

## **Romantic Relationship: The Issues Faced in a Conflict among Young Adults**

J.Lavanya Jayakobi\*  
Sam Jeng Mun

*Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences  
Taylor's University*

\*Corresponding e-mail: [lavanyajayakobi97@gmail.com]

The phenomenon of conflict in a romantic relationship is a unique experience which differs from one to another individual. By using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the current research aims to answer the question “Does the Gottman’s Four Horsemen of Apocalypse applies in romantic relationship among young adults? through the interviews of 16 participant age range from 18 to 25 years old. From the data collected, three superordinate themes were found which are communication styles, individual reactions and problems solving, as well as subthemes. The findings show everyone’s experiences on conflict in romantic relationship is extremely personal, and the carrying traits on solving the conflict in their romantic relationship. The information provides valuable insight on the experiences of conflict in romantic relationship among young adults to counsellors and therapists, better equipping them to service university students.

*Keywords:* conflict; Four Horsemen of Apocalypse; young adults; interpretative phenomenological analysis, romantic relationships

Romantic relationships occur when two different individuals are dating or involved in any other type of romantic connections. Partners involved in a romantic relationship are key sources of social support in building one another by providing moral support and guidance. To increase the longevity of a relationship, being intimate and forever showing commitment helps to increase the lifespan of the bond but on the other hand, gap among the individuals can influence the emotions and behavioural pattern in ways which may lead to future difficulties in a romantic relationship: for example, stress, negativity, and miscommunication. Besides, couples with a high amount of trust tend to thrive longer in a healthy relationship because partners with a high level of trust can help motivate the relationship positively and strategically even if the other partner is failing to do so, mainly during stressful moments (S. Kim et al., 2015).

Study conducted by Bonache et al. (2017, p. 1916) addresses that conflict can be caused based on couple’s attachment style and interpersonal skills. These characteristics create space for adolescents to play a vulnerable role in their relationship that could lead to risky behaviour or abuse like physical or verbal violence. Interpersonal conflict relating to relationships shows the healthiness and wellbeing of relationship are based on the way individuals approach the conflicts (K. Laurent, Hertz, Nelson & M. Laurent, 2016). Improvisations on the interpersonal conflict can not only help in increasing the understanding capability during an argument but also handling the negative behaviour of a partner with higher tolerance.

The health and longevity of a relationship is also based on the ability on overcoming negative reciprocity in conflict situations through effective communication however

some scenarios might lead to upsetting behaviour; be it subtle criticism or overt hostility, and defensive responses (Merolla & Harman, 2016, p. 354). In most cases, conflicts are identified as a negative matter that is highly unavoidable in a romantic relationship, but conflicts however are important in a relationship whereby it tests the mental health and the bond between the couples. (Connolly et al., 2015).

Conflicts reflect to interpersonal stress which can influence physiological reactivity as it means harm towards a relationship. This can also damage the biological stress response system as it affects them physically, but effective conflicts support the relationship by giving satisfaction and stability to the individuals to withstand the problems (Merrill & Afifi, 2017). Moreover, social media increases relationship complications whereby it plays a major role in affecting conflict through jealousy. Jealousy is a form of negative emotion that evolves from loved ones being lost to another individual or the possibility of a threat. Over usage of social media does lead to negativity in relationships such as breakups, divorce, affair and affect happiness.

Many claims anger is the source of unhappy or unsatisfied relationship, but John Gottman explains that conflict is not the main problem, but how we cope with the situation. Venting frustration constructively actually helps clean up the air and get the relationship back in order. Conflict, though, is a concern when it is characterized by the presence of what Gottman called "the four horsemen of the apocalypse" that consist of four important traits which are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (Hooper et al., 2017, p. 228). Based on the information gathered about conflict, there are similar patterns of emotional distress caused by conflict across diverse communities. Such experiences are extremely personal to individuals who are undergoing them. No number of

quantifiable statistics will demonstrate the diverse experiences of various people suffering from conflict in their relationship. Moreover, several attempts have been made to study the reason why the number of young adults who face conflicts in a romantic relationship has been tremendously increasing in the current era. However, there is a dearth of research on young adults facing the same issues based on Gottman's Four Horsemen of Apocalypse, therefore this study aims to clarify the issues faced by the young adults critically through Gottman's Four Horsemen of Apocalypse which consist of the four factors, criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling leading to a conflict in a romantic relationship.

Research done by The Gottman Institute (2013) claims that contempt is known to be the main reason behind the separation of couples as it plays a vital role in destroying the feeling of closure and admiration which involves communication between couples during a conflict rather than the debate, they are involved in. The Four Horsemen enactment was later found to be part of the conflicts that happen among young adults involved in romantic relationships. The personality traits and habits of the individuals are closely related to the Four Horsemen (Horan, Guinn & Banghart, 2015).

Criticism plays the role of questioning the attitude or character of your partner, rather than reflecting on the actual conduct that is troubling you. It is good to have healthy disagreement among the partners, but it is unfair to attack the spouse's personality or character in the process of the argument (Hooper et al., 2017, p. 228). Spousal criticism and aggression play a role in influencing tolerance to pain. However, these traits are linked to pain behaviours and are often observed among certain subgroups such as women or people with a depressive despair when their partners engage in substantial criticism or hostility

which can lead to anxiety (Cano & Tankha, 2018, p. 1). At times, mistakes of a partner can be forgiven at first but not in a positive way but to hold grudges. High levels of anxiety in criticism often discuss less about the acts of their partners discovered by them and “gunnysack” the issues to be let out when the tipping point is hit and criticism is let out in whole can lead to separation of couples as the toxic might build might have damaged the interpersonal of the individual carrying the criticism from the partner in a romantic relationship (Fowler, 2011).

Nevertheless, adopting is a defensive approach in the middle of a confrontation may be a natural reaction, but it plays a role causing frustration among the partners if one of them has trouble listening to what is being said. Garofalo (2017) claims that defensiveness is associated with emotions dysregulation and interpersonal problems which shows emotion dysregulation is correlated with a higher level of defensiveness. Individuals with lower level of emotion dysregulation are correlated with higher levels of defensiveness and it is likewise for an individual with higher level of emotion dysregulation. Therefore, defensiveness is an important role in the processes that bind emotional dysregulation and the related negative consequences.

Contempt is a single predictor of the eventual dissolution of a relationship. It is often displayed such as refusing to acknowledge the validity of a partner's opinion, for instance denying the mistakes by telling the partner that they are irrational or telling their partner to stop giving useless statements. Becoming contemptuous, one negates the views and opinions of the spouse by giving the impression that such views and opinions are meaningless and that one's view and opinion are far more important, signalling that individual-centric results are prioritized (Hooper et al., 2017, p. 228).

Stonewalling however involves people who choose to stonewall and often refuse to respond whereby individuals involved in a romantic relationship stop interacting when the arguments get overboard. This is to avoid interacting coldly and showing less effort to communicate so that big conflicts can be avoided from happening among the couples. Besides that, it also helps the couples to calm down during the conflict and think through the issues causing the problem, but this might trigger the other individual involved in the argument as it leaves them to be the only person arguing in the conflict. Previous studies have found that the usage of stonewalling by the partner decreases the mutual happiness of both parties (Velotti et al., 2015, p. 296). Partners tend to pick up the stonewalling behaviour during an argument when attachment anxiety encourages them to do so. The fear of losing someone through a conflict might result in partners withdrawing from the conversation to prevent the action from happening and this might result in forming a gap in the relationship with no proper closure.

In addition, respect is an important factor that couples should give one another in a relationship and when that diminishes over time might result in a conflict. Defensiveness and contempt are the words that can be defined as words representing lack of respect shown to a partner during an emotional situation like conflict regarding personality traits and defensive responses towards a partner that happens to be a negative act in a nicer way. Failing to show respect during moments when partners need the most will affect the argument and understanding capabilities to provide satisfaction and sustain the quality of the conflict.

## **Method**

### **Participant**

The research comprises a sample of 16 participants of both male and female genders between the age of 18 to 25 years old, studying around Klang Valley Universities. The age range between 18- 25 years old was opted based on the age range of the students studying around Klang Valley. Before participating in the study, the participants were required to fulfil certain criteria; participant should be heterosexual and in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months and above. Besides, identifiable information of the participants was not collected, this is to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participant in the study. Instead, to identify each participant's data, they were given the Sponge Bob character themed name for their participation throughout the research. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any point with and without providing reasons. Lastly, participants participated in this research out of their will and to appreciate the time and effort invested by the participants, they were given a e-voucher from 'Subway' after the interview session as a token of appreciation.

### **Instrument**

The instruments used in this study are audio recorder to record participants interview session which later used to analyse the data for superordinate and subordinate themes. Besides, social media such as Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp is used to as a tool to share the information regarding the research and to get target participants to join the research. To protect the confidentiality of the research, minimal information has been shared in the social media to attract target participants, such as

the title of the research and the criteria to participate in the research. Lastly, Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams was used to conduct the interview via online based on the participants convenience and availability.

### **Procedure**

The research requires certain criteria to be fulfilled by the participant before participating in the study hence, purposive sampling method is used. Potential participants are approached through social media and interested participants get back to the researcher through the respective social media platforms. Before confirmation, participants were given a short brief regarding the research, information sheet to read through the purpose of the study and consent form to fill up their personal information for their approval to participate in the study. Once the consent form is filled up with their personal information, potential participants will send it to the researcher's personal email to confirm their participation in the research. After the confirmation, an interview session will be scheduled with the potential participants according to their availability and convenience. Interview session takes place after the confirmation via 'Skype', 'Teams' and 'Zoom'. A short briefing will be given once again to ensure the participants clearly understand the purpose of the study, particularly on their rights as a participant and they can withdraw from the research at any point of time if they face any form of triggers or emotional distress. And if they need to be assisted for a therapy, they also can refer to the service sheet given to them to seek help. Finally, after transcribing the participant's recording to analyse the data, it will be deleted for ethical purposes and to ensure the participants personal information is not revealed during and after the interview

session. The audio and data will only be accessed to the researcher and will not be shared to a third party because participants confidentiality should be protected at all cause, and it is against the ethics board of Taylor's University as they do not allow the researchers to share any form of information about their participants to a third party.

### **Analytical Strategy**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used in this research, as the research aims to explore the participants' experience on conflict in their romantic relationship. This analytic approach is also chosen to thoroughly analyse the significance of issues faced in the romantic relationship among young adults. To enable us to further comprehend and discover about this aspect in romantic life, as this approach would focus on the different characteristics of the participating individuals and the pattern that is formed among the participants. Since IPA is an in-depth and detailed analytical approach, rather than reflecting the data back to existing theories, it will be able to offer qualitative interpretation of the personal experiences of participants, particularly in the sense of subjective and complicated topics such as the issues faced in a conflict in a romantic relationship. The researcher code's each participant's transcript to analyse separately for a pattern. The themes were created by the adjectives used by participants to characterise their words and perceptions of the romantic relationship problems encountered in the confrontation. To observe and achieve a pattern that reflects the data collected, the themes that were created were then evaluated, and compared. And three superordinate themes were found.

### **Results**

In this study, three superordinate themes were found after analysing the data. It provides an in-depth account of participants' experience on issues faced in a conflict among young adults in a romantic relationship through the IPA method. Each theme represents from the direct quotes of each participant to better explain each account relating to them.

#### **Communication Styles**

The first superordinate theme found in the study is 'Communications Styles'. And it is divided into four sub-ordinate themes which is called 'poor communication skills, affective communication, expressing emotions through words, and time off.

Participants face misunderstanding and disagreements with their romantic partner due to poor communication style in their relationship. Participant Mrs. Puff mentions "So (short pause) conflict comes when there's lack of communication and lack of trust between the two partners. So, it's very important to keep communicating." Next, participant Squilliam also stated "when we are physically together, face to face, I can easily handle it because that person is right here with me, I can talk to her there and then. Instead of you know shouting and all this, I say what I need to in a proper and better way. I say it properly but when it comes to long distance relationships, communication is a bit harder. So, due to anger sometimes I lash out." Being in a romantic relationship, participants often feel it is important to communicate because lack of communication skills could ruin a relationship especially when it is a long-distance relationship.

Based on the data received, participant or their romantic partner do resolve conflicts through effective communication in relationship. Participant Larry mentioned

“Communication is everything in a relationship to make things better, but the tone of your communication plays a role as well which is everything. The tone when you communicate with your partner should be in a better way rather than putting all emotions together and lashing out. That thing I have to change in myself, that is what I meant by communication.” Larry agrees on having effective communication is important and he mentions the tone of the voice could play a major role when we are trying to convey a message to the other person. Because the tone of voice could possibly change the situation for the better or for the worst. On the other hand, Participant SpongeBob stated that “Obviously, it makes me feel upset like it makes me angry. So, because like, if you do not talk about it to me, who else are you going to talk about it to, you know, like, this is something people need to work out not one person. And if you still feel that way about something, you must speak on it, you cannot keep it in, even though I used to do that, like I used to keep things in, but not anymore. (Short pause) So it is kind of frustrating if like, the person does not say eye to eye, and if they are constantly going to block you out, then it is very unhealthy. It's like, very toxic, because they're not letting you see your peace of mind.” mentions that she feels upset and angry when her partner does not communicate well with her. She said when there is two people in the relationship it is important to communicate with each other and say their peace because bottling up emotions can become very toxic. Eventhough, she does not speak up in the past, she understands the importance of effective communication skills and often speaks up to her partner and expects her partner to do the same as well.

Based on the information derived from the data, participants have shared their experiences on taking time off from their

partners or in certain situation their partners would take time off for their mental health and inner peace. And communicate when they are ready or when each other are in much calmer state. For instance, participant Karen mentions “Okay, (um) I would say we are both quite mature people in a sense, where we don't avoid the problem, or we don't (arr) yeah, we don't avoid the problem. So, we tend to take some time to pull off if necessary, and then we will talk about it. And we will just discuss (lah). So, it would be a very calm understanding environment where I say what I want to say, and I say how I feel about it. And then he will get his turn to say how he feels about it. And then we either come up with a compromise or something. So, there is like a win win situation for both of us.” In Karen's relationship, she and her boyfriend want to ensure both speak what they feel without any disagreement, so they tend to take some time away and talk when they are ready. They are not avoiding it, but they are cooling down to create a safe space for each other to talk so it will be a win win situation.

The data further explains that individuals in romantic relationship find it difficult expressing their feelings and choose to bottle it up in their romantic relationship. In other cases, couples are too expressive towards each other. Participant Gary mentions “(Arhh) I guess I like how he differs a lot from me, because we're like two very different people. But we somehow like complement each other. And I like how he is way of doing things, like, like, compliments my way of doing things. But I feel like he can really be a lot more expressive. Like, he is a lot calmer than I am. So, I wish he would be like, more aggressive when he says things. Like, I really want him too just express. I want it to be like a safe zone for him to just, you know, to spit it out. And it is like, you do

not really have to, like structure your words properly, you know, things like that. If he is angry, I want him to show me his anger (chuckles). Not in a violent way lah!” Gary wants her partner to express his feeling during a conflict and avoid filtration because she wants to experience the negative side of her partner eventhough he chooses to be a lot calmer during a conflict.

### **Individual Reactions**

Through the conflict faced in the relationship, participants and their romantic partners have reacted differently depending on the situation. Based on the individual reaction superordinate theme it is divided into four sub-ordinate themes. Which is anger, defensiveness, lashing out, and sadness.

Participants do experience dealing with anger issues during a conflict between their partners. This often occurs due to the unexpressed emotion they have bottled up for a long time. In particular, participant Lady Fish stated “(Uhh) I tend to jump into conclusion because of my anger I tend to end things because of my anger and I think it is a very bad idea to put our emotions (uhh) to let our emotions to take control of us so I think if I like could manage my emotions if I like could try to calm down at places where I would actually react angrily to if I get to control that I think I could deal with problems easily I could (uhh) I would be a better person.” In Lady fish relationship, she often reacts out of anger by jumping into conclusions. Lady Fish feels she could handle her emotions better but due to her anger she tends to put her emotions first and react angrily which contributes as one of the reasons for conflict in her romantic relationship.

Couples have experienced defensiveness in their relationship, and it plays a main role during the conflict. In some situations,

defensiveness has brought the situation worst as per stated in the data of the research. Because either one of the couples feel they have never committed mistakes and often feel right during the conflict. Participant Patrick Star explained “(Ermm) At first, yeah, like, when the argument just starts, (umm) we'll usually tend to be defensive to say that we didn't do it or, like, you know, somehow defend ourselves. But as the argument goes on, like, you will realize that (oh) maybe it is my fault. So yeah, defensive may be the starting, then once you realize that it is not actually, I mean, it is your fault, then we tend to come to an agreement.” Patrick Star mentions that during the argument both would be defensive. And they tend to defend themselves but while arguing if they think it is their fault they would come to an agreement. On the other hand, participant Moth says she would be defensive not her boyfriend in the relationship. “I would be very defensive and not him. I am a very defensive person because I used to be a very composed person. I used to be like that because right now I am actually seeing myself in him to be every frank like how I used to be in my past relationship. He is exactly like how I was. So, when I see myself in him, I totally understand his behaviour and his actions towards me. Nevertheless, yes, he does get on my nerves, but I am like it's okay never mind, he is being himself so yah that's just it.” Moth is defensive in the relationship because in the past she used to be very composed in her past relationship, so now she is defensive. She also sees herself in her boyfriend so sometimes when his boyfriend tends to react due to her defensiveness, she would understand because she was in his shoes before.

Couples do express their emotions on feeling sad regarding the situation when it occurs during the conflict. Participant

Karen mentions “I think, affect me, as I think it will affect my mood. First of all, like, when I have an argument with him, and I would obviously feel a little bit sadder, or a little bit angrier, whatever it is. But one thing I think I know about the both of us is that regardless of whatever we argue about, we tend to come back as like a collective, a collective couple, and then we just kind of like sort it out together. So, I think it has affected me as a person, that I’ve learned a lot more from him through our conflicts. Karen’s mood gets affected and feels sad when she has an argument with her partner with a little anger as well. Despite the chaotic situation they find ways to solve the conflict since they come as a collective couple.

Couples do experience lashing out at one another out of anger due to stress of the moment or sometimes when they find it difficult to pass through the message across to their partner because one of them refuse to listen. Participant Mr. Krabs mentions “(Short pause) We’ll come up to a point where, we both argue and argue, she will come up to a point where she’s not really sure. And she will not be fine, in the morning at 5.30 I need to wake up and drive all the way from Klang to Sunway. Because she is not ready to put down the call. I am not going to give in every time. Sometimes, she must understand that she has to woman up for herself. Yeah, if you mess up, just accept it, take it and go on. I’ll be shouting at her. She will be shouting back to me. I said “I cannot believe I’m with you, I’m going to sleep. I will fight at seven o’clock in the morning and I love you, bye”. (Laughs) So, that is how I was pushing through my relationship for some time. Both Mr. Krabs and his girlfriend find it very difficult to solve the conflict because he is not ready to give in for the mistake he did not commit, and she does not want to comply over her mistake which brings them

to a point of arguing for days over the same problem. And they do not end the conflict instead they just leave it behind.

### **Problem Solving**

Participants share their experiences based on how they solve their problem in their relationship based on these three subordinate themes. Which is rationalism, environment, and compliance.

Participant shares their perspective on rationalizing the situation to resolve the problem in the conflict with their partner. Participant Pearl Krabs mentions “No no, it’s just (uhh) in like a conflict resolution, it’s just better to confront the other person with I statements. So instead of like putting the blame on the other person you say (ermm) like (arhh) “I felt this way and da da da da da”. So, I try my best to apply that. And then we just talk about it (short pause) as (ermm) I guess rationally as possible without disregarding like (mmm) the emotions involved in the conflict.” Pearl Krabs prefers to use “I” statement instead of “You” statement. This will enable the couples to speak more rationally and will not seem like the partner is at fault 100 percent. On the other hand, participant Squilliam stated “From my point of view, I don’t think that I want to change anything in her. All this anger management and patients I learn from her. So, she is being much rationale than me sometimes in dealing with situations, so yeah. I don’t think I need her to change anything.” Squilliam feels his girlfriend is way rationale than him. Where she can take good decisions and keep him sane.

Environment played a vital role in problem solving among the couples in their conflict situations. Participant Larry mentions “Yah that the main point of going on a drive with her, cause if we are communicating over the phone, I don’t think emotions are playing a

role in it because there are two sides of it where they don't get to see you, or you don't get to see them therefore the emotions are not flowing to them you know. The words might sound very different over text than reality. So, when you have this private space and time together and especially for me driving is very peaceful as well as for her which makes us comfortable with one another and open up and solve the issues." Larry says that most of the time he would ask her out or she would ask him out. they would go for a long drive to places that they like and have a talk about things whilst enjoying the views to help resolve the issues. He further elaborates that the main point of long drives helps communication better as emotions are not caught properly on the phone and it does not help much in resolving the issues. He further explains that sometimes the words may sound differently on the phone compared to talking in person.

One of the reasons for resolving the conflict is through complying to one another depending on the situation. Participant Squidward mentioned "(Arr) It's we both completely comply easily. (Short pause) We understand each other very well. So, yeah, this is hard because we are both pretty chill, yeah." Squidward have stated, in their relationship both comply to each other easily and they are very chill about it. Besides, participant Plankton do comply in the relationship compared to his girlfriend "(Uhm) Not really, no. And that was a more of a general broad term. Like, daily romantic relationship, daily lives, and all that. But when it comes to conflict, then yeah, I do comply majority of the time. As to its I realized that it's also the quickest way to subdue the issue at hand. So, if it is a specifically a problem with me, then okay. I comply, I see what the issue and I try to improve from it and then I move on." Plankton does comply most of the time

when there is conflict in the relationship. But in a normal day basis he often does not do that. He says, by complying, it is the best way to subdue the situation. He often improves from that issue and chose to move on. On the other hand, participant Mrs. Puff mentions "Because from the very start, I have been doing the mistakes most of the time. So, it is like, he cannot accept my mistakes. So, when he says stop doing this, then I comply. Because I know it is my mistake. Yeah." Mrs. Puff often complies in the relationship. She complies because she feels from the start of the relationship, she has been making the mistake more often than her partner.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question "Does the Gottman's Four Horsemen of Apocalypse apply in a romantic relationship among young adults?" After analysing the transcription, three superordinate themes were found and highlighted which are communication styles, individual reactions and problem solving. The theme has explained thoroughly on the possibilities a conflict may arise in a romantic relationship among young adults which later related to Gottman's theory.

The first subordinate theme under the communications styles theme is ineffective communication, where couples experience poor communication skills with their partners, and known to be the main cause for misunderstandings and disagreements in a conflict. Participant stated, his girlfriend would not be interested to have a conversation and blocks him away when they experience conflict in their relationship. Based on Gottman's theory, stonewalling took place in participant's relationship where his partner chose to block him away rather than have a discussion to resolve the conflict.

The second super ordinate theme is individual reactions. In this theme, participants share on ways they react during conflicts when it arises. The subtheme we will be discussing about defensiveness. From this study there is a high amount of defensiveness in romantic relationships among young adults. In the beginning, romantic couples would feel offended by their mistake and tend to defend themselves from the problem. Once situations are cooled down, they would admit their mistake and apologise. One of the participants has faced intensive arguments with his partner which leads to both being defensive and they could not find ways to resolve it due to the intensity of the problem. This refers to Gottman's theory of being defensive in a relationship. Based on the study, defensiveness occurs when an individual's opinion on certain matters is not taken into consideration.

The last superordinate theme is problem solving. This theme is based on the ways romantic couples will be dealing with their conflict. The subordinate theme will be discussed is compliance. Young adults do comply in their romantic relationship because they often feel guilty because they feel they were the cause of the problem. Participant have mentioned, she often complies in the argument because she is being told that she is making mistake all the way by her partner. Which relates to Gottman's theory of being contempt and participant takes on the blame because there is no reason for her to prove herself right due to her boyfriend's dominance in the relationship.

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