Gender-Differences in the Use of Communication Strategies
in Romantic Relationships

Chin-Hui Chen, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan
Yong-Jen Chen, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan
Wan-Yi Zhou, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan
Yu-Jing Chen, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan
Chang-En Wu, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan
Yi-Zhen Zhu, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan

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Abstract
This research explores gender differences in communication within romantic relationships, focusing on university students due to a literature gap in this demographic. The study investigates how they endorsed communication strategies for conflict resolution and expressions forgiveness. Online questionnaires were distributed over three months, with 200 Taiwanese university students participating in this survey. Using independent-samples t-tests, the results suggested that females tended to adopt indirect fighting strategies during conflicts, while men favored the 'Minimization Strategy' for showing forgiveness. The study emphasizes recognizing and accepting gendered differences in communication strategies to enhance mutual satisfaction in romantic relationships.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Conflicts, Communication Strategies, Romantic Relationships

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1. Introduction

1.1 Communication in Love and the Importance

Romantic relationships play a pivotal role in our lives, providing us with companionship, support, and opportunities for personal growth. However, in order to maintain a healthy and fulfilling romantic relationship, it is crucial to know how to communicate appropriately or strategically in order to cope with the challenges faced in love.

Communication holds an indispensable position within the realm of romantic relationships as it profoundly influences how our partners comprehend our messages, and connect with us verbally and nonverbally so that they know how to navigate the nature of the involved social interactions (Meeks, et al., 1998). Through effective communication in love, we could successfully convey our thoughts, emotions, and needs to our partners. It is also believed that communication serves as a fundamental determinant of relationship satisfaction (Halbert, 1961; Hull, 2012). It also fosters understanding between romantic partners, facilitates conflict resolution, builds trust, and enhances overall connection and intimacy (Katz, et al., 2020). The significance of effective communication in romantic relationships is hence highlighted in this study. More importantly, this project aims to identify potential gendered differences in communication choices made in romantic relationships.

1.2 A Briefing on Gendered Differences in Communication Styles in Love

It has been revealed that there are certain distinctions between men and women in terms of their communication in romantic relationships (Metts, 2006).

As discussed in Zhao's study (2022), men and women seem to exhibit divergent approaches to communication in love. For instance, when expressing affection, men tend to use explicit verbal statements such as "I like you", while women often rely on nonverbal cues and body language to convey their liking. In the face of conflict, women tend to confront it directly and display more negative emotions, while men typically opt for conflict resolution and avoidance (Zhao, 2022). When seeking to repair a relationship, men seem to prioritize the offer of timely apologies to signal their desire to reconcile in conflicts. When ending a relationship, women tend to employ sexual innuendos as a means to indicate their reluctance (Zhao, 2022). Moreover, research has shown that women are more likely to cite reasons related to autonomy, openness, and equity when discussing break-ups (Baxter, 1986). More elaboration on the use of communication strategies to deal with the various communication scenarios in love will be provided later in the section of literature review.

1.3 Research Purposes

In sum, by acknowledging and comprehending the distinctions of communication behaviours in love between the two genders, we can learn how to accommodate our communication styles for our partners of the other gender in order to enhance the quality of romantic relationships by means of the use of appropriate communication strategies (Savicki & Kelley, 2000). In the process of language socialization, we probably don't have sufficient awareness as to how our communication behaviours and choices can vary by our gender. Given that experiencing a romantic relationship is something that college students would like to prioritize among all in their lives, this project hence aimed to elicit college students' views as to how they choose to communicate strategically when encountering two particular scenarios

in love, namely, conflict resolutions and expressing forgiveness. To make this project a sociolinguistic one, we focus on exploring how the variation in communication choices appear to be associated with gender identities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Communicating Conflicts in Romantic Relationships

Conflicts in intimate relationships are inevitable, and the way people manage them can either strengthen or weaken the relationship (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2020). Researchers have found that conflict styles can be classified based on two dimensions: cooperation and directness (Rahim, 1986; Sillars et al., 2004). These two dimensions create six conflict communication styles: 1. competitive fighting, 2. compromising, 3. collaborating, 4. indirect fighting, 5. avoiding, and 6. yielding.

Competitive Fighting Strategy
According to Blake and Mouton (1964), competitive fighting is a conflict strategy that involves direct and uncooperative behavior. The competitive goals associated with this strategy tend to result in closed-minded interaction (Tjosvold et al., 2016). Individuals who adopt this strategy are more likely to prioritize winning the conflict over finding a mutually beneficial solution.

Compromising Strategy
Compromise is a conflict management strategy that involves seeking a fair, intermediate position that satisfies some of both partners' needs. This strategy involves pursuing a part-win-part-lose situation, where each partner gives up a little to achieve mutual goals. According to Gross and Guerrero (2000), the compromising style is perceived as moderately appropriate and effective. However, excessive use of this style can lead to negative outcomes such as anxiety and depression, as it may create a perception that problems have never been fully resolved.

Collaborating Strategy
Collaborating involves active participation, open communication, and the sharing of ideas and resources (Rahim, 1986; Sillars et al., 2004). This conflict style is frequently utilized in team-based settings, where individuals with diverse backgrounds, skills, and expertise come together to solve complex problems or complete tasks requiring collective effort. According to Tjosvold et al. (2001), cooperative conflict contributes to effective teamwork and leadership. Successful collaboration necessitates trust, respect, and willingness to compromise and work towards a mutually beneficial solution.

Indirect Fighting Strategy
Indirect fighting is a conflict management style where individuals adopt an indirect and uncooperative approach when dealing with disagreements. As noted by Sillars et al. (2004), this style involves behaviors such as ignoring the partner, refusing to address the problems in a respectful manner, or walking away in frustration. Indirect aggression serves as an alternative to direct aggression, as highlighted by Archer and Coyne (2005). However, the limitation of this approach is that it often leads to avoidance of the problem rather than addressing it. This avoidance can be more detrimental to the relationship than adopting a competitive style since it prevents the parties involved from confronting the issue head-on.

Avoiding Strategy

The avoiding strategy involves deliberately keeping oneself away from certain people or situations to avoid conflict, tension, or discomfort. This strategy is used for various reasons, such as a fear of confrontation, a desire to maintain peace or neutrality, or a lack of interest or motivation. Huang (黃囉莉, 2006) suggests that using the avoiding strategy has several advantages over the competitive approach, such as reducing confrontation and demonstrating an implicit yielding approach. Unlike those who adopt a yielding strategy and are willing to make sacrifices, those who use an avoiding strategy may not appear to be doing something great, but it is usually harmless to everyone involved. However, Huang (黃囉莉, 2006) also notes that avoiding conflict may sometimes lead to positive outcomes, but it can also cause resentment to build up over time and further exacerbate the relationship.

Yielding Strategy

The yielding strategy, as a coping mechanism, refers to the act of reaching a compromise with the opposing party that is lower than the original goal. (Klein & Johnson, 1997; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993; Sillars, 2010). Yielding can be viewed as an act of surrender, submission, or acquiescence under pressure, force, or influence, often motivated by respect for authority or a desire to maintain peace or avoid conflict. However, in some instances, this behavior can be perceived as a weakness or a lack of confidence. Despite this, the yielding strategy may also serve as an effective means of conflict resolution, particularly in situations where the parties involved have different levels of power or authority. It is important to note that the yielding strategy should be used judiciously, as over-reliance on this strategy may lead to a loss of credibility or a failure to achieve one's goals. (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993).

2.2 Communicating Forgiveness in Romantic Relationships

Forgiveness is crucial when it comes to repairing a relationship and increasing intimacy after a negative event (Emmers & Canary, 1996). However, there are various methods of demonstrating or communicating forgiveness. In Waldron and Kelley's (2005) study, forgiving communication was categorized into five forms, which were labeled as explicit statements (e.g., telling your partner "I forgive you."), conditional (e.g., offering forgiveness with specific conditions), minimizing strategy (e.g., telling 'It's not a serious problem.'), nonverbal display (e.g., hugs or smiles), and discussion (e.g., more in-depth discussion of the incident).

Sheldon and Honeycutt's (2011) investigation of 147 married couples found that men had a tendency to state that the transgression is not a significant issue. When it comes to transgressions, they used minimizing strategy more frequently than women, no matter how strong their religiosity level was. However, no obvious gender differences were observed in other strategies.

In a more recent study, Antony and Sheldon (2019) revealed that, in the process of restoring friendship, females were prone to more verbal strategies, such as discussion, conditional, and explicit forgiveness. In contrast, males were inclined to use minimization and nonverbal display. In terms of forgiving behaviors, nonchalant comments or conciliatory gestures were likely to be employed by men, such as buying a drink for the offending friend. The severity of a transgression was found to be related to the use of forgiveness strategy. Lesser offenses are positively associated with minimization and negatively associated with discussion and conditional forgiveness in friendships.

Previous studies on the usage of forgiveness-granting strategies have focused on dating and married couples and friendships. However, hardly any of them examine the gender difference of college dating students. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

To verify how communication strategies for conflict and forgiveness as revealed in existing literature can be realized among Taiwanese college students, the following two research questions were proposed:

RQ 1: Are there any gendered differences in conflict communication among Taiwanese college students in romantic relationships?

RQ 2: Are there any gendered differences in forgiveness communication among Taiwanese college students in romantic relationships?

3. Methodology

3.1 Survey Participants

To recruit participants for this study, we posted online questionnaires on three social media platforms: Line groups, Instagram, and D-card, with a focus on Taiwanese university students. The survey was available for completion from July 2023 to October 2023. As a result, a total of 200 Taiwanese university students participated in this survey. Those who haven't been in a romantic relationship were asked to imagine themselves in that relationship when they answered the questions in the survey. In terms of the gender distribution, over half of them (N=108, 54%) were females, and approximately two-quarters (N=92, 46%) were males.

3.2 Survey Items

The communication strategies as reviewed in section 2 were employed as the survey items to examine how male and female Taiwanese college students concurred with them. The survey participants were asked to assess the provided communication strategy statements using a 5-point Likert scale to express their agreement levels. The scale included the following values: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (no comment), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree).

3.3 Analyses

The gendered differences in the extent to which the 200 participants agreed with the given communication strategies were identified by using independent t-tests, using SPSS. As to the extent to which each strategy was endorsed by the participants, the Mean values were observed.

4. Results

4.1 Gendered Differences in Conflict Communication Strategies

Table 1 and Table 2 showed the relative gendered differences in the extents to which college students endorsed the various conflict communication strategies. Independent sample t tests suggested that significant gendered differences could be found.

Those significantly more favored by male students include: "When conflicts arise, I am proactive in sharing my perspective and am willing to actively understand my partner's point of view", t(198)=2.144, p<.05; "When conflicts arise, I might agree with what my partner is

saying just to avoid an argument, even if I don't actually agree with him/her.", t(198)=2.928, "When conflicts arise, I would yield to my partner out of respect for his/her opinions.", t(198)=2.44, p<.05.

As to those significantly preferred by female students included: "After conflicts, I might deliberately distance myself from my partner.", t(198)=-5.028, p=.000; p<.01; "I do not tolerate conflicts when they arise.", t(198)= -2.276, p<.05).

Table 1: Conflict communication by gender: Mean values

Conflict communication strategies	Gender	N	Mean
當衝突發生時，我會主動分享自己的看法也願意積極了解對方的想法。	M	92	4.33
When conflicts arise, I am proactive in sharing my perspective and am willing to actively understand my partner's point of view.	F	108	4.11
當衝突發生時，我會想要跟伴侶一起合作來解決問題。	M	92	4.32
When conflicts arise, I want to collaborate with my partner to solve the problems.	F	108	4.31
當衝突發生時，我願意主動與對方用開放的態度討論問題。	M	92	4.36
When conflicts arise, I am willing to engage in open discussions with my partner with a positive attitude.	F	108	4.15
當衝突發生時，我會不爽的離開現場。	M	92	2.41
When conflicts arise, I tend to leave the scene because of my feeling upset.	F	108	2.69
當衝突發生時，我會故意對對方說難聽的話。	M	92	2.23
When conflicts arise, I may intentionally say hurtful things to my partner.	F	108	2.3
當衝突發生後，我會刻意疏遠對方。	M	92	2.52
After conflicts, I might deliberately distance myself from my partner.	F	108	3.3
當我和伴侶發生衝突時，我習慣轉移我們的話題。	M	92	2.91
When my partner and I have conflicts, I have a tendency to change the topic of our conversation.	F	108	2.63
當衝突發生時，我會因為不想吵架，而裝作沒聽到對方說話。	M	92	2.55
When conflicts arise, I may pretend not to hear what my partner says because I don't want to argue with him/her.	F	108	2.47
當衝突發生時，我會為了不想吵架，而去附和對方說的話，儘管我並不同意他/她。	M	92	2.91
When conflicts arise, I might agree with what my partner is saying just to avoid an argument, even if I don't actually agree with him/her.	F	108	2.41

當發生競爭衝突時，我會優先考慮贏得衝突而不是討論共同的問題。 In competitive conflicts, I prioritize winning the conflict over discussing the issues causing our arguments.	M	92	2.37
	F	108	2.17
當發生競爭衝突時，我不會容忍衝突。 I do not tolerate conflicts when they arise.	M	92	2.72
	F	108	3.05
當發生衝突時，我願意讓步，以解決衝突。 When conflicts occur, I am willing to compromise to resolve them.	M	92	3.77
	F	108	3.53
當發生衝突時，我願意找到能滿足雙方可以接受的解決方法。 When conflicts arise, I am willing to find solutions that both my partner and I can accept.	M	92	4.23
	F	108	4.21
當發生衝突時，我會因尊重對方的意見，而屈服於他。 When conflicts arise, I would yield to my partner out of respect for his/her opinions.	M	92	3.36
	F	108	2.98

Table 2: Conflict communication strategies by gender: independent samples t tests

Conflict communication strategies	t	df	Sig.
當衝突發生時，我會主動分享自己的看法也願意積極了解對方的想法。 When conflicts arise, I am proactive in sharing my perspective and am willing to actively understand my partner's point of view.	2.144	198	0.033
當衝突發生時，我會想要跟伴侶一起合作來解決問題。 When conflicts arise, I want to collaborate with my partner to solve the problems.	0.092	198	0.927
當衝突發生時，我願意主動與對方用開放的態度討論問題。 When conflicts arise, I am willing to engage in open discussions with my partner with a positive attitude.	1.966	198	0.051
當衝突發生時，我會不爽的離開現場。 When conflicts arise, I tend to leave the scene because of my feeling upset.	-1.95	198	0.053
當衝突發生時，我會故意對對方說難聽的話。 When conflicts arise, I may intentionally say hurtful things to my partner.	-0.428	198	0.669
當衝突發生後，我會刻意疏遠對方。 After conflicts, I might deliberately distance myself from my partner.	-5.028	198	0

當我和伴侶發生衝突時，我習慣轉移我們的話題。 When my partner and I have conflicts, I have a tendency to change the topic of our conversation.	1.79	198	0.075
當衝突發生時，我會因為不想吵架，而裝作沒聽到對方說話。 When conflicts arise, I may pretend not to hear what my partner says because I don't want to argue with him/her.	0.487	199	0.627
當衝突發生時，我會為了不想吵架，而去附和對方說的話，儘管我並不同意他/她。 When conflicts arise, I might agree with what my partner is saying just to avoid an argument, even if I don't actually agree with him/her.	2.928	198	0.004
當發生競爭衝突時，我會優先考慮贏得衝突而不是討論共同的問題。 In competitive conflicts, I prioritize winning the conflict over discussing the issues causing our arguments.	1.37	167	0.172
當發生競爭衝突時，我不會容忍衝突。 I do not tolerate conflicts when they arise.	-2.276	198	0.024
當發生衝突時，我願意讓步，以解決衝突。 When conflicts occur, I am willing to compromise to resolve them.	1.918	198	0.057
當發生衝突時，我願意找到能滿足雙方可以接受的解決方法。 When conflicts arise, I am willing to find solutions that both my partner and I can accept.	0.139	198	0.889
當發生衝突時，我會因尊重對方的意見，而屈服於他。 When conflicts arise, I would yield to my partner out of respect for his/her opinions.	2.44	198	0.016

4.2 Forgiveness Communication Strategies

As revealed in Table 3 and Table 4, it was evident that "Nonverbal communication strategies were considerably favored: for instance, "When I want to forgive my partner, I express forgiveness through facial expressions, hugs, or kind gestures." was the most commonly used by both males (Mean=4.28) and females (Mean=4.25).

Additionally, men (Mean=3.98) also showed a greater concordance of the minimization strategy, such as, "When I want to forgive my partner, I tell him/her, "It's not a big deal. Don't worry", while women (Mean=4.05) exhibited a stronger preference for discussion, for example, "When I want to forgive my partner, I actively discuss the conflict in-depth with him/her."

What's more, the results of the independent-samples t-test showed that men reported significantly higher agreement on three communication strategies as compared to women: namely realizing explicit communication in the strategy of "When I want to forgive my partner, I directly tell him/her that I have forgiven him/her." (Mean for men=3.88, Mean for

women=3.40, t(197.27)= 3.464, p=0.001); to minimize negative impacts by means of the following two strategies: "When I want to forgive my partner, I tell him/her, It's not a big deal. Don't worry." (Mean for men=3.98, Mean for women=3.52, t(198)=3.529, p=0.001); and "When I want to forgive my partner, I have a casual conversation with him/her and avoid discussing the mistakes causing conflicts." (Mean for men=3.83, Mean for women=3.34, t(198)=3.251, p=0.001).

Table 3: Forgiveness communication strategies by gender: Mean values

Forgiveness communication strategies	Gender	N	Mean
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會直接跟伴侶說我已經原諒他了。	Male	92	3.88
When I want to forgive my partner, I directly tell him/her that I have forgiven him/her.	Female	108	3.4
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會跟對方說「沒什麼大不了的，不用擔心」。	Male	92	3.98
When I want to forgive my partner, I tell him/her, "It's not a big deal. Don't worry."	Female	108	3.52
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會透過表情、擁抱或示好的行為表達原諒。	Male	92	4.28
When I want to forgive my partner, I express forgiveness through facial expressions, hugs, or kind gestures.	Female	108	4.25
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會告訴對方如果這次的過錯不再發生，我才會原諒他。	Male	92	3.11
When I want to forgive my partner, I tell him/her that I will forgive him/her if the same mistake doesn't happen again.	Female	108	3.26
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會主動跟對方深入討論這次的衝突。	Male	92	3.86
When I want to forgive my partner, I actively discuss the conflict in-depth with him/her.	Female	108	4.05
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會以輕鬆的口吻與他閒聊，並避開談論對方的過錯。	Male	92	3.83
When I want to forgive my partner, I have a casual conversation with him/her and avoid discussing the mistakes causing conflicts.	Female	108	3.34

Table 4: Forgiveness communication strategies by gender: independent samples t tests

Forgiveness communication strategies	t	df	Sig.
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會直接跟伴侶說我已經原諒他了。 When I want to forgive my partner, I directly tell him/her that I have forgiven him/her.	3.464	197.27	0.001
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會跟對方說「沒什麼大不了的，不用擔心」。 When I want to forgive my partner, I tell him/her, "It's not a big deal. Don't worry."	3.529	198	0.001
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會透過表情、擁抱或示好的行為表達原諒。 When I want to forgive my partner, I express forgiveness through facial expressions, hugs, or kind gestures.	0.316	198	0.753
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會告訴對方如果這次的過錯不再發生，我才會原諒他。 When I want to forgive my partner, I tell him/her that I will forgive him/her if the same mistake doesn't happen again.	-1.003	198	0.317
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會主動跟對方深入討論這次的衝突。 When I want to forgive my partner, I actively discuss the conflict in-depth with him/her.	-1.357	198	0.176
當我想原諒伴侶時，我會以輕鬆的口吻與他閒聊，並避開談論對方的過錯。 When I want to forgive my partner, I have a casual conversation with him/her and avoid discussing the mistakes causing conflicts.	3.251	198	0.001

5. Discussions and Conclusion

The study presented in the paper examines gender differences in the endorsement of conflict communication strategies among college students. Through the analysis of data presented in Table 1 and Table 2, the researchers identified notable variations in the extent to which male and female students favored certain strategies.

Male students were found to be significantly more inclined towards proactive engagement in conflict resolution, as indicated by their higher endorsement of strategies such as actively sharing perspectives and understanding their partner's point of view, even when conflicts arise. Additionally, male students tended to agree with their partners to avoid arguments and yield to their partner's opinions out of respect.

On the other hand, female students exhibited a preference for strategies involving post-conflict behaviors. They were more likely to deliberately distance themselves from their partners after conflicts and expressed lower tolerance for conflicts when they arose.

The findings suggest that gender plays a significant role in shaping conflict communication strategies among college students. These differences highlight potential areas for targeted interventions or communication skill development programs tailored to address the specific

needs and preferences of each gender. Further research could delve into the underlying reasons for these gendered differences and explore their implications for interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution dynamics.

The findings presented in Tables 3 and 4 shed light on the prevalence and gender differences in the use of various conflict communication strategies, particularly in the context of forgiveness. The most commonly employed strategy among both male and female participants was nonverbal communication, such as expressing forgiveness through facial expressions, hugs, or kind gestures. This indicates a shared reliance on nonverbal cues to convey forgiveness within relationships.

Furthermore, men were observed to exhibit a greater tendency towards minimizing conflicts when expressing forgiveness, often reassuring their partners that the issue is not significant. Conversely, women showed a preference for engaging in discussions to settle the conflict and its resolution. This suggests divergent approaches to forgiveness, with men leaning towards downplaying the conflict's importance and women opting for more open dialogue and exploration of underlying issues.

The results of independent samples t-tests revealed significant gender disparities in the endorsement of specific communication strategies related to forgiveness. Men reported higher agreement levels on three strategies compared to women: explicit communication, minimization, and casual talk. This indicates that men are more inclined to directly express forgiveness, reassure their partners about the insignificance of the conflict, and engage in casual conversations to facilitate forgiveness without delving into fault-finding discussions.

These findings underscore the nuanced nature of forgiveness and its communication within intimate relationships, highlighting gender-specific patterns in strategy preference. Understanding these differences can inform relationship interventions and communication skills training programs tailored to address the distinct needs and preferences of men and women in navigating conflicts and fostering forgiveness within relationships. Further research could explore the underlying mechanisms driving these gender differences and their implications for relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution dynamics.

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Contact email: irenechen@mail.npust.edu.tw