

Exploring the Factors Behind Romantic Relationship Conflicts Among University Students: A Case of Mukuba University

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Abstract: *The study sought to investigate the factors behind romantic relationship conflicts among university students. This was a case study conducted at Mukuba University. The target population was undergraduate students at Mukuba University. The sample was selected using quota sampling technique; thus, participants were selected from different schools and year of study based on their romantic relationship status. Those who had not experience romantic relationships were not part of the study. The sample size of the study was 15 students drawn from three schools. The data were collected using face-to-face interviews with the selected students. The study identified six overarching themes, including communication issues, insecurity, time management and priorities, intimacy and sexual matters, financial issues, and cultural or religious disparities as the causes and types of conflicts. The study also revealed that communication conflicts stem from partners ignoring, providing the silent treatment, or encountering communication ambiguity. Insecurity issues arise from incidents of infidelity, suspicion, and possessiveness, while time and priority conflicts result from imbalances between academic commitments and the partners' quality time together. Moreover, the study sheds light on conflicts related to differences in sexual desires and financial discrepancies. Financial challenges include concerns about overdependence on partners for support or materialistic attitudes, often leading to conflicts. Religious and cultural disparities are also influential, as participants experienced relationship strain due to differing beliefs. Furthermore, the investigation explored the outcomes of these conflicts, categorizing them into emotional, relational, academic, mental health, and social impacts. Conflicts triggered anxiety, depression, and stress, affecting relationship stability and leading to decreased feelings of love and connection, breakup, or relationship resilience. Additionally, conflicts negatively affected academic performance and concentration, leading to stress-related physical symptoms and social isolation among individuals experiencing relationship conflicts. The coping mechanisms employed by individuals were categorized into maladaptive strategies like abuse or escapism and adaptive strategies such as seeking support and self-care/stress management. Maladaptive strategies involved aggressive behaviors and avoidance, while adaptive mechanisms included seeking external support or engaging in self-care activities as a means to manage conflict-induced stress. This study contributes to the understanding of conflicts in romantic relationships, emphasizing the complexity and diverse impact of these conflicts on individuals involved.*

Key words: romantic conflicts, adaptive, maladaptive.

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships are a common aspect of university life. A romantic relationship is a deep, emotional connection or attachment between two people, typically characterized by feelings of love, affection, and attraction. It is an interpersonal bond that goes beyond friendship and often includes elements of physical and emotional intimacy (Clayton, et al., 2012). The transition to university life is a time of great change and self-discovery for many young adults. This phase often coincides with a heightened interest in exploring romantic relationships, whether they are casual or committed (Stallman, 2010). University provides students with a unique opportunity to meet new people, explore new relationships, and learn more about themselves and what they want in a partner (Futris, et al., 2017). The university setting provides a unique setting where young adults frequently form and nurture romantic partnerships. Thus, romantic relationships play a significant role in the lives of university students, contributing to personal growth, emotional well-being, and social development.

These relationships, however, are not without conflicts. University students are at an age where they are starting to understand their own needs and wants in a relationship (Dennis, 2011). They are also beginning to understand the importance of communication, trust, and mutual respect in a relationship. The stresses and opportunities of university life can impact these relationships, giving rise to a myriad of conflicts. Moreover, the dynamics of university relationships can be further complicated by factors such as academic pressure, financial constraints, and the newfound independence that comes with entering higher education. Conflicts can have profound implications for the individuals involved, affecting their academic performance, mental health, and overall quality of life. It is not only academically intriguing but also of utmost importance for the well-being and success of this demographic (le & Wilkinson, 2018).

Romantic relationship conflicts among university students have been a subject of growing concern among educators, counsellors, and researchers. These conflicts can manifest in various ways, including disagreements over time management, jealousy, communication issues, and conflicts related to personal goals and aspirations (Stallman, 2010). Recently, there have been reports of attempted suicide among university students due to romantic related conflicts (Nalwimba, 2023). More specifically, relationship difficulties are a significant contributor to anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Stallman, 2010). These conflicts cannot only disrupt the emotional equilibrium of individuals but also have the potential to hinder academic progress, jeopardizing the primary reason for attending university.

In light of the significance of this issue, this study focuses on Mukuba University, a prominent institution of higher education with a diverse student body. Mukuba University's student population represents a microcosm of the broader university community, making it an ideal case study to explore the factors behind romantic relationship conflicts in the university setting. Understanding the unique challenges faced by students at Mukuba University can provide

insights that may be applicable to other universities and contribute to the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms.

This study therefore, identified and analyzed the factors contributing to romantic relationship conflicts among Mukuba University students. By delving into the experiences and perspectives of these students, the study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the root causes of conflicts and the potential consequences they may have on academic success and overall well-being. In doing so, it is hoped that the study will shed light on the underlying issues that university administrators, counsellors, and policymakers should consider when designing programs and services to support the relational and emotional needs of their students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of contemporary research seems to indicate that conflict in romantic relationships among college students can vary in nature and arise from various sources. McDonald et al. (2016) reported finances to be a common problem for college students. Financial strain, including tuition and living expenses, can lead to conflicts. Disagreements over money management, spending habits, and financial responsibilities can be a significant source of tension (Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017).

The other conflict is improper communication. This can include misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or a lack of effective communication altogether. College students may struggle to express their feelings and needs (Dennis, 2011), leading to conflicts when expectations are not met.

Time management also leads to conflicts between partners in a romantic relationship. Balancing academics, extracurricular activities, and a social life can be challenging for college students. Differences in how partners manage their time can lead to conflicts when one feels neglected or that the other is not making enough effort (Futris, et al., 2017). For example, it has been shown in several studies that the use of technology may cause conflicts in romantic relationships, negatively affect the communication between couples, and impact the emotional well-being of the members at times when they are sharing quality time together (McDonald et al., 2016).

Jealousy is equally a source of conflict in a romantic relationship. Jealousy can stem from various sources, such as perceived flirting with others, insecurity, or fears of infidelity. Jealousy can lead to conflict if not addressed, as it may erode trust in the relationship (Roberts, et al., 2016). For instance, internet use in general, as well as the excessive use of Facebook, has shown to be a threat against romantic relationships (Clayton, et al., 2013). Some people use FB to monitor their partner's activities. It has been proven that these behaviours are highly counterproductive, since they tend to create conflicts in the relationship, and be a possible precursor for future breakups (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021).

Linked to jealousy is insecurity. Conflicts in a relationship can result from insecurity. When one of the partners in the relationship constantly feels insecure, this can cause arguments, bickering, and conflicts. In extreme cases of insecurity, it can also lead to all kinds of accusations that make any conversation difficult (Le & Wilkinson, 2018). In a research conducted in Canada, participants expressed the feelings of insecurity caused by face book FB. Even participants who had full confidence in their partners became jealous in situations where other people posted messages on their FB wall (Peel, 2022).

Other conflicts are also caused by social influences. Peer pressure and the influence of friends can impact a romantic relationship (Andrews, et al., 2012). Friends' opinions and judgments can lead to conflicts if one partner feels that their relationship is negatively influenced by external factors.

Further, the demands of coursework, exams, and deadlines can be intense. Stress related to academic performance can spill over into the relationship, causing conflicts when one partner feels neglected or overwhelmed (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). Academic stress can eventually affect personal intimacy. This type of conflict revolves around sexual needs/desires. It is often caused when one partner's sexual needs/desires greatly vary from those of the other. The conflict can further escalate if infidelity is involved (Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017).

A relationship can be affected by selfishness and criticism. Individuals in a relationship get often get so obsessed with their desires that they forget how their decisions affect others. This is true for any kind of relationship. In relationships, couples often have conflicts when one partner fails to think of the other person when making decisions (Futris, et al., 2017). Being selfish and unable to respect the needs of the other person can make a healthy relationship impossible. In addition, a relationship where a partner criticizes everything the other does is plain annoying. It can be equally frustrating if a partner blames the other for everything (Schmidt & Lockwood, 2015).

In any relationship, expectations have to be real. When one partner fails to meet expectations, the other tends to feel betrayed and hurt. To navigate the situation effectively, both partners need to keep their demands and expectations reasonable. They must always communicate with their partners to ensure they are on the same page (Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017).

However, conflict in relationships can lead to a significant amount of stress and emotional turmoil between the partners. The ongoing stress can negatively affect the health and well-being of both partners. It can also lead to anxiety, depression, and a drop in sleep quality (Schmidt & Lockwood, 2015). Other effects of relationship conflicts can include being unhappiness and less satisfaction with the relationship, emotional and physical withdrawal from everything, and various types of insecurities (Le & Wilkinson, 2018). In fact, conflict triggers some very strong emotions that can lead to disappointment, feelings of hurt, and discomfort. When handled in an unhealthy manner, they can lead to irreparable rifts and breakups (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021).

University students in romantic relationships resolve their conflicts in various ways, just like individuals in relationships at any stage of life. For instance, effective communication is crucial in resolving conflicts. University students often discuss their concerns, feelings, and perspectives with their partners. They may choose face-to-face conversations, phone calls, or text messages to express their thoughts and emotions (Peel, 2022).

Active listening is also important in resolving conflicts. Both partners should actively listen to each other, showing empathy and understanding. This means giving their full attention, not interrupting, and making an effort to comprehend their partner's point of view (Peel, 2022).

Others resolve their conflicts through time and space. Sometimes, partners take a break and allow their emotions to cool down. Especially, students give each other space to reflect on the issue and return to the conversation later with a calmer mindset (Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017).

On the other hand, other students may seek advice from trusted friends, family members, or even counselling services on campus. These external perspectives can provide valuable insights and guidance (Dennis, 2011). Some just apologise and forgive. Apologizing and forgiving are key aspects of resolving conflicts. Some university students acknowledge their mistakes, express remorse, and their partners forgive them as they work to rebuild trust (Futris, et al., 2017).

The foregoing literature shows that the issue of conflicts in romantic relations in universities is adequately reported. However, every relationship is unique, and what works for one couple may not work for another. Therefore, this paper sought to understand the issue in the context of Mukube University.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the factors behind romantic relationship conflicts among university students at Mukuba University, the study adopted a qualitative approach and contextualized the study to Mukuba University where there have been cases on attempting suicide due to relational conflicts.

The study adopted a case study design in order to explore the factors contributing to romantic relationship conflicts among university students. The target population was university students at Mukuba University who were in romantic relationships or had experienced romantic relationship. A quota sampling was used to select the sample of 15 participants from the three schools; namely, Applied Sciences, Education and mathematical and Natural Sciences.

Data were collected using in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with relationship conflicts. The interviews explored individual stories about the conflicts, coping mechanisms, and suggestions for improving relationship dynamics.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis on the qualitative data from interviews. Identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to the factors behind conflicts.

The researcher upheld some ethical considerations that included obtaining consent from all the participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Table 1: Types of conflicts

Overarching Theme	Theme	Causes
1. Types of Conflicts	1.1 Communication Issues	1.1.1 Ignoring or Suppressing issues
		1.1.2 Silent treatment
		1.1.3 Lack of clarity
	1.2 Insecurity	1.2.1 Infidelity
		1.2.2 Suspicion and Jealousy
		1.2.3 Over interaction with others
1.3 Time and Priorities	1.3.1 Time management	
	1.3.1 Academic Commitment	
1.4 Intimacy and sexual issues	1.4.1 Differences in sexual desires	
	1.4.2 Physical intimacy	
1.5 Financial issues	1.5.1 Financial responsibilities and conflicts over money	
1.6 Cultural and Religious	1.5.2 Religious beliefs	
	1.5.3 cultural Background	

Table 1 shows that, on the overarching theme of the types of conflicts, the study revealed six (6) themes; namely, communication, insecurity, time management and priorities, intimacy and sexual issues, financial issues and cultural and religious beliefs.

On the communication subtheme, the data revolved around ignoring the partner, silent treatment or lacking clarity in communication. This was evident from the following verbatim:

“My boyfriend is very defensive, so to avoid problems, I find it easier to pretend all is well than address the real issues.” (Face to face interviews, 10/10/23).

Regarding the insecurity subtheme, the data revealed that the conflicts focused on infidelity, suspicion and jealousy. A participant reported that, “I have caught her in some lies, and it is hard to trust her now.” (Face-to- face interview, 12/10/23). Another participant added, “I like

to freely interact with anyone without anybody controlling me, but my boyfriend gets incredibly possessive whenever I am around others.” (Face-to-face interviews, October, 12 2023)

The data on the time and priorities subtheme the conflicts centered on the romantic partners’ failure to balance between academic demands and the time to be together. Thus, a participant indicated that, *“I feel like I am forcing myself on her; I am always the one making time for us, and she is always busy.”* (Face-to-face interviews, October, 5 2023)

Regarding intimacy and sexual issues, the study revealed that the conflicts were related to having differences in sexual desires. This was supported by the following statement: *“Because of school pressure, I sometimes struggle to open up emotionally, which he interprets as a lack of intimacy. It causes misunderstandings between us.”* (Face-to-face interviews, September, 21 2023)

The study also revealed on the financial issues subtheme that conflicts arise due to financial challenges regarding financial management and overdependence on the other for financial support. According to some participants, *“Nowadays, girls are only interested in money, not love. They forget that we are all students.”* (Face-to-face interviews, September, 11 2023) This was contradicted by another participant stated that, *Girls of nowadays, “He never buys me anything-not even on my birthday; his money is only for drinking and smoking”* (Face-to-Face Interview, November, 4 2023).

On the religious beliefs and cultural background subtheme, the data revealed that different religious beliefs can cause conflicts among roman couples in universities. For example, one participant narrated that, *“We broke up because he discovered I had a tattoo mark, which was against his beliefs; he asked to remove it, but I found nothing wrong with it.”* (Face-to-face interviews, November, 15 2023)

Table 2: Conflict Outcomes

Mother Theme	Theme	Subtheme
1. Conflict Outcomes	1.1 Emotional Consequences	1.1.1 Stress & anxiety
		1.1.2 Sadness or depression
	1.2 Relationship outcomes	1.2.1 Decreased feeling of love and connection
		1.2.2 Relationship Resilience
		1.2.3 Breakup or separation
	1.3 Academic impact	1.3.1 Academic performance
		1.3.2 Lack of concentration on studies
	1.4 Mental Health	1.4.1 Stress-related physical symptoms
	1.5 Social Impact	1.5.1 Social isolation
		1.5.2 Peer pressure

Table two categorizes various outcomes associated with conflicts experienced in relationships. The data revealed five (5) subthemes; notably, emotional, relational, academic, mental, and social.

On the emotional consequences subtheme, the data stressed anxiety, depression, and creased feelings. Participants revealed that when conflicts arise, they get disturbed. A participant stated that, *“When conflicts arise, I feel this overwhelming stress. It is like a weight on my chest, making it hard to focus on anything else.”* (Face-to-face interview, November, 11 2023)

The relations outcome subtheme revealed that victims of conflicts in a relationship experience decreased feeling of love; break up, while others show resilience. The following statements from the participants reinforce this finding:

“When someone wrongs me, I don’t even want to that person nearby; the love goes away.”(Face-to-face interviews, October, 11 2023)

“We now know each other well because of conflicts.” (Face-to-face interviews, October, 10 2023)

The study also showed that conflicts have academic impacts. On this subtheme, the data was based on lack of concentration and academic performance. The participants reported that, *“The conflicts are affected my focus on studies, and my grades have dropped significantly.”* (Face-to-face interviews, October 11, 2023)

On the mental health subtheme, the results focused on the stress-related outcomes. A participant reported that, *“I normally get headaches and feel physically drained because of the stress from our conflicts.”* (Face-to-face interview, November 10, 2023)

Lastly, conflicts do had social impacts that included social isolation and peer pressure. A participant indicated that, *“I tend to isolate myself when I am going through tough times. It is like I want to withdraw from everyone.”* (Face-to-face interviews, October 6, 2023) Another participant revealed that, *“Sometimes, our friends' opinions affect how we deal with conflicts. It adds pressure to the situation.”*(Face-to-face interview, November 10, 2023)

Table 3 Coping Mechanism

Mother Theme	Theme	Subtheme
1. Coping Mechanisms	1.1 Maladaptive Coping	1.1.1 Unhealthy coping strategies (Abuse)
		1.1.2 Escapism through distractions
	1.2 Adaptive Coping	1.2.1 Seeking Support
		1.2.2 Self Care & Stress Management

Table three (3) categorizes different coping strategies individuals employ to deal with stress and challenges in relationships. The data revealed two (2) subthemes; notably, maladaptive and adaptive coping mechanisms.

On the maladaptive coping subtheme, the data focused on unhealthy coping strategies, and escapism. Unhealthy coping strategies consisted of abuse. A participant indicated that, "*When things get rough, I tend to lash out. It is not healthy, I know, but it is my way of coping with the frustration.*" (Face-to-face interview, November 11, 2023)

The data on the escapism subtheme showed that some individuals coped by escaping from confronting conflicts head-on. A participant indicated that, "*When things get tough, I make myself busy with other activities, like watching movies, just to avoid dealing with our problems.*" (Face-to-face interview, November 11, 2023)

On the adaptive coping subtheme, the data showed three mechanisms; namely, seeking support, and self-care and stress management. On seeking support a participant indicated that they turned to friends or counselors for support: "*I turn to friends or family for advice and support. It helps me gain perspective on our conflicts*" (Face-to-face interview, November 11, 2023), indicated one participant.

On the other hand, the data showed that victims managed their conflict through self care and management. A participant stated that, "*I just focus on doing exercises like jogging as a way to manage the stress that comes with conflicts in our relationship.*" Face-to-face interview, November 11, 2023)

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings regarding types of conflicts, encompassing communication issues, insecurity, time management, intimacy and sexual issues, financial challenges, and cultural or religious disparities, align with established literature in the field of relationship studies. Research often emphasizes the significance of effective communication, trust and security, time allocation, intimacy, financial management, and cultural differences as key sources of conflict in romantic relationships. For instance, Mirsu-Paun & Oliver's (2017) work highlights communication patterns (like stonewalling, criticism, contempt, and defensiveness) that are predictive of relationship instability, resonating with the identified communication issues in your study.

The presence of conflicts related to infidelity, possessiveness, and differing sexual desires corresponds with existing literature emphasizing trust, commitment, and sexual compatibility as critical factors influencing relationship satisfaction (Futris, et al., 2017). Financial conflicts and disparities in cultural or religious beliefs have been well-documented in studies concerning relationship stressors, indicating their importance in understanding relationship dynamics (Peel, 2022).

On the other hand, the outcomes identified in the study included emotional consequences, relational impacts, academic challenges, mental health implications, and social ramifications. These outcomes reflect the multi-dimensional nature of conflict's influence on relationships, reflecting the conclusions drawn in various studies. Research consistently demonstrates that unresolved conflicts can result in emotional distress, affect relationship satisfaction, impact academic or occupational performance, contribute to mental health issues, and influence social behavior and interactions (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021; Schmidt & Lockwood, 2015, etc.). This aligns with existing findings that emphasize how conflicts can lead to emotional and psychological distress, subsequently affecting relationship quality and individual well-being.

On the observed coping mechanisms, the study revealed adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Maladaptive strategies like abuse or escapism through distractions, and adaptive coping, such as seeking support and self-care/stress management, are in line with theories on coping in relationship conflicts. Literature often discusses how individuals resort to both unhealthy and healthy coping strategies when faced with relationship stress (Ie & Wilkinson, 2018; Peel, 2022, etc.). Studies suggest that adaptive coping mechanisms, such as seeking social support or practicing self-care, are associated with better relationship outcomes, while maladaptive strategies like avoidance or aggression are linked with higher relationship dissatisfaction and distress.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study offer a comprehensive understanding of the various conflicts within romantic relationships, aligning closely with established literature in relationship studies. The identified conflict areas encompass communication issues, insecurity, time management, intimacy and sexual matters, financial challenges, and cultural or religious disparities, corroborating the significance of these factors in relationship dynamics. For example, the correspondence between communication patterns highlighted by Mirsu-Paun & Oliver (2017) and the identified communication issues emphasizes the critical role of effective communication in relationship stability.

Similarly, the presence of conflicts related to infidelity, possessiveness, and differing sexual desires resonates with existing literature highlighting the importance of trust, commitment, and sexual compatibility (Futris et al., 2017) in determining relationship satisfaction. The documentation of financial conflicts and cultural or religious disparities, as observed in Peel's work (2022) on relationship stressors, reinforces the crucial role these aspects play in understanding relationship dynamics.

Furthermore, the identified outcomes of conflicts, including emotional consequences, relational impacts, academic challenges, mental health implications, and social ramifications, underline the multi-dimensional nature of conflict's influence on relationships. These outcomes correspond with various studies, such as Peel & Caltabiano (2021) and Schmidt & Lockwood (2015), illustrating the widespread impact of unresolved conflicts on emotional well-being,

relationship satisfaction, academic or occupational performance, mental health, and social interactions.

The study's exploration of coping mechanisms, encompassing both adaptive and maladaptive strategies, aligns with existing theories on coping in relationship conflicts. The identification of adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking social support and practicing self-care, reinforces their association with better relationship outcomes. Simultaneously, the recognition of maladaptive strategies like avoidance or aggression underlines their correlation with higher relationship dissatisfaction and distress.

Implications

These findings hold significant implications for the development of intervention strategies aimed at reducing conflicts and enhancing relationship well-being in universities. By identifying the specific areas of communication, trust, intimacy, financial management, and cultural differences as conflict sources, the study provides targeted areas for relationship support services.

Understanding the impact of unresolved conflicts on emotional, relational, academic, mental, and social aspects emphasizes the need for comprehensive relationship support programs in universities. These programs can target conflict resolution strategies, stress management, and communication skills to address the multifaceted outcomes arising from conflicts.

Recommendations

The University needs to have a fulltime counselor who would be able to implement the following:

1. Organize talks that focus on communication in a relationship. For example, they can develop workshops or programs focusing on effective communication, conflict resolution, and active listening to address identified communication issues among students.
2. Offer guidance to students on how to manage their time. The university should offer resources or counseling to help couples balance academic or professional commitments with relationship needs to minimize time-related conflicts.
3. Establish open forums for discussions on sexual desires and emotional intimacy within relationships. Relationship counseling can help couples bridge gaps created by differing levels of sexual desires or emotional accessibility.
4. Conduct financial literacy workshops and cultural sensitivity programs to address financial and cultural disparities.
5. Promote adaptive coping strategies through counseling or support groups, emphasizing seeking support and self-care activities while discouraging maladaptive behaviors.

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