0.83

Associations among variables

Associations between overall suppression risk and demographic characteristics indicated several significant relationships (Table 3). Education level, occupation, marital status, and history of emotional trauma were significantly associated with overall suppression risk. These findings suggest that individuals with differing educational backgrounds, occupational roles,

marital experiences, and trauma histories vary in their tendency to suppress emotions. In contrast, no significant associations were observed for gender or prior training in communication or emotional skills, indicating that suppression risk appears to be more strongly shaped by broader life and relational experiences than by gender identity or formal training exposure.

Table 3: Associations between Overall Suppression Risk and Demographic Variables

Demographic Variable	Test value	p-value	Significance
Gender	0.83	0.346	Not significant
Education level	51.48	<0.001	Significant
Occupation	74.91	<0.001	Significant
Marital status	9.42	0.009	Significant
Training (communication/emotional)	4.48	0.106	Not significant
Trauma experience	25.39	<0.001	Significant

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Matrix of Suppression Subscales (N = 336)

Subscale	Surface Behaviour (B)	Justification (J)	Fear of Perception (P)	Identity Fragility (I)	Emotional Risk (R)
Surface Behaviour (B)	1.00	0.39	0.41	0.19	0.60
Justification (J)	0.39	1.00	0.28	0.27	0.58
Fear of Perception (P)	0.41	0.28	1.00	0.69	0.51
Identity Fragility (I)	0.19	0.27	0.69	1.00	0.43
Emotional Risk (R)	0.60	0.58	0.51	0.43	1.00

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 5) showed significant positive associations between all five suppression dimensions. Surface behaviour correlated strongly with Emotional Risk ($r = 0.60, p < 0.001$) and moderately with Justification ($r = 0.39, p < 0.001$). Fear of Perception was strongly associated with Identity Fragility ($r = 0.69, p < 0.001$) and showed moderate correlation

with Emotional Risk ($r = 0.51, p < 0.001$). Justification was strongly correlated with Emotional Risk ($r = 0.58, p < 0.001$). All other intercorrelations were positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). These findings suggest the dimensions of emotional silence are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

The Pyramid of Emotional Silence

A framework for understanding the layers beneath suppressed expression.



The Emotional Suppression Funnel

This visual shows how people get pushed toward silence - how emotional discomfort builds up and filters down into inhibition.



DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to identify the psychosocial and cognitive dimensions of emotional silence. The findings suggest that silence is not merely the absence of speech or words but a calculative strategy shaped by individual vulnerabilities and contextual pressures. Participants frequently endorsed suppressing their emotions in situations where judgment, rejection, or potential relational conflict were anticipated. These findings are aligned with earlier work that positions defensive silence as a calculated coping response, one that protects identity and social standing while inadvertently heightening psychological strain [20,21]. Gender differences emerged as especially salient. Women demonstrated stronger tendencies toward self-silencing in certain contexts, consistent with prior studies on gender-based rejection sensitivity and relational vulnerability [22]. Men on the other hand may face social norms that discourage the expression of vulnerability and producing a different but equally restrictive form of suppression [23]. These dynamics show the importance of examining silence not as a uniform phenomenon but as one calculated approach through gendered expectations and role demands.

The findings from the present study also revealed significant associations between marital status and the justification of silence. Married participants often rationalize emotion control and silence, possibly due to the heightened relational stakes of intimate partnerships. This is in line with decision-making models that emphasize the disproportionate weight given to anticipated losses such as conflict or rejection, relative to potential relational gains [24,25]. In organizational settings, similar dynamics are observed where employees often justify silence to preserve harmony or avoid challenging authority, even when silence cause long-term problems with well-being [26].

From a broader perspective, the study's results align strongly with the organizational literature on psychological safety and burnout. Repeated use of silence, while adaptive in the moment, has been linked to emotional exhaustion, diminished authenticity, and erosion of trust [27,28]. Findings from the current study extend this to interpersonal and cultural contexts, suggesting that the same psychosocial mechanisms that drive silence at work with fear of evaluation, rationalization, and risk of appraisal. There is also aligns with the operative in family and social life as well.

It is also important to recognize the cultural aspect of silence. In collectivist contexts, silence may be a sign of maturity or group loyalty, whereas in hierarchical institutions it often reflects deference to authority [29,20]. Trauma history which showed associations with identity fragility and hesitation to speak adds another layer.

Finally, the strong correlations observed among fear of perception, identity fragility, and emotional risk indicate that silence rarely arises from a single factor. Rather, it reflects an integrated cognitive appraisal in which individuals weigh costs and benefits of expression. These findings are consistent with appraisal theories of emotion, which argue that silence functions as a risk-minimizing strategy rather than simple passivity [30].

The findings from the present indicate that emotional silence is a psychologically complex, socially conditioned behavior with significant implications for individual well-being and relational dynamics. While silence may provide short-term relief from conflict but its cumulative effects stress, erosion of trust, and organizational stagnation. Further, which underscore the importance of interventions that cultivate psychological safety and normalize vulnerability.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study highlights that emotional silence is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by psychosocial and cognitive processes, including fear of judgment, identity fragility, and perceived emotional risks. Far from being passive, silence emerged as a strategic response to protect self-concept and relationships, though at the cost of authenticity and psychological well-being.

In terms of application, the findings underscore the need to create environments that normalize emotional expression and reduce the stigma of vulnerability. Within organizations, strengthening psychological safety and addressing cultural or gendered norms can reduce reliance on silence as a coping strategy. Similarly, educators and mental health professionals can use the

insights from the Pyramid of Emotional Silence to design interventions that encourage open dialogue, enhance resilience, and mitigate the long-term consequences of suppression.

Declaration by Authors

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