

Abandonment Schema and Limerence: The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions among Young Adults

Muhammad Munib Ur Rehman

&

Ivan Suneel

Department of Psychology
Forman Christian College University Lahore

Abstract

This research aimed to investigate the relationship between abandonment schema, interpersonal cognitive distortions, and limerence among young adults. It was hypothesized that a significant relationship would exist between the study variables. Furthermore, the subdomains of interpersonal cognitive distortions, including interpersonal rejection, unrealistic relationship expectations, and interpersonal misperception, are expected to mediate the relationship between abandonment schema and limerence among young adults. Convenient sampling was used to collect data from young adults (N=332) enrolled in various public and private universities in Lahore, with an age range of 18 to 30 years ($M = 21.8$, $SD = 2.05$). Abandonment Core Belief Scale (Skeen, 2014), Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale (Hamamci, 2004), and Wolf & Lemay Limerence Measure (Wolf & Lemay, 2015) were used. The findings indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between abandonment schema, interpersonal cognitive distortions, interpersonal rejection, unrealistic relationship expectations, and interpersonal misperception and limerence. The mediation analysis revealed a significant partial mediation, with unrealistic relationship expectations significantly mediating the relationship between abandonment schema and limerence. At the same time, interpersonal rejection and interpersonal misperception did not show significant indirect effects. The study's insights can inform schema-focused interventions aimed at reducing dysfunctional relational patterns and limerence in youth.

Keywords: *abandonment schema, interpersonal cognitive distortions, unrealistic relationship expectations, limerence, young adults*

Limerence is characterized by an overwhelming preoccupation with a romantic interest, first introduced by Tennov (1979). It is a cognitive-emotional state defined by intense romantic desire and emotional dependence on a specific individual, often referred to as the limerent object (LO). It involves persistent, intrusive thoughts, obsessive longing, emotional volatility, and idealization of the LO, often accompanied by physiological sensations and a distorted perception of reality (Wolf, 2017). Limerence is typically maintained despite uncertainty about reciprocation and is marked by a perceived inability to control or end the emotional attachment. Previously, limerence has primarily been examined in terms of variables such as lustful sexual attraction, low self-esteem, sexual autonomy, hidden obsession, fixation, and rumination (Bradbury et al., 2024; Weinrich, 1988). However, its connection with the current study variables remains largely unexplored.

Previous research has conceptualized limerence within the frameworks of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) or addiction, given its compulsive nature and the disruptive impact it can have on relationships and daily functioning (Wakin & Vo, 2008; Wyant, 2021). However, these models frequently overlook the deeper, developmental roots of limerence that may be embedded in early maladaptive schemas or underlying personality traits. Schema therapy, proposed by Young et al. (2003), posits that early adverse childhood experiences disrupt the fulfillment of basic emotional needs and lead to the formation of enduring maladaptive schemas.

Among these, the schema of abandonment is particularly salient, which is characterized by a pervasive, enduring cognitive-emotional pattern in which an individual holds the belief that close relationships are inherently unreliable, emotionally unpredictable, or transient (Young et al., 2006). This schema involves the expectation that significant others will not be consistently available to provide emotional support, safety, or stability (Palihawadana et al., 2018; Young et al., 2003). Individuals may adopt distinct coping styles, namely schema surrender, schema avoidance, or schema overcompensation when the abandonment schema is activated. The latter, schema overcompensation manifests in behaviors such as clinging to and “smothering” a partner, followed by paradoxical aggressive responses to perceived separations (Young et al., 2003). It suggests that individuals with abandonment schema may obsessively pursue a limerent object as a way to cope with the underlying schema of abandonment or in hopes of gaining their reciprocation (Bélanger et al., 2021). Such behavior serves as a compensatory mechanism to avoid emotional loss or rejection. Belu and O’Sullivan (2024) suggest that it reflects an attempt to maintain perceived stability in relationships through intense infatuation.

In this research, it was hypothesized that limerence might be the overcompensation coping style of abandonment schema. Moreover, schema therapy proposed that maladaptive schemas are maintained by cognitive distortions, which are systematic errors in thinking that serve to reinforce the validity of the existing schema (Beck & Beck, 2011). These distortions function by selectively attending to information that supports the schema, while simultaneously filtering out or dismissing evidence that contradicts it (Young et al., 2003). In the context of interpersonal relationships, these distortions can be categorized into intimacy avoidance (or interpersonal rejection), unrealistic relationship expectations, and

interpersonal misperception (Hamamcı, 2004). Such distortions not only perpetuate the abandonment schema but may also contribute to the formation and maintenance of limerence by distorting perceptions of romantic interactions and inflating expectations of emotional reciprocation. When perceptions of romantic interactions are distorted, such as overestimating signs of affection or misinterpreting ambivalent cues as meaningful, individuals may develop intense emotional fixations on their limerent object (Đurić et al., 2025; Overall et al., 2015). Bélanger et al. (2021) suggest that this fixation may be driven by a subconscious desire to gain unconditional emotional reciprocation, which they believe will finally resolve their underlying fear of abandonment. Thus, it can be hypothesized that cognitive distortions not only sustain maladaptive schemas but also fuel the obsessive and idealized pursuit characteristic of limerent experiences.

Research has shown that early childhood experiences, especially authoritarian parenting, parent-to-child maltreatment, and anxious attachment styles, significantly contribute to the development of early maladaptive schemas, including abandonment schema, among Pakistani youth (Anwar et al., 2024; Batool et al., 2017). A recent Pakistani study confirmed that both maternal and paternal parenting styles influence the formation of such schemas, which in turn affect emotional and interpersonal functioning in adulthood. Additionally, Western literature highlights the impact of EMS on parenting across generations, supporting that dysfunctional childhood environments foster schema development (Sójta & Strzelecki, 2023). In Pakistani culture, where traditional norms around arranged marriages coexist with a growing preference for personal choice, young adults may face additional relational challenges (Khurshid, 2018). The tension between familial expectations and personal desires can exacerbate feelings of uncertainty and abandonment, particularly for those with existing maladaptive schemas. This cultural dynamic may contribute to emotional disturbances such as limerence. This shift often heightens cognitive distortions and uncertainty in relationships (Akbari & Zeinali, 2025).

Furthermore, the literature has consistently linked the abandonment schema to borderline personality disorder (BPD), a condition marked by emotional dysregulation, unstable relationships, and a heightened fear of abandonment (Smith & South, 2019). Although BPD is not directly measured in the present study, its core features, especially the abandonment schema, are integral to understanding the genesis of limerence. Despite growing research interest in the emotional experiences of young adults, no research has examined how early maladaptive schemas and interpersonal cognitive beliefs contribute to limerence, especially within Pakistani collectivist culture. In light of these considerations, the current study aimed to investigate the relationship between abandonment schema, interpersonal cognitive distortions, and limerence among young adults and propose a model that limerence is not merely a manifestation of obsessive or addictive behaviors but is deeply rooted in early maladaptive schema of abandonment, thereby contributing a culturally informed, schema-based framework to the literature.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant relationship between abandonment schema, interpersonal cognitive distortions, interpersonal rejection, unrealistic relationship expectations, interpersonal misperception, and limerence among young adults.

H2: Interpersonal rejection, unrealistic relationship expectations, and interpersonal misperception mediate the relationship between abandonment schema and limerence among young adults.

Methodology

Sample

A sample of young adults (N=332), aged 18 to 29 years, currently enrolled in a private or public university, was taken from Lahore, Pakistan, using a purposive sampling strategy. G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2007) suggested a sample of (N=298) with an effect size of 0.15 and an alpha level of 0.05. The sample included (N=153) young men and (N=179) young women with a mean age of 21.8 years (SD = 2.05).

Measures

Abandonment Core Belief Self-Assessment

The Abandonment Core Belief Self-Assessment (Skeen, 2014) is a 10-item scale adapted from the 17-item Abandonment Schema subscale of the Young Schema Questionnaire-L3 (YSQ-L3; Young & Brown, 2003), which measures 18 Early Maladaptive Schemas. Responses are recorded on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely untrue of me) to 6 (describes me perfectly). Total scores were calculated by summing all item responses, with higher scores indicating a more severe abandonment schema. The scale demonstrated strong reliability in this study, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.88$.

Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions Scale

The ICDS (Hamamcı, 2004) is a 19-item scale, comprised of three subscales: interpersonal rejection (8 items), unrealistic relationship expectations (8 items), and interpersonal misperception (3 items). It uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater cognitive distortions. Total scores range from 19 to 95. The scale demonstrated strong reliability in this study, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.88$.

Wolf & Lemay Limerence Measure

The WLLM (Wolf & Lemay, 2015) is a 30-item self-report measure and utilizes a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale evaluates limerence across seven core symptoms: exclusivity, intrusive thinking, uncertainty, idealization, ache in chest, elation, apprehension, and inability to become non-limerent. Total scores were calculated by summing all item responses, with higher scores indicating severe limerence. It demonstrates strong psychometric properties, with a reliability coefficient of Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$, in the recent study.

Procedure

Approval for the study was obtained from the Board of Studies and Ethical Review Committee (ERC Ref: PSYC699-23-121; dated 14-11-2023) at the Department of Psychology, Forman Christian College University Lahore, followed by approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB Ref: IRB-569/01-2024). Permission to use the assessment tools was obtained by contacting the original authors via email. A

booklet was prepared, including an informed consent form, socio-demographic questionnaire, and standardized measurement tools. To recruit participants, formal permission was obtained from relevant authorities in public and private universities in Lahore through official letters. Before data collection, participants were informed about the study's objectives, assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation, and given the right to withdraw at any stage. To ensure ethical compliance, participant anonymity was maintained by assigning random codes to the booklets. Data access was restricted to the primary researcher and supervisor, and findings were reported accurately and transparently. No participant was harmed during the study. After the data

collection, it was analyzed using IBM SPSS version 26 (IBM Corp., 2016).

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and distribution characteristics for the scales and subscales used in the study. The internal consistency for all measures was found to be acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .62 to .94 (Table 1). As the values for skewness and kurtosis fell within the acceptable range, further parametric statistical analyses were considered appropriate.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability Coefficients, and Distribution Characteristics for the Scales and Subscales (N = 332)

Scale-Subscale	<i>k</i>	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range		Skewness	Kurtosis
					Potential	Actual		
AS	10	0.88	32.18	12.0	10-60	10-60	0.21	-0.26
ICD	19	0.85	54.94	12.9	19-95	22-88	-0.00	-0.26
IR	8	0.75	22.61	6.1	8-40	9-38	0.28	-0.35
URE	8	0.72	23.64	6.6	8-40	8-37	-0.09	-0.29
IM	3	0.62	8.69	2.9	3-15	3-15	0.05	-0.36
Limerence	30	0.94	125.5	37.3	30-210	30-207	-0.23	-0.18

Note. *M*= Mean; *SD*= Standard Deviation; *k* = No. of items, α = Cronbach's Alpha, AS=Abandonment Schema; ICD=Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions; IR= Intimacy Rejection; URE= Unrealistic Relationship Expectations; IM= Interpersonal Misperception

Table 2 presents the internal consistencies of the scales and sub-scales, demonstrating acceptable to good reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.62-0.94). AS has a strong positive correlation with ICD ($r = 0.66$, $p < 0.01$), IR ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$), and Limerence ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$). A moderate to strong positive correlation was found between AS and URE ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$). The relationship between AS and IM was moderate but significant ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, ICD demonstrated a strong positive correlation with

Limerence ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$), ICD also had very strong correlations with its subdomains, including IR ($r = 0.85$, $p < 0.01$) and URE ($r = 0.86$, $p < 0.01$), as well as a strong positive correlation with IM ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, Limerence showed a moderate to strong correlation with IA ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$) and URE ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$), while its association with IM was moderate ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2

Pearson Product-Moment Correlations Between Study Variables (N=332)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. AS	-	0.66**	0.65**	0.62**	0.54**	0.38**
2. ICD		-	0.56**	0.85**	0.86**	0.65**
3. Limerence			-	0.48**	0.48**	0.35**
4. IR				-	0.54**	0.44**
5. URE					-	0.40**
6. IM						-

Note. ** $p < 0.01$; AS=Abandonment Schema; ICD=Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions; IR= Intimacy Rejection; URE= Unrealistic Relationship Expectations; IM= Interpersonal Misperception

Mediation Analysis

A multiple mediator model (Model 4 in PROCESS) was used to examine the mediation effects of IR, URE, and IM in the relationship between AS and limerence (see Table 3). The total effect of AS on limerence was significant ($B = 2.017$, $SE = 0.129$, $t = 15.626$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.763, 2.270]), with a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.65$. The direct effect remained significant after including the mediators ($B = 1.574$, $SE = 0.169$, $t = 9.290$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.240, 1.907]), with $\beta = 0.50$. The total indirect effect of AS on limerence through the mediators was significant ($B = 0.443$, $BootSE = 0.121$, 95% CI [0.213, 0.695]), indicating that IR, URE, and IM collectively mediate this relationship.

Among the individual mediators, the indirect effect of AS on limerence through IR was not significant ($B = 0.105$, $BootSE = 0.101$, 95% CI [-0.095, 0.313]), with a standardized effect of 0.034 ($BootSE = 0.033$, 95% CI [-0.031, 0.101]).

However, the mediation effect through URE was significant ($B = 0.253$, $BootSE = 0.085$, 95% CI [0.090, 0.426]), with a standardized effect of 0.082 ($BootSE = 0.027$, 95% CI [0.029, 0.136]). The indirect effect through IM was not significant ($B = 0.085$, $BootSE = 0.057$, 95% CI [-0.020, 0.209]), with a standardized effect of 0.028 ($BootSE = 0.018$, 95% CI [-0.007, 0.066]).

Model summaries showed that AS explained 38% of the variance in IR ($F = 205.48$, $p < .001$), 29% of the variance in URE ($F = 133.24$, $p < .001$), and 15% of the variance in IM ($F = 56.01$, $p < .001$). Although IM accounted for a smaller variance, its relationship with AS remained significant. The final model explained 46% of the variance in limerence ($F = 68.95$, $p < .001$), suggesting that AS, IR, URE, and IM together provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to limerence.

Table 3

Mediating Effect of Interpersonal Rejection, Unrealistic Relationship Expectations, and Interpersonal Misperception in the Relationship Between Abandonment Schema and Limerence (N=332)

Antecedent	IR				URE				IM				Limerence			
	B	SE	p	β	B	SE	p	β	B	SE	p	B	B	SE	p	β
AS	a_1 0.32	0.02	0.00	0.62	a_2 0.29	.025	0.00	0.54	a_3 0.09	0.01	0.00	0.38	c' 1.57	0.17	0.00	0.51
IR	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	b_1 0.33	0.34	0.32	0.05
URE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	b_2 0.86	0.29	0.00	0.15
IM	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	b_3 0.90	0.58	0.12	0.07
	$R^2 = 0.38$				$R^2 = 0.29$				$R^2 = 0.15$				$R^2 = 0.46$			
	$F(1, 330) = 205.48$, $p < .001$				$F(1, 330) = 133.24$, $p < .001$				$F(1, 330) = 56.01$, $p < .001$				$F(4, 327) = 68.95$, $p < .001$			

Note. B=Unstandardized Coefficient; SE=Standard Error; β =Standardized Coefficient; R^2 =Coefficient of Determination; AS=Abandonment Schema; ICD=Interpersonal Cognitive Distortions; IR= Intimacy Rejection; URE= Unrealistic Relationship Expectations; IM= Interpersonal Misperception

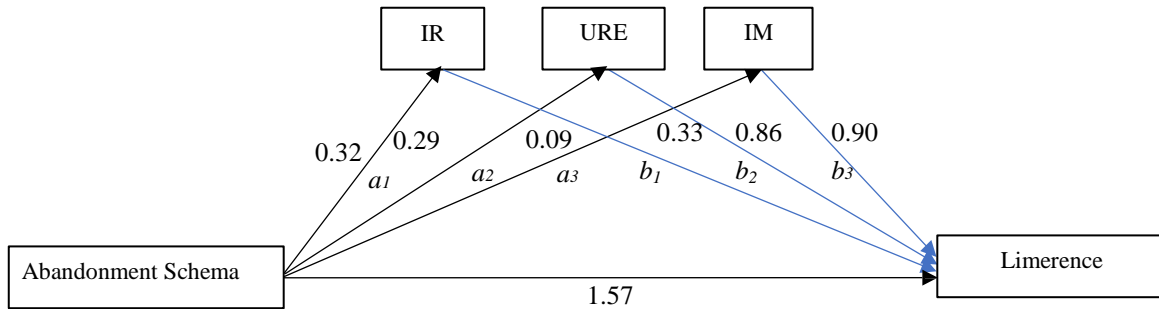


Figure 1: Partial Mediation Between AS and Limerence through URE

Discussion

This research aimed to investigate the relationship between abandonment schema, interpersonal cognitive distortions (its sub-domains, namely interpersonal rejection, unrealistic relationship expectations, and interpersonal misperception), and limerence among young adults. It also aimed to explore the mediating effect of interpersonal rejection, unrealistic relationship expectations, and

interpersonal misperception in the relationship between abandonment schema and limerence. We hypothesized that limerence might be an overcompensation coping mechanism of abandonment schema. The results show that the abandonment schema was significantly positively related to limerence, suggesting that individuals with a stronger abandonment schema are more likely to experience limerence.

This supports our hypothesis that limerence may serve as an overcompensation coping response to abandonment schema. This finding is particularly new as there is no previous literature studying these two variables together.

However, research by Bélanger et al. (2021) revealed that fear of abandonment mediates the relationship between obsessive passion and obsessive relational intrusion, suggesting that individuals who have a fear of abandonment are more likely to get obsessed with their romantic partners and invade their privacy, leading to abusive relationships. Furthermore, the abandonment schema was significantly positively related to interpersonal cognitive distortions and their subdomains: interpersonal rejection, unrealistic relationship expectations, and interpersonal misperception. According to Young et al.'s (2003) model, cognitive distortions are one of the primary mechanisms through which schemas are maintained. Findings of the study suggest that individuals with an abandonment schema interpret relational experiences in ways that reinforce their core fears, often through distortions such as intimacy avoidance (interpersonal rejection), unrealistic relationship expectations, and interpersonal misperception (mind reading). These distortions maintain the schema by magnifying perceived threats of rejection and by fostering unattainable relational ideals (Puri et al., 2021).

These distortions also reinforce inaccurate assumptions about others' intentions. Consequently, individuals become trapped in self-fulfilling cycles, where maladaptive beliefs and behaviors sustain both the schema and its associated emotional distress, such as limerence (Kover et al., 2024). The findings indicate a significant positive association between interpersonal cognitive distortions and limerence. Research suggests that individuals experiencing romantic obsession often fear intimacy due to deep-seated feelings of unworthiness, leading them to avoid reciprocal relationships as a defense against rejection (Bartholomew, 1990). This avoidance sustains an idealized fantasy world rather than real emotional connections. Unrealistic expectations further exacerbate limerence, as individuals idealize their limerent object (LO) and anticipate reciprocation, resulting in emotional dysregulation and dissatisfaction when these expectations remain unmet (Willmott & Bentley, 2015). Given that real-life relationships rarely align with these exaggerated ideals, such individuals struggle with relationship instability (Djikic & Oatley, 2004). Additionally, limerence was significantly linked to interpersonal misperception, which may suggest that individuals experiencing limerence are prone to misinterpret their LO's cues and project their assumptions and desires onto them. This cognitive distortion fosters misunderstandings and interpersonal conflicts, intensifying emotional distress (Bradbury et al., 2024; Tennov, 1999).

The results of the mediation analysis align with the proposed schema therapy framework, indicating how early maladaptive schemas, specifically the abandonment schema (AS), fuel limerence through cognitive distortions. The significant total and direct effects indicate that AS strongly predicts limerence, consistent with the notion that abandonment fears drive pathological infatuated relational tendencies. The significant total indirect effect suggests that cognitive distortions collectively contribute to this relationship, reinforcing the perpetuation of schemas (Huang et al., 2023; Thorsteinsson, 2023; Kover et al., 2024).

Among the mediators, unrealistic relationship expectations (URE) emerged as the strongest pathway, indicating that individuals with abandonment schema develop unattainable relational ideals, leading to limerence. This finding is supported by schema therapy's claim that cognitive distortions sustain maladaptive patterns by reinforcing schema-consistent beliefs (Young et al., 2006). The non-significant effects of interpersonal rejection (IR) and interpersonal misperception (IM) suggest that, while these distortions are linked to abandonment schema, they do not directly contribute to limerence. The variance explained by the model (46%) highlights the significant role of abandonment schema and cognitive distortions in predicting limerence. This reinforces the theoretical premise that individuals with an abandonment schema often struggle in relationships due to distorted perceptions and expectations. These distorted thoughts can lead to maladaptive behaviors, such as clinging to partners or fearing rejection, which in turn reinforce the very schema they are trying to avoid. This cycle perpetuates and may develop limerence, or emotional distress, and hinders the development of healthy, secure relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights limerence as a maladaptive over-compensatory coping response to the abandonment schema, perpetuated through interpersonal cognitive distortions, particularly unrealistic relationship expectations. The findings support schema therapy's framework, which states that early maladaptive schemas and associated cognitive distortions predict limerence. Furthermore, this study found that unrealistic expectations in relationships play a significant role in how abandonment schema leads to limerence. Helping young adults build realistic views about love and relationships could protect them from unnecessary emotional pain. Caregivers, counselors, and educators need to recognize these emotional patterns and provide support early on.

Limitations and Suggestions

The study used a cross-sectional and correlational design, which restricts the ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between abandonment schema, cognitive distortions, and limerence. Since all data were gathered through self-report measures, potential biases such as social desirability and subjective perceptions may have influenced participants' responses, which could not be controlled as in a true experimental setup. Furthermore, the generalizability of the findings is limited due to the specific sample and context; broader and more diverse populations, like psychiatric or forensic populations, should be included in future research to enhance the external validity. Future studies may benefit from qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, which can offer a richer and more refined understanding of participants' experiences. Moreover, future research should consider studying other schemas, like the emotional deprivation schema and dependence/incompetence schema, with limerence. Including attachment style measures and personality trait measures may further clarify how attachment-related processes and personality patterns interact

with early maladaptive schemas in the development of limerence.

Implications

There is a significant dearth of research available on limerence worldwide. In Pakistan, no research has been done on this topic so far. The findings of the study help fill that gap and add to the existing literature. The findings of the study also extend the scope of Schema Therapy by conceptualizing limerence as a behavioral expression of an over-compensatory coping mechanism of abandonment schema. It also validates the theoretical proposition that cognitive distortions perpetuate the maladaptive schema, particularly in romantic contexts. Clinically, the findings indicate that effective management of limerence requires assessing underlying abandonment schema and associated interpersonal cognitive distortions. Furthermore, rather than relying solely on traditional OCD-focused CBT models, Schema Therapy may offer a more comprehensive therapeutic framework for limerence by addressing core unmet emotional needs, challenging irrational romantic beliefs, and fostering the Healthy Adult Mode to reduce dependency and emotional dysregulation.

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