

Research Paper

## To Examine the Difference in Relationship Satisfaction and Conflict Resolution Strategies among Married and Unmarried during Covid-19

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### ABSTRACT

How people perceive their level of satisfaction and handle conflicts shapes interpersonal relationships, making these processes important areas for psychological study. This study investigated the difference in relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution strategies among married and unmarried. The total sample comprise of 100 participants (married=34; unmarried=66) and under the age of 30 years. The data was collected by using standardized scales i.e. 'Relationship Assessment Scale' and 'Conflict Resolution questionnaire' to measure the constructs. Results showed that married individuals reported significantly higher relationship satisfaction and greater use of compromising and avoiding conflict styles, while non-married individuals favoured collaborative conflict resolution. No significant differences emerged in competing or accommodating styles. The small, cross-sectional sample and dependence on self-report measures constitute some of the limitations, underscoring the necessity for future studies to employ longitudinal designs and more thorough evaluations in order to enhance comprehension of these relational processes.

**Keywords:** Relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution strategies, marital status, analysis of variance

**Relationships:** Whether they are formally recognised by marriage or develop outside of it, relationships play a crucial role in people's emotional, psychological, and social development. Marriage has historically been the most socially acceptable form of personal relationship because of its formal integrity, more clearly defined role expectations, and juridical safeguards. According to Brown (2004) and Waite & Gallagher (2000), these include sharing financial responsibilities, inheritance rights, healthcare decision-making, and widespread societal affirmation, which increase the perceived stability of marriages. Due to the formalised commitment, mutual support, and long-term orientation embedded in marriage, research continues to demonstrate that married individuals frequently report higher levels of psychological well-being and improved physical health outcomes (Umberson et al., 2022).

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On the other hand, cohabiting relationships and other unmarried romantic relationships typically exhibit greater diversity in terms of long-term commitment, expectations, and structure. As a 'testing phase' before marriage or as a different route to long-term relationship, cohabitation among young adults has become more common (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2013; Manning & Cohen, 2012). Increased relational uncertainty, higher breakdown rates, or ambiguous expectations regarding responsibilities and future plans could result from a lack of formal commitment. Even though many cohabiting couples claim to have close connection to one another (Rhoades et al., 2021). Cohabiting couples experience greater conflict or instability than married couples, particularly when decisions about their relationship come from falling into cohabitation rather than deliberate choosing (Stanley et al., 2010). Cultural and demographic shifts have also had a significant impact on how cohabitation and nonmarital partnerships are seen. In many urban, educated, and progressive places, cohabitation is increasingly socially accepted and seen as a sign of long-term commitment (Brown et al., 2022; Rosenfeld, 2014).

***Conflict resolution strategies in relationships:*** The methods people employ to settle disputes in their relationships are referred to as conflict resolution. Such strategies have a big impact on the duration, emotional health, and quality of relationships. According to Thomas and Kilmann (1974), there are five main ways to resolve conflicts: avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and cooperating. While accommodating puts the wants of the other party ahead of one's own, avoiding shows a retreat from conflict. While compromising calls for both parties to make concessions, competing entails aggressively pursuing one's objectives. The most integrative strategy is collaboration, which emphasises working together to find a solution that meets the needs of both sides. When combined, these approaches provide an explanation for how people handle interpersonal conflicts in intimate partnerships (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). When taken as a whole, these approaches show the various ways people handle conflict and the possible effects each may have on how well relationships work. Increased resilience and relationship satisfaction are significantly correlated with constructive approaches, such as cooperation and compromise (Lawrence, 2020; Montoya, 2022). According to Lopez and Guarnaccia (2021), destructive strategies like competitive reactions or persistent avoidance are likely to create relational pressure and discontent. Married couples may rely more on avoidance and compromise to preserve stability, whereas unmarried venturing into unfamiliar relationship territory may favour cooperative strategies to handle rising expectations (Thompson & Walker, 2019).

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

***Conflict resolution styles and marital satisfaction:*** Conflict resolution has been shown to be an essential aspect in determining marital satisfaction. According to recent research, the quality of a relationship and its long-term stability are greatly influenced by how they handle conflict. Higher levels of intimacy, trust, and marital satisfaction are closely linked to constructive conflict resolution techniques such cooperative problem-solving, emotional control, and open communication (Cankurtaran et al., 2023; Park & Kim, 2023).

However, undesirable behaviours including criticism, withdrawal, resistance, and prolonged avoidance have been shown to negatively impact marriage quality and result in long-term relational distress (Nguyen et al., 2023). Similar findings from earlier research by Li and Zhang (2021) showed that avoiding conflict can provide temporary relief, but it usually leads to unsolved issues that gradually deteriorate marital wellbeing. According to Santos and Vega's (2021) study, couples who alter their conflict resolution techniques in response

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to changing circumstances report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and resilience. In support of this, Unal and Akgun (2022) used the '*Actor-Partner Interdependence Model*' to show how constructive problem-solving behaviours improve marital adjustment and have a favourable impact on marital satisfaction in both the partners. According to Wang and Zhou (2023), responding mindfully during arguments lowers emotional reactivity and promotes harmony in relationships. Additionally, Torres and Delgado (2023) suggests that perspective-taking and empathy encourage cooperative resolution to depute, which raises marital satisfaction. A longitudinal study by Hassan and Qureshi's (2024) found that, even in high-stress situations, supportive communication and compromise are predictive of increased marital stability over time. Similarly, Romero and Castillo (2024) noted that A cooperative approach to solving conflicts functions as a buffer against the negative effects of external stressors Overall, research consistently shows that maintaining happy and healthy marriages requires the use of constructive, adaptable, and emotionally sensitive dispute resolution techniques. All of these research support the idea that effective conflict resolution is crucial in determining both short-term relationship experiences and long-term marriage outcomes.

***Married vs. unmarried adults: Relationship satisfaction and conflict:*** Research comparing married and unmarried people consistently demonstrates significant differences in relationship satisfaction and conflict dynamics. Due to the emotional, social, and legal security that marriage offers, prior research has shown that married people frequently report increased relationship satisfaction (Amato, 2014). According to Gottman and Notarius (2000), marriage usually provides more regulated routines, deeper commitment, and clear role expectations, which facilitate constructive conflict management. On the other hand, unmarried adults who are dating or living together could have more relational uncertainty, outside pressures, and ambiguity in commitment, which can increase conflict and lower relationship satisfaction (Stanley et al., 2006). According to Sweeney (2010), long-term cohabiting relationships can achieve satisfaction levels comparable to those of married couples, especially when partners exhibit significant commitment and stability. Recent research supports these differences and highlights the complexity of modern interpersonal relationships.

Lehmiller (2021) suggests that due to more mutual involvement and shared long-term objectives, married individuals continue to exhibit higher relational stability and reduced conflict intensity. Further, Zhang and Li (2022) in a cross-cultural study discovered that married couples, because of their longer-lasting relationships and collaborative decision-making, typically display more successful conflict resolution patterns than dating partners. In a similar vein, Hawkins and Fackrell (2023) found that married individuals have higher levels of relational predictability and emotional support which are directly linked to less conflicts in relationships.

Furthermore, Rhoades and Stanley (2022) shown that committed cohabiting couples claim relationship satisfaction comparable to the satisfaction of married couples when they share financial responsibilities and see their relationship as long-term. Similarly, Kim and Lee (2023) discovered that conflict levels of cohabiting adults differ greatly depending on the length of the relationship, common objectives, and communication styles. According to longitudinal research by Thompson and Ellis (2024), unmarried couples who communicate openly and make decisions together exhibit relational results that are comparable to those of married people, especially in terms of emotional intimacy and conflict resolution.

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According to the literature, committed unmarried relationships, particularly long-term cohabiting partnerships, can develop similar levels of stability and satisfaction when mutual commitment, communication, and shared expectations are strong, even though marriage still offers a framework that supports higher relationship satisfaction and more effective conflict resolution.

**Gap in the literature:** The majority of research on marital satisfaction and conflict resolution that is currently available comes from western populations and mostly uses cross-sectional designs, which restricts its application to the quickly evolving relationship patterns in the Indian context. Few research take into account the perspectives of both spouses or examine how flexible or adaptive conflict-handling techniques support long-term marital stability. Furthermore, behavioural conflict techniques, emotional and psychological aspects are frequently examined separately, leaving a gap in our knowledge of how these components work together to influence marital and relational outcomes.

**Significance of the Study:** Understanding how early love desires affect later interpersonal processes like communication, emotional balance, and conflict resolution is crucial as modern relationships become more complex. This study clarifies how commitment, relational maturity, and social expectations may affect these dynamics by comparing people according to their marital status. The knowledge acquired can help educators, therapists, and counsellors create relationship-focused programs and interventions that foster stronger, longer-lasting relationships.

### **Objectives:**

1. To examine the differences in relationship satisfaction between married and unmarried adults.
2. To compare the conflict resolution strategies (avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating) used by married and unmarried adults.
3. To identify which conflict resolution styles are more strongly associated with higher relationship satisfaction across both groups.

### **Hypotheses:**

1. There will be a significant difference in relationship satisfaction between married and unmarried adults
2. There will be a significant difference in conflict resolution strategies between married and unmarried adults.
3. Married adults will show greater use of compromising and avoiding conflict resolution styles compared to unmarried adults.
4. Unmarried adults will show greater use of collaborating as a conflict resolution style compared to married adults.
5. There will be no significant difference no significant difference between married and unmarried adults in competing and accommodating conflict styles.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample:**

The sample included 100 participants divided into two groups by marital status: 34 married and 66 unmarried individuals, all under 30 years of age.

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**Inclusion criteria:** Married participants needed to have been married for at least one year, while unmarried participants were required to be in a relationship for at least one year to ensure relationship stability. All participants had to be financially independent to minimize external stress factors. They also belonged to a higher socioeconomic status to maintain sample consistency. Lastly, a minimum education level of matriculation (10<sup>th</sup> grade) was required to ensure participants could understand and respond to the study materials properly.

**Exclusion criteria:** Participants who were undergoing treatment for psychological disorders or chronic physical illnesses were excluded to avoid potential influences on conflict resolution behaviours. Additionally, individuals who were divorced or from separated families were not included in the study to focus on intact or ongoing relationships.

**Ethical considerations:** Informed consent of the participants was obtained and proper confidentiality of their information shall be maintained.

### *Measuring scales:*

- 1. Relationship assessment scale (RAS):** The scale was developed by Hendrick, S. S. in 1988 and consists of 7 items designed to assess overall relationship satisfaction. Respondents rate each item on a 5-point scale, with scores ranging from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) has demonstrated high reliability in various studies. Its Cronbach's alpha, falls between 0.85 and 0.94, indicating that the items consistently measure the construct of relationship satisfaction.
- 2. Conflict resolution questionnaire:** The questionnaire was developed by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann in 1974 as a self-report questionnaire aimed at evaluating how individuals typically manage interpersonal conflicts, particularly within romantic relationships. It categorizes conflict management into five distinct styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating, each reflecting different approaches to handling disagreements or tension. The instrument comprises 30 items, where participants choose between two statements (A or B) that best describe their typical behaviour, even if neither option perfectly fits. The subscales demonstrate acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.60 to 0.75, which is adequate for psychological measures assessing diverse conflict styles.

**Statistical analysis:** Considering the study's objectives, descriptive statistics and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were utilized to analyse the data.

## **RESULTS**

The table-1 shows the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), skewness (Sk) and kurtosis (Ku) were calculated for married and non-married individuals to check the normality of the data. Table 1 shows that the values of skewness and kurtosis is within the range i.e. between -2 and +2 (George & Mallery, 2010) and we can proceed with parametric statistics.

A series of between-subjects ANOVA (Table 1) were conducted to examine differences between married and non-married adults in terms of relationship assessment (RA) and various conflict resolution styles. The results revealed a statistically significant difference in relationship assessment (RA)  $\{F(1,98)=4.27, p<.05\}$ , with married individuals reporting

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higher levels of relationship satisfaction (RA) than unmarried (MD=2.57). This suggests that marital status is associated with a more favourable perception of relationship quality.

**TABLE: 1**

V	Descriptive statistics								Tests of Between-Subjects Effects				
	Married				Unmarried				Type III SS	df	MS	F	MD
	M	SD	Sk	Ku	M	SD	Sk	Ku					
RA	27.35	4.55	-0.92	1.73	24.78	6.45	-0.52	-0.32	147.645	1/98	147.64	4.27*	2.57
CMPT	4.64	2.71	-0.12	-1.2	4.97	2.23	-0.12	0.07	2.336	1/98	2.33	0.41	0.32
CMPR	6.5	1.82	-0.26	0.03	5.69	1.91	0.47	-0.14	14.471	1/98	14.47	4.07*	0.81
AVD	6.67	1.96	0.51	-0.19	5.89	1.61	-0.14	-0.31	13.741	1/98	13.74	4.55*	0.78
ACOD	6.82	2.08	0.4	-0.66	7.15	2.31	0.12	-0.52	2.414	1/98	2.41	0.48	0.33
COLB	5.35	1.92	0.31	-0.67	6.25	1.68	-0.18	-0.37	18.364	1/98	18.36	5.87**	0.91

*V=Variables; RA=Relationship Assessment; CMPT=Competing; CMPR=Compromising; AVD=Avoiding; ACOD=Accommodating; COLB=Collaborating; M=mean; SD=standard deviation; Sk=skewness; Ku=kurtosis; Df=degree of freedom; MS=mean square; F=F ratio; MD=mean difference; \*\*=significant at 0.01; \*=significance at 0.05*

Regarding conflict resolution styles, a significant difference was observed in the compromising style (CMPR) {F(1,98)=4.07,  $p<.05$ }, with married participants reporting greater use of compromise (MD=0.81), indicating a tendency among married individuals to seek balanced, mutually acceptable solutions during conflict. Similarly, a significant difference emerged in the avoiding style (AVD) {F(1,98)=4.55,  $p<.05$ }, where married individuals again scored higher (MD=0.78), suggesting a greater likelihood of conflict avoidance potentially as a strategy to preserve relationship harmony or minimize escalation in high-commitment relationships.

In contrast, unmarried individuals demonstrated significantly higher use of the collaborating style (COLB) {F(1,98)=5.87,  $p<.01$ }, which indicates that unmarried adults may be more (MD=0.90) inclined to engage in open, cooperative problem-solving, possibly reflecting a relational context with greater flexibility and emphasis on mutual understanding. No significant differences were found in the competing (CMPT){F(1,98)=0.41,  $p>.05$ } or accommodating styles (ACOD) {F(1,98)=0.485,  $p>.05$ }, respectively, suggesting that these styles are utilized similarly regardless of marital status.

Overall, the results indicate that marital status influences specific conflict resolution strategies particularly compromise (CMPR), avoidance (AVD), and collaboration (CLOB) while having no substantial impact on more assertive or self-sacrificing approaches like competing (CMPT) and accommodating (ACOD). Married adults reported significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction, and more frequent use of compromising (CMPR) and avoiding (AVD) conflict styles. Unmarried adults showed a significantly greater preference for the collaborating (COLB) conflict style. No significant differences were found between the groups in the use of competing (CMPT) and accommodating styles (ACOD). Following table shows the summary of the results:

**TABLE 2: SUMMARY**

Variable	Married Adults	Unmarried Adults
<b>Relationship Assessment (RA)</b>	✓ More positive assessments	—
<b>Competing (CMPT)</b>	—	✓ Slightly more competitive
<b>Compromising (CMPR)</b>	✓ Use more compromising	—
<b>Avoiding (AVD)</b>	✓ More avoidance in conflict	—
<b>Accommodating (ACOD)</b>	—	✓ More accommodating
<b>Collaborating (COLB)</b>	—	✓ More collaborative

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study aimed to examine differences in relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution strategies between married and unmarried adults. The results provide insightful information on how interpersonal dynamics are influenced by relationship status by providing partial support for the proposed hypotheses.

The findings demonstrated that married individuals reported higher relationship satisfaction than unmarried ones, which is in line with H1. This is consistent with previous studies showing that marital commitment is linked to improved emotional security and relational stability, which increase satisfaction in relationships (Carrère & Gottman, 1999; Whitton et al., 2007). Clear expectations, shared responsibilities, and long-term investment are common advantages for married individuals which improve their assessment of their relationship. On the other hand, unmarried relationships, can entail more ambiguity, boundary negotiations, and a growing sense of commitment which could decrease the level of satisfaction in relationship (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006).

Hypothesis (H2) was partially supported in terms of conflict resolution patterns, with notable differences in cooperating, avoiding, and compromising conflict resolution styles. Married adults had been expected to use greater avoidance and compromise strategies as mentioned in H3. This is in line with earlier research which indicates that married couples frequently use conflict resolution techniques to uphold harmony and sustain long-term relationship stability (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Kurdek, 1994). While compromise enables partners to find a mutual solution whereas avoidance can calm a stressful situation or delay a disagreement. When employed carefully, avoidance can be beneficial in long-term relationships even though it is frequently viewed as undesirable one (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006).

Unmarried adults used cooperating techniques more frequently, which supports H4. When partners make a significant effort to comprehend one another open communication, perspective-taking, and mutual problem-solving are characteristics of collaboration that are frequently linked to partnerships in earlier stages of relationship (Rahim, 2011). According to previous research, individuals who are dating or unmarried typically rely more on cooperative techniques, which reflects adaptability and a desire to deepen connections (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004). Unmarried adults may employ cooperation more frequently because they have less structural limitations like shared resources and family duties, It enables individuals to spend more time and emotional energy to fruitful conversation.

According to H5, there were no significant differences in accommodating or competing styles in both married or unmarried adults which implies that marital status may not have a significant impact on aggressive (competing) and self-sacrificing (accommodating) attitudes. This result is consistent with other studies showing that personality qualities, communication abilities, or situational triggers are more strongly associated with these two types than relationship type (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Kurdek, 1995). Therefore, depending on contextual demands rather than levels of relational commitment, married and unmarried adults seem to be equally prone to employ these styles.

Overall, the study shows that married adults choose conflict resolution techniques that support relational stability (avoidance and compromise), whereas, unmarried individuals

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prefer cooperative problem-solving, which reflects their developmental stage and relational setting. These findings support the idea that individual differences as well as the structural and emotional aspects of the relationship influence conflict resolution styles (Holman & Jarvis, 2003). The need of adjusting relationship interventions based on relationship state is further shown by the notable differences in relationship satisfaction and in particular conflict types. While programs targeted at fostering collaborative communication skills may be beneficial for unmarried individuals, whereas, married couples may benefit from conflict resolution techniques that balance constructive participation with conflict resolution.

### **Limitations:**

Even though the study offers insightful information, there are a number of limitations that should be considered while evaluating the results. The results cannot be applied to larger groups with a wider range of cultural, socioeconomic, or age backgrounds due to the relatively small sample size and demographic narrowness. Additionally, the cross-sectional design limited the ability to infer causality or observe changes in relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution styles over time. Furthermore, using self-report measures introduces response biases that could affect how participants perceive and report their conflict behaviours. These biases include social desirability and inaccurate memory. The study's ability to comprehend how marital status interact over time to effect long-term relationship stability, communication patterns, and emotional functioning is further limited by the lack of longitudinal or behavioural data.

### **Suggestions/ Recommendations:**

To further understand how conflict behaviours change throughout the course of a relationship, future research should employ longitudinal designs and more diverse sample sizes. Measurement accuracy would be strengthened and deeper understanding of communication and emotional dynamics would be provided by using mixed-method approaches. In order to promote better long-term relationship outcomes, these findings can also help practitioners customise interventions based on couples' relational origins.

## **CONCLUSION**

According to this study, adults relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution styles are significantly influenced by their relationship status. Unmarried adults tends to use cooperative techniques more frequently, indicating a desire for open discussion and shared problem-solving. On the other hand, married adults, reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction and showed a greater tendency to utilise compromising techniques, which indicates the stability, shared duties, and long-term commitment in their marital relationship. This can affect how people resolve conflicts and how fulfilled they feel in relationships overall.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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