

Research Paper

## The Role of Forgiveness in Conflict Resolution and Relationship Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships

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### ABSTRACT

Forgiveness is one of the factors of coping with conflict and forming long-term romantic satisfaction, especially for college students. This qualitative study examines subtle effects of the conditional and unconditional forgiveness (of partners and others) as an input to the conflict style and relationship satisfaction. It also describes the mechanism of the mediating role exercised by these variables, personality traits and affective attachment repertory. Using thematic analysis, the current study dissects the lived experiences of participants to specify the dynamics of forgiveness, highlighting forgiveness' evidence as fostering the process of emotional restoration and as maintaining relational bonds. Controlling for gender, level of education, cultural ethnicity, environmental, socio-economic conditions, the current study makes an attempt at offering an ethologically and multidimensionally meaningful view of forgiveness in romantic relations, and taking into consideration that prior relational experiences may act as extraneous variables.

**Keywords:** *Forgiveness, Conflict Resolution, Relationship Satisfaction, Romantic Relationships*

The very basis of human relationship, be it romantic or otherwise, influences the psychological well-being and social identity. Conflict resolution, or how to resolve disputes, often requires forgiveness as an important relational tool for its continuity. Forgiveness can be defined as a voluntary process of overcoming emotions of resentment or revenge against someone who has caused harm. This could be conditional or unconditional forgiveness. Conditional forgiveness comes with terms or expectations, whereas unconditional forgiveness means giving pardon without any terms and symbolizes great relational commitment.

Among college students, romantic relationships often serve as a formative experience, fostering emotional growth and resilience. However, this developmental stage is full of challenges, including conflicts arising from diverse personality traits and emotional attachment styles. Authentic forgiveness can be a transformational force, reducing the level of emotional distress and increasing relationship satisfaction.

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This study, adopting the qualitative approach, will determine how forgiveness relates to different styles of conflict resolution and levels of relationship satisfaction in long-term romantic relationships. Explored by individual and relational narratives, this study will help bring forth the interplay between forgiveness and personality types and emotional attachment styles by focusing on experiences that the college students share.

### ***Significance of the Study***

Closely related to the themes of conflict resolution and satisfaction, forgiveness as a concept is frequently mentioned in relation to close romantic relationships, still, its qualitative facet was not examined comprehensively enough. This study fills this gap by exclusively targeting college students, a population that struggles to maintain healthy and committed relationships.

Sexual conditional forgiveness and non-sexual unconditional forgiveness as distinguished in the research affords a richness of understanding of how forgiveness takes place and how it might aid in resolving conflicts and maintaining relationship harmony. In addition, the research focuses on the role which personality features and styles of emotional attachment play in the process of forgiveness, and thus reveals the major factors that define the relational patterns.

Lastly, this study also posits the role of forgiveness apart from exploring the multifaceted aspects of the qualitative nature of relationship through qualitative triangulation contributing to the academic and practical conceptualizations of relational health well-being.

### ***Rationale of study***

Romantic relationships during college years are pivotal for emotional growth and learning about interpersonal dynamics. However, they often come with challenges like personality clashes, communication breakdowns, and differing expectations. Forgiveness has been shown to help resolve conflicts and restore emotional harmony (McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington, 2006), but most research focuses on long-term or married couples. There is a lack of understanding about how forgiveness operates specifically in college student's romantic relationships.

For students, romantic relationships occur during a time of significant life transitions, such as gaining independence, managing academic pressures, and shaping their future. These changes can lead to emotional volatility, making forgiveness a critical tool for relationship maintenance. Little qualitative research has explored how college students use forgiveness in their relationships, especially when influenced by stress, evolving identities, and social pressures.

This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how college students understand and practice forgiveness, and how it impacts conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, the study will provide insights into how forgiveness functions in these relationships, offering practical implications for counseling and support programs for young adults.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

A study by Allemand et al. (2007) examined how trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction are associated with episodic forgiveness. They assessed 180 participants by their

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answers to questions of forgiving the most serious transgression in their current romantic relationship and it was found that both trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction were related to forgiveness of that transgression. Also, trait and episodic forgiveness were positively related at relatively higher levels of relationship satisfaction.

The study of forgiveness communication explores the interaction between personal, relational, and contextual factors in decisions regarding the forgiveness strategies used. Edwards (2018), through the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model, elaborates on how attachment dimensions and relational equity inform the forgiveness techniques used, which exert a significant influence on relational satisfaction. It is necessary to use mixed-method approaches employing quantitative tools like attachment and equity scales and qualitative analyses of narratives to comprehensively examine the way forgiveness communication operates towards conflict resolution and relational repair in romantic relationships.

A study conducted with the Islamic Psychology Department, UIN Raden Intan Lampung researched the dynamics of forgiveness in late adolescents romantic partners with a particular regard-to-the-correlation of interpersonal trust and agreeableness with forgiveness. Through a quantitative approach using his study examined conflict resolution, attachment styles, and interpersonal forgiveness to understand their impact on romantic relationship satisfaction. Research found no link between conflict resolution and breakups, highlighting the need for more studies on young relationships. Adult attachment styles, particularly Avoidance and Anxiety, predicted conflict resolution behaviors and satisfaction, while forgiveness was influenced by trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. Attachment security fostered higher confidence and satisfaction, while ambivalence heightened sensitivity but reduced problem-solving abilities. Trust and agreeableness in late adolescents positively correlated with forgiveness, with agreeableness as the stronger predictor. These findings emphasize the importance of individual and relational dynamics in fostering stable romantic relationships.

This study examined conflict resolution, attachment styles, and interpersonal forgiveness to understand their impact on romantic relationship satisfaction. Research on adolescent couples found no link between conflict resolution and breakups, highlighting the need for more studies on young relationships. Adult attachment styles, particularly Avoidance and Anxiety, predicted conflict resolution behaviors and satisfaction, while forgiveness was influenced by trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. Attachment security fostered higher confidence and satisfaction, while ambivalence heightened sensitivity but reduced problem-solving abilities. Trust and agreeableness in late adolescents positively correlated with forgiveness, with agreeableness as the stronger predictor. Cooperative conflict styles like integrating and compromising enhanced satisfaction, while aggressive styles like dominating reduced it. These findings underscore how the intricate dance between personal traits and relational dynamics lays the groundwork for lasting and harmonious romantic relationships.

The study by Braithwaite et al. (2011) looks at how forgiveness affects relationship satisfaction. It suggests that forgiveness improves satisfaction by encouraging more effort in the relationship and reducing negative behaviors. Through two studies using structural equation modeling, the research shows that forgiveness leads to greater relationship effort and fewer negative actions, both of which contribute to higher satisfaction. The change from  $\beta = .00$  (Study 1) to  $\beta = -.14$  (Study 2) shows the influence of mediating factors and

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longitudinal effects. The study's theory is called transformation of motivation, it views forgiveness as a shift in mindset promoting self-regulation and reduces conflict. This highlights the importance of forgiveness for better relationship dynamics.

### ***Research Gap***

The existing literature examines the role of forgiveness styles, conflict resolution styles, and relationship satisfaction in different contexts of romantic relationships of young adults, cultural influences, and attachment styles. The studies, like Forgiveness and Relationship Satisfaction: Mediating Mechanisms and The Role of Trait Forgiveness and Relationship Satisfaction in Episodic Forgiveness, argue that forgiveness is an important mediator in the maintenance of relational. However, most of these studies rely on quantitative frameworks to study qualitative nuances of experiences of forgiveness in romantic relationships.

No specific work has emphasised particularly upon the complex relationships among conditional and unconditional forgiveness, conflict resolution, and relationship satisfaction. In this connection, while such works as The Effect of Conflict Management Strategy on College Students' Romantic Relationship Satisfaction explore background variables, among other issues, they have not focused on the aspects leading to those roles. These works focused less on groups in somewhat transitional, more emotional stages in life, such as college life, instead focused on general populations.

In addition, cultural, socio-economic, and environmental contexts are treated as secondary variables of causation and are rarely examined deeply as critical to the understanding of the forgiveness-conflict resolution processes. Therefore, a gap exists in the understanding of forgiveness experiences in romantic relationships of college students, especially via qualitative methodologies, capturing the complex, multidimensional aspects of this phenomenon.

### ***Philosophical Roots***

This study is grounded in constructivism and interpretivism, which focus on understanding how people experience and make sense of the world in their own ways.

Constructivism suggests that people actively create their own understanding through their experiences. In the context of romantic relationships, this means that college students may have unique ideas about forgiveness based on their personal histories and what they've learned from past relationships. Forgiveness isn't one-size-fits-all: it's shaped by the individual.

Interpretivism emphasizes understanding the deeper meanings behind people's actions. It's not just about what happens in a relationship, but why it happens and what it means to those involved. In this study, we'll explore how students interpret forgiveness, how they feel about it, why they forgive, and what impact it has on their relationships. By using interviews and focus groups, we aim to understand the personal and emotional experiences of students. These philosophical roots allow us to explore the many different ways forgiveness plays a role in resolving conflicts and improving relationship satisfaction in their lives.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Question***

“How does Forgiveness play a role in Conflict Resolution and Relationship Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships?”

### ***Aim***

The aim is to understand how forgiveness plays a role in conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships.

### ***Research objective***

The main goal of this study is to explore how forgiveness plays a role in resolving conflicts and improving relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships, particularly among college students. It aims to understand how both conditional and unconditional forgiveness affect relationship dynamics, and how these processes work with different conflict resolution styles. The research also looks at how personality traits and emotional attachment styles influence these dynamics. By focusing on individual experiences, the study provides a deeper understanding of how forgiveness helps heal emotional wounds, reduce conflicts, and enhance overall relationship satisfaction. Ultimate goal is to offer insights that can support healthier, more fulfilling relationships and contribute to counseling and psychological practices.

### ***Research Design***

The study considers a qualitative approach with different measures like interviews and observation to gain insights into the role of forgiveness in resolving conflicts and enhancing relationship satisfaction in romantic partnerships. The analysis has been done with the help of a thematic analysis model.

### ***Participants***

***Age Group:*** 18–24 years

***Sampling Method:*** Purposive sampling targeting those who are already in relationships for more than six months. The study tried to accommodate diversities of participants across different cultural backgrounds, educational qualifications, and socio-economic status.

***Sample Size:*** 10 couples

### ***Data Collection***

#### ***a. Semi-Structured Interviews:***

Participants were asked for more in-depth responses into forgiveness, conflict resolution, and relationship satisfaction. These interviews helped us understand their experiences. Thus, the questions focused on the following;

- Identifying narratives around important conflicts and their resolution.
- Understanding how forgiveness has an impact on emotional restoration and relational bonds.
- Analyzing how personality traits, attachment styles, and contextual factors influence forgiveness.

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### ***b. Observations:***

The researchers made thoughtful observations of the body language, tone of voice, and affect of the participants during the interviews in order to get a richer understanding of what they went through. Non-verbal behaviors, such as pausing, facial reactions, or shifting in body posture, also offered richer interpretations to verbal accounts, emphasizing peaks of emotional discomfort, confidence, or reflection. Observations aided in pinpointing discrepancies between narrative accounts and unexpressed feelings, and it provided depth to thematic analysis. These observations were recorded in reflexive journals and utilized to enrich the interpretation of participant narratives.

### ***Procedure***

The initial step in the study was selecting the participants for the study. Using purposive sampling, 20 participants were gathered who fit in the inclusion criteria. This was followed by a semi structured interview where the participants will share their experiences and stories. All the data collected was analysed at the end using a thematic analysis model.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The ethical guidelines considered during this qualitative study, that are necessary to ensure safety and well-being of participants are mentioned below:

*Informed consent* - The participants were given a complete understanding of the aims and objectives of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks of participation. Verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of the study and participation was voluntary. They were also informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point of time, without any repercussions.

*Confidentiality* - Participants were assured that their identity will not be disclosed and all data was kept anonymous by using initials or codes to protect their privacy. The data was also stored, accessed and managed in a secure manner, ensuring that access remains only with the research team and guide.

*Avoiding stigma and stereotyping* - As the subject matter involves personal information with regard to relationships, the participants were guaranteed that there will be no judgement or preconceived notions from the research team. The presentation of finding also avoids reinforcing stereotypes based on their interpersonal relationships.

*Avoiding harm* - Through the process of the study, it was ensured that the participants' emotional and psychological well-being was not hindered. Sensitive issues regarding conflicts in their relations were handled with care and empathy and effort was made to not coerce the participant into anything that they do not wish to share.

*Debriefing* - After the data collection process is completed, the research team explains to the participants how the data they provided will be utilised further in the study. Any follow up questions were open to being answered and clarifications regarding the research were also cleared here. The participants were allowed to review their transcripts if required. The team worked to ensure that the participants leave the study with the same state of mind that they arrived at the study in, and there are no feelings of discomfort or doubts.

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### ***Completed Analysis***

The study's analysis used a thorough thematic analysis method. To start, researchers read the interview transcripts multiple times to get familiar with the data. This close look focused on what the transcripts said, how participants spoke, and early thoughts noted during data gathering. They also included observations from the interviews to capture non-verbal signs that gave more context.

After getting to know the data, the team coded it to find important bits of information. They gave each bit a label to break the big dataset into meaningful chunks. Then, they grouped these codes to spot emerging themes. They made sure these themes were both text-specific and broad enough to allow for big-picture thinking.

We took a close look at the themes that came up trying to spot patterns and ideas that were alike. We grouped similar themes together, which let us get rid of any that were saying the same thing and combine ones that overlapped.

We then put together a well-organized table of themes. This showed the main themes and sub-themes, along with quotes or bits from the interviews to back them up. This gave us a clear way to show what we found connecting what people said to how we understood it. The final set of themes gave us a full picture of how forgiveness affects how people solve conflicts and how happy they are in their relationships.

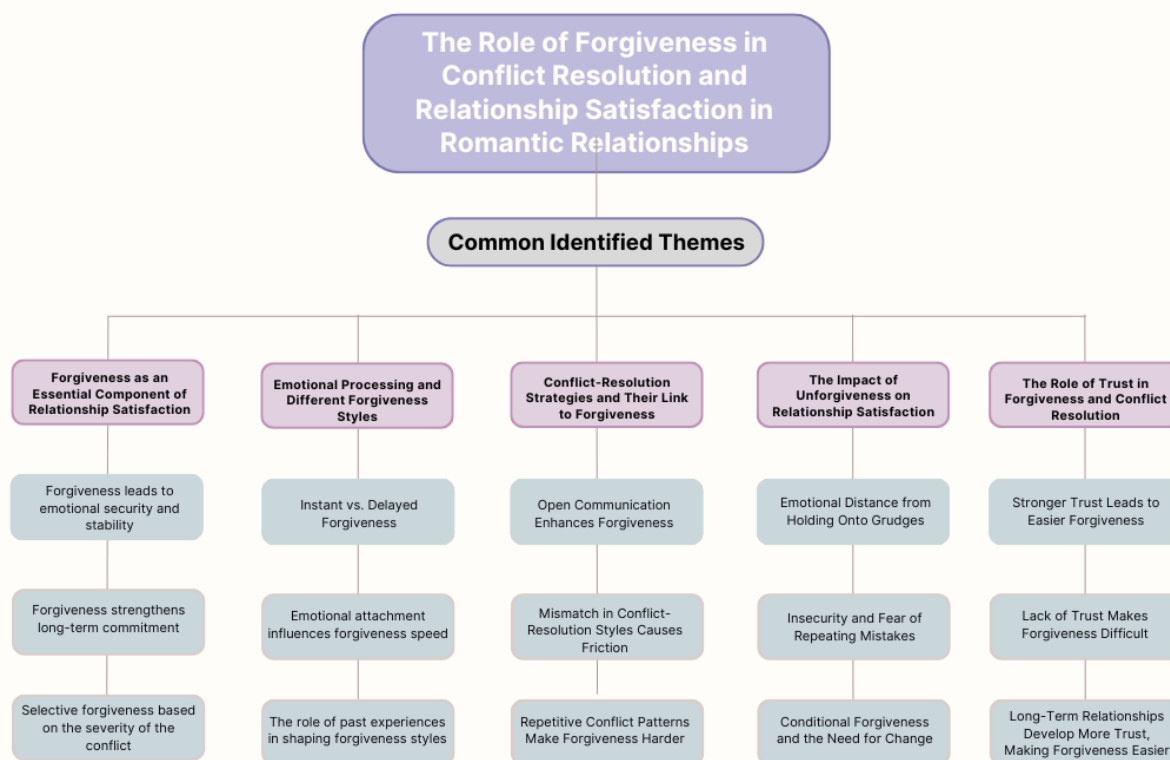
### ***Result through Thematic Analysis***

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Key Insights</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
Forgiveness as an Essential Component of Relationship Satisfaction (Frequently Seen – Most Couples)	Forgiveness leads to emotional security and stability	Couples who forgive easily feel more secure and satisfied in their relationship. Emotional security allows partners to focus on growth rather than past mistakes.	<i>"Knowing that we can move past mistakes without holding grudges makes me feel safe in this relationship."</i>
	Forgiveness strengthens long-term commitment.	Holding onto resentment damages connection, while forgiveness reinforces emotional closeness.	<i>"We have had misunderstandings, but I never feel like it's the end. We always come back to each other."</i>
	Selective forgiveness based on conflict severity	Minor conflicts are forgiven quickly, while serious issues take time and effort to forgive.	<i>"If it's something small, I can let it go. But if my trust is broken, it takes me longer to forgive."</i>
Emotional Processing and Different Forgiveness Styles (Varies Across Couples – Some Forgive Instantly, Others Take Time)	Instant vs. Delayed Forgiveness	Some forgive quickly to maintain peace, while others need time to process emotions before forgiving.	<i>"I don't like dragging conflicts, so I forgive quickly. But my partner takes longer to process before forgiving."</i>
	Emotional attachment influences forgiveness speed	Emotionally attached partners forgive faster due to fear of losing the relationship, while	<i>"I used to be scared of conflicts because I didn't want to lose him, so I would forgive instantly."</i>

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Themes	Sub-Themes	Key Insights	Example Quote
		independent individuals take longer.	<i>Now I take time to process my emotions."</i>
	Past experiences shape forgiveness styles	Individuals who have faced past betrayals struggle more with forgiveness.	<i>"I take time to forgive because I've been hurt before. I don't want to blindly trust again."</i>
Conflict-Resolution Strategies and Their Link to Forgiveness (Frequently Seen – All Couples, But Styles Differ)	Open Communication Enhances Forgiveness	Honest discussions help resolve conflicts efficiently and reduce resentment.	<i>"We always make sure to talk about what went wrong instead of ignoring it."</i>
	Mismatch in Conflict-Resolution Styles Causes Friction	One partner may prefer immediate resolution, while the other needs space, leading to misunderstandings.	<i>"I want to fix things instantly, but my partner needs space. It used to frustrate me, but now I've learned to give them time."</i>
	Repetitive Conflict Patterns Make Forgiveness Harder	Continuous conflicts reduce willingness to forgive.	<i>"I forgave him for not prioritizing our time together, but when it happened again, I couldn't forgive so easily."</i>
The Impact of Unforgiveness on Relationship Satisfaction (Less Frequently Seen – A Few Couples Struggle with This)	Emotional Distance from Holding Onto Grudges	Unforgiveness creates emotional disconnection and barriers to trust.	<i>"I say I've forgiven him, but I still remember what happened. It's hard to feel the same way after that."</i>
	Insecurity and Fear of Repeating Mistakes	Fear of repeated mistakes lowers relationship satisfaction.	<i>"If I forgive too easily, he might think it's okay to do it again."</i>
	Conditional Forgiveness and the Need for Change	Some forgive only when their partner shows active effort to improve.	<i>"I forgave her, but I needed to see her actually work on what caused the issue."</i>
The Role of Trust in Forgiveness and Conflict Resolution (Frequently Seen – Most Couples)	Stronger Trust Leads to Easier Forgiveness	High trust allows partners to forgive easily and recover from conflicts quickly.	<i>"I never doubt his intentions, so even when we fight, I can forgive him quickly."</i>
	Lack of Trust Makes Forgiveness Difficult	Weak trust leads to fear of future betrayal and emotional barriers.	<i>"It's hard to forgive when you feel like it might happen again."</i>
	Long-Term Relationships Develop More Trust, Making Forgiveness Easier	Over time, couples build resilience in conflict resolution and forgiveness.	<i>"After three years together, we know each other so well that forgiveness comes naturally."</i>

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## Key Observations

- Some participants displayed *nervous laughter or hesitation* upon referring to past conflicts, indicating residual emotional responses.
- Partners who labeled themselves as being quick to forgive tended to speak in a *confident and calm manner*, while those who had difficulty with forgiveness hesitated and reflected.
- Most participants *changed body position or evaded eye contact* when discussing unresolved conflicts, suggesting discomfort or emotional blocks to complete reconciliation.
- They *smiled or spoke in endearing terms* when explaining how they navigated past disputes, demarking the connection between trust and forgiveness.
- A few participants displayed *defensive body postures* (crossed arms, fidgeting, or a strained posture) when asked about conditional forgiveness, indicating potential underlying tensions.
- A few participants *hesitated* when answering repeated-conflict questions, suggesting more profound reflection or continued struggle with forgiveness.
- These findings were recorded in reflexive diaries and utilized to complement the interpretation of participant accounts.

## DISCUSSION

The study's findings demonstrate that forgiveness has a significant influence on satisfaction levels in relationships and conflict resolution. Openly forgiving couples are more emotionally secure and stable than reluctant ones, but their differences in real and perceived styles of forgiving, bringing up, and dealing with conflict can cause relational challenges.

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Some may want to forgive much faster than needed for the sake of peace while others have to process their feelings before they can forgive. Those who are attached emotionally influence the way they forgive; those strongly attached forgive easily out of fear of losing a partner, whereas those with past betrayals are less likely to extend this trust again.

Trust is an important takeaway in the process of forgiveness. Conflicts are resolved more effectively by couples who have strong trust, while couples who have trust issues face emotional barriers. All these leads to grudging conflict without behavioral changes that can profess forgiveness which makes it difficult for one to forgive. This results in increased emotional distance over time, as probably one partner perceives lack of genuine efforts towards change as, thus, making forgiveness conditional to it.

The personality traits of a partner as well as the style of emotional attachment affect how each handles the issue of forgiveness in the relationship. Typically, people with anxious attachment styles experience difficulty in forgiveness as a result of their apprehension of abandonment. Such individuals generally need assurances, and until they receive such, they cannot let go of the disagreement. The opposite is true for individuals with a secure attachment style, who are more easily able to move past conflicts due to their faith in the relationship's continuity. Furthermore, the cultural backgrounds and societal factors influence how forgiveness is perceived; some people would have learned much about forgiveness from their upbringing, traditional values, and societal norms spelling out expectations from relationships.

In addition, forgiveness seems to be based on the emotion regulator mechanism as it helps a partner deal with stress in the relationship and counter negative feelings. This much healthier emotional climate in a relationship due to forgiveness brings quality for long-term endurance and resistance to outside interventions. As couples regularly exercise forgiveness, they usually feel better about the relationship and more stable emotionally.

The study also corroborates previous studies, which have shown that forgiveness could reduce emotional suffering and increase relationship satisfaction. However, contrary to studies conducted on long-term relationships, this particular study has focused on the challenges unique to college students, who find themselves trying to juggle personal growth along with independence and romantic ideals at once. Balancing self-development along with the romantic commitments defies altogether matters of forgiveness for younger relationships, wherein emotional maturity and experience differ widely among individuals.

In general, the study indicates the complicated and confusing nature of forgiveness among romantic partners. While it may serve as a potent weapon in maintaining peace and harmony in relationships, this research identifies the complexity of forgiveness in dating relationships. Although it may cement relationships and lead to fulfillment, its efficacy relies on variables such as trust, communication, emotional processing, attachment style, and history. Future work might investigate how to assist couples with persistent conflict and unresolved issues to more effectively navigate forgiveness.

### **Limitations**

- **Sample Size and Scope:** The qualitative interviews featured only 10 participants. This could be enough sample size for an in-depth thematic analysis, but data might fail to represent the broader target population.

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- **Self-report Social Desirability Bias:** Data depended heavily on self-reported experiences that have resulted to give answers that may be socially acceptable to their responses but not necessarily true among other experiences by respondents, especially when talking about more sensitive areas such as forgiveness.
- **Cultural and Socio-Economic Representation:** Although the aim of the study was to take in samples from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, it mostly studied diversity in college students alone.
- **Time Frame:** The inclusion criteria for participants that have been in a relationship for more than six months might lead to some exclusion of perceptions of those who have been in the relationship for a shorter period or much longer, thereby limiting the findings.
- **Researcher Subjectivity:** The reflexive exercise and peer review will not remove entirely the chances of subjectivity bias since thematic analysis is itself interpretive in nature, and qualitative research is also co-opted from it.
- **Uncaptured Variables:** Forgiveness, conflict resolution, and relationship satisfaction are variables that a study seeks to achieve; however, other important variables like mental health, stressors from outside, and the history of the relationship, which might also have an impact on the outcome, are beyond the immediate scope of this study.

### CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes how forgiveness affects relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution, especially among college students. While forgiveness can stabilize relationships, factors like trust, communication, and emotional processing styles may influence its effectiveness. These insights are valuable for counseling, relationship education, and self-awareness programs aimed at young couples.

Exploring the role of culture in forgiveness and conflict resolution, particularly in relation to different attachment styles in romantic relationships, would be a worthwhile endeavor. Longitudinal studies could monitor forgiveness over time and assess its impact in situations where forgiveness is consistently practiced versus those where it does not lead to lasting satisfaction. Research in these areas can deepen our understanding of how forgiveness contributes to ongoing relationship health and emotional well-being, enabling couples to effectively resolve conflicts and build strong, meaningful connections.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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