Marital Communication during Conflict: A Study on Attachment Dimensions and Interaction Patterns

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is increasingly present and could be severe in many adult romantic relationships including marriage, yet understudied in the context of adult attachment style. This study set out to investigate the underlying relationship between adult attachment styles and patterns of interaction in a Malaysian setting. By means of survey method, data was collected using self-reporting questionnaire involving 400 married individuals in the state of Penang, Malaysia for the duration of six months, with Partial Least Squares (PLS) employed for data analysis. The application of Attachment Theory in this study was established via two dimensions of anxiety and avoidance. Result from the analysis yielded all the constructs have composite reliability value of more than 0.6 and convergent and discriminant validity with an average variance extracted (AVE) value greater than 0.50. The findings indicated that, married individuals who are high in anxiety will exhibit destructive and avoidance patterns during conflict. Similarly, married individuals who are high in avoidance will exhibit destructive, avoidance and low level of constructive pattern during conflict. The study concludes that conflict pattern of interaction among married individuals is a function of adult romantic attachment styles. This study also addressed the gap in research literature by providing a non-western context by basing research within a Malaysian setting.

Keywords: *Anxiety, avoidance, conflict, marital communication, married individuals.*

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is often associated with negative behaviors (e.g. bitter arguments, anger, fighting and acts of violence). While there are many causes of conflicts between married couples, the way a couple interacts during a conflict situation is known to differ as a function of attachment styles. The different types of attachment, whether secure or insecure, can influence the way couples communicate with each other in their daily interactions; they also affect the ways in which disagreement and grievance are delivered in a conflict situation. According to Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), attachment refers to the bond or relationship that a person has with someone close to them. The concept of attachment was first studied to understand the relationship between an infant and his/her caregiver. The childhood attachment shown by an infant towards their caregiver was strongly advocated to be the foundation of future attachment with other people, such as romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). According to Sutton (2019) one of the established patterns of growing areas of interest in attachment literature is attachment on romantic relationship. Different attachment styles exert distinct influences on the way conflict is communicated or how patterns of conflict are governed. Marital communication should include the elements of love, commitment and trust.

According to du Plooy and de Beer (2018), communication activities such as engaging in small talk and providing verbal and non-verbal messages of affection; positive exchanges which include any interactions perceived by both parties as constructive; and effective conflict management are the factors that relate to high marital satisfaction. Marital conflicts, if not managed well, can lead to greater dissatisfaction and an erosion of the relationship between spouses. In their study, Greeff and Bruyne (2000), explained that destructive communications during conflict, including avoidance, competitive patterns of dominance and subordination, and demeaning and degrading verbal and nonverbal interactions, can lead to an unsatisfactory relationship. According to Moore (2020), unresolved conflicts will lead to a considerable amount of disconnect, hostility, and discontent in a couple's relationship. Therefore, married couples need to learn and understand how to deal with conflict in a constructive way if they want to have a happy relationship. One of the most significant negative outcomes of prolonged conflict and marital dissatisfaction affecting married couples is divorce, a fact particularly pertinent in a Malaysian context. More recently, in 2019, around 56,624 divorce cases were recorded in Malaysia while 45,754 cases were reported in 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Although the Statistics Department has revealed the decrease in the number of divorce cases, the authorities are concerned that the cases will increase again especially with the rising number of household conflicts. Normi (2016) stressed that family problems and divorce may indirectly cause an increase in social problems and criminal activities within Malaysia. Conflict in family and divorce also affects children negatively. They could experience psychological problems or might fall into the trap of vice, drug addiction, alcoholism and crime. In support of this reasoning, Gager et al. (2016) found that children in a high-conflicting family had a higher possibility of relationship dissolution in later relationship compared to children from a low-conflicting family.

In Malaysia, little empirical work has examined patterns of interaction during conflicts. The current study attempts to address this so far limited research, as conflict patterns of interaction – be they functional and positive, or negative and dysfunctional – require a more thorough investigation, particularly in the realm of conflicts within marriages, than merely scratching the surface of the causes or effects of marital discord. In a Western context, meanwhile, researchers have shown an increasing interest in understanding how marital conflicts are managed, controlled and solved. According to McCabe (2006), research studies on conflict from the 1950s and onwards have shown a significant shift from a focus on the individual to interactional analysis between couples by examining how partners communicate, react and respond to various conflict situations. This trend has continued until today, with recent studies seeking to observe the patterns of interaction between spouses during periods of conflict (Fincham, 2003; Whitton et al., 2018). In response to the lack of research material appraising the underlying relationship between attachment dimensions and patterns of interaction in a Malaysian context, this study aims to explore the influence of adult romantic attachment dimensions on patterns of interaction during conflict among married Malaysians. The attachment theory provides a useful theoretical underpinning by suggesting how individuals from different attachment styles might interact differently during conflict situations. With this in mind, then, the research question is as follows.

RQ: What is the relationship between adult romantic attachment dimensions and patterns of interaction during conflicts among Malaysian married individuals?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Drawing on concepts from ethology, cybernetics, information processing, developmental psychology and psychoanalysis, Bowlby (1969) formulated the basic tenets of the theory. He revolutionized our thinking about the ties between a mother and child, as well as the disruption of these ties through separation, deprivation and bereavement in the context of a child-caregiver relationship.

Within the scope of child-caregiver literature, early work on attachment theory focused on identifying children's attachment styles by exploring the quality of the early parent-child relationship based on the internal working model of the self and others (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Guerrero et al., 2001; Ainsworth et al., 2015). It is expected that the formation of attachment behaviors during childhood (involving, for example, separation and subsequent reunions with caregivers) affects adults' style of attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Vorria et al., 2007; Apostolidou, 2006; Mohd Hasim et al., 2018).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) were amongst the first few scholars who extended the attachment models found by Ainsworth et al. (1978) in child-parent relationships to examine romantic relationships between adults. They delineated three adult attachment styles found in the child development literature: secure, anxious-ambivalent and avoidant.

Although the three-category model of attachment style introduced by Hazan and Shaver (1987) was adopted by several researchers (e.g. Brennan & Shaver, 1990; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Thompson, 1999; Folwarczny & Otterbring, 2021). Bartholomew (1990) introduced a four-category system of attachment three years after Hazan and Shaver (1987). She argued that the working mental model a person holds about the self and others would produce four instead of three attachment styles for romantic partners: secure, dismissive, preoccupied and fearful (Guerrero et al., 2001).

With a positive view of the self and others, the secure subjects (associated with Hazan and Shaver's 'secure' classification, 1987) equate a high level of comfort with intimacy and autonomy. Secure individuals are more optimistic than insecure individuals, who are categorized as exhibiting dismissive, preoccupied and fearful attachment styles. Secure individuals who have low levels of anxiety and avoidance also have good self-esteem, seek out social support and tend to engage in direct communication. In addition, they develop personal characteristics that lead to building positive relationships, ending ultimately in trusting, stable and lasting bonds (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016a; Cherry, 2022).

Insecure attachment styles consist of three characteristics: preoccupied, dismissive and fearful styles. Preoccupied individuals with high levels of anxiety but low levels of avoidance cling to and place high expectations on their partners; they take everything personally and worry too much because they fear being alone (Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Dodgson, 2018). With a negative view of the self, but a positive view of others, preoccupied subjects, associated with Hazan and Shaver's (1987) 'anxious-ambivalent' classification, tend to demonstrate dependence and maximize investment from partners (Del Giudice, 2019)

With a positive view of the self but a negative view of others, the dismissive subjects, classified by Hazan and Shaver (1987) as 'avoidant', harbor a desire to remain independent and avoid committed relationships. Bartholomew (1990) added that, due to high levels of avoidance but low levels of anxiety, the dismissive individual attains autonomy and has problems with intimacy. These individuals are also unwilling to share emotions, feelings and

thoughts with others, particularly their partners and tend to minimise commitment with partners (Cherry, 2022; Del Giudice, 2019).

Finally, the fearful individual has a negative view of both the self and others. This type of individual is associated with Hazan and Shaver's (1987) 'anxious-ambivalent and avoidant' category. Those classified as fearful tend to have difficulties with intimacy and autonomy (Bartholomew, 1990). Due to high levels of anxiety and avoidance, they exhibit a fear of rejection and the suffering that this may cause. According to Holland (2019), they may actively seek a relationship, but when the relationship becomes too serious, or their partner wants greater intimacy, the fearful individual may respond by withdrawing from the relationship. Bartholomew (1990) suggested that both dismissive (avoidant) and fearful individuals were most likely to avoid intimacy and deactivate their attachment systems, but for different reasons and in different ways.

Based on Bartholomew's (1990) model of the self and others, Brennan et al. (1998) findings indicated that individual differences in attachment could be most parsimoniously represented along two fundamental dimensions of anxiety and avoidance. By crossing these two dimensions, the four attachment orientations – secure, preoccupied, dismissive and fearful – proposed by Bartholomew can be more clearly understood. According to Brennan et al.'s (1998) scale, an individual belonging in the 'secure' cluster scored low for both anxiety and avoidance. Those in the 'fearful' category scored highly in anxiety and avoidance, while those in the 'preoccupied' cluster appeared high in anxiety and low in avoidance. Finally, those in the 'dismissive' cluster scored highly for avoidance and low for anxiety.

Patterns of Interaction During Conflict
Another important variable that may influence the level of attachment dimensions is the patterns of interaction during a conflict in marriage. Marital conflict arises between partners due to a range of issues and, during that crucial time, the manner in which spouses interact and manage the conflict situation is critical in avoiding a more serious implication. Throughout their marriage, couples communicate with each other in various ways when conflict occurs, following several patterns which are detailed below.

a.   Constructive Pattern
Constructive conflict behaviour occurs when people express disagreement without hostility and with a commitment towards an effective resolution of the conflict. Mutual constructive communication involves partners discussing issues in their marriage, positively expressing feelings in a calm position while attempting to resolve the matter by accepting the other's point of view (Deylami et al., 2021). Sadeghi et al. (2011) described mutual constructive couples as partners who are able to talk about their problems and make attempts to solve them during a conflict. These couples also tend to exhibit positive conflict behaviours and avoid violence and irrational reactions during their conversations. In their study of positive behaviour during marital conflicts and its influence on stress hormones, Robles et al. (2006) found that positive behaviour included agreements, approval, acceptance of responsibility, assent and positive mind-reading between particular individuals.

b.   Destructive Pattern
In contrast, destructive conflict behaviour or negative behaviour occurs when people engage in actions and behaviours that result in increased antagonism instead of conflict resolution (Switzer, 2014). The destructive conflict pattern reflects an inability to effectively address and

manage conflict, which contributes to marital discord and increases psychological distress and depressive symptoms (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Gottman (1994) also identified several destructive communication patterns, such as criticism, defensiveness, contempt and withdrawal, which were detrimental to relationship stability and contributed to physiological distress among couples. In turn, it will lead to the termination of the relationship (Jaymess & Yahya, 2019).

c.   Avoidance Pattern

Couples with avoidance conflict interaction assume that the conflict is severe and they refrain from communicating with each other when the conflict occurs. They live in a parallel state with each other and their relationships may be minimal or do not exist at all. The avoidant couples have no special way to solve their conflicts and believe that they solve over time and that they do not need to discuss the matter specifically (Abusaidi et al., 2018).

In this situation, couples tend to bypass engaging with one another as much as possible, thereby resulting in minimal contact during the lowest point of their relationship (Sadeghi et al., 2011). Although possibly successful at preventing a prolonged argument or escalation, avoidance strategies usually require considerable resources to enact and might cause substantial levels of stress (Reznik et al., 2010). In a research conducted among Japan and South Korean samples, result indicated that avoidance has a negative association with marital satisfaction (Kyung-Ran, 2021)

Attachment Dimensions and Patterns of Interaction During Conflict

In general, attachment dimensions are found to influence patterns of interaction during a conflict. In other words, people characterised as secure and insecure tend to interact differently during these periods (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006).

Looking at the literature, individuals with low levels of anxiety and avoidance (also known as secure individuals, e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Bartholomew, 1990) are more adept at balancing a desire for intimacy and interdependence, resulting in a more rational perception towards conflict.

Moreover, because they view themselves as likeable or loveable and expect their partners to be responsive and available when needed, secure individuals define conflicting issues as less threatening to themselves (Pietromonaco et al., 2004; Weger Jr., 2006; Pistole & Arricale, 2003). Being able to communicate openly, they consider themselves to be more effective in arguments and more involved in constructive communication than their less secure counterparts (Pistole & Arricale, 2003; Domingue & Mollen, 2009, Jaymess & Yahya, 2019). Feeney (1999) observed that when individuals with low levels of anxiety and avoidance experience warmth and sensitive treatment from their caregivers, they tend to handle negative feelings constructively by acknowledging distress and seeking support.

Conversely, Feeney et al. (1994) claimed that individuals with high levels of anxiety (otherwise known as anxious/ambivalent, e.g., Bartholomew, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) would likely overreact during their disagreements with romantic partners, perceiving the dispute as a threat to their relationship and experiencing a stronger emotional reaction. Highly anxious individuals chronically fear rejection; they tend to apply destructive communication patterns and become more verbally aggressive as their conflicts are more likely to be coercive, distressing and lacking in mutual negotiation, and thereby associated with several ineffective or negative conflict behavioural patterns (Jaymess & Yahya, 2019).

According to Shi (2003), to minimise conflict, individuals high in avoidance behaviours (or avoidant or dismissive individuals, e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Bartholomew, 1990) will try to avoid conflict whenever possible. When conflict is unavoidable, however, they might resort to verbally aggressive behaviour to control the level of intimacy in the interaction. Mardani et al. (2021) added that, highly avoidant individuals also like to sink into their defences and like to stonewall, remain silent. They would prefer to maintain distance from one's partner and divert from displaying or expressing their emotions (Feeney, 1999).

Pietromonaco et al. (2004) also argued that individuals high in anxiety and avoidance (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Batholomew, 1990) would likely exhibit a mix of preoccupied and dismissive behaviours because they are constantly torn between approach and an avoidant orientation towards intimacy. They are of the opinion that they will be protected from rejection if they avoid intimacy with their partners with whom they share a close relationship (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Similarly, insecure adults who display high levels of both anxiety and avoidance tend to cling, make demands, stonewall or withdraw because they believe that their partners will reject them. Additionally, they may use such means to protest against perceived unresponsiveness from their partners (Johnson, 2003).

After reviewing the literature, this study thus reached and tested six hypotheses:

H1: Anxiety during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of constructive patterns of interaction.
H2: Anxiety during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of destructive patterns of interaction.
H3: Anxiety during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of avoidance patterns of interaction.
H4: Avoidance during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of constructive patterns of interaction.
H5: Avoidance during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of destructive patterns of interaction.
H6: Avoidance during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of avoidance patterns of interaction.

Adult Attachment and Conflict Patterns of Interaction in the Malaysian Context
Generally speaking, existing research studies have concluded on the universality and uniformity of relational attachment styles across cultures. Relational attachment styles are a culturally universal phenomenon due to similarities in the innate biological tendencies for security and protection among human species. Indeed, in their study of 214 university students from the United States and 153 university students from Hong Kong (Ho et al., 2011) found universal pathways between adult attachment styles and current relationship satisfaction between the two cultural groups. Attachment styles are said to transcend across cultures due to similarities in fundamental human needs (Yum & Li, 2007).

Nevertheless, despite the conclusive empirical evidence as to the universality of relational attachment styles, less is known about the influence of culture on the pattern of interactions during conflicts, especially among married couples. While attachment styles reflect innate human tendencies and needs for love, protection and freedom, conflict communication patterns may vary as a result of socialisation processes and experiences often learnt from one's immediate family, friends and community. Conflict communication

behaviours, such as anger, disagreement and resentment, may be expressed differently due to different norms and cultural expectations.

It is also worth noting that existing patterns of conflict interaction – namely constructive, destructive and avoidance patterns – were found to be widely evident in numerous research studies conducted in Western societies. However, it remains unclear whether such patterns are general across cultures or articulated or communicated differently across cultures. Being an Asian country, the majority of the Malaysian population, consisting of Malay, Chinese and Indian people, regard marriage as a sacred bond blessed by God. According to Fatimi and Mohd Zamani (2006), Malaysians (especially Muslims and Hindus) consider marriage as a sacred social institution and position religion as an important element of married life (Buddhists, meanwhile, only consider it as a way to achieve happiness; nonetheless, they still view marriage as a stable institution). Asian people, including Malaysians, are generally closely bound to their culture and traditions, whereby different ethnic groups still retain their religions, customs and ways of life. Culture shapes perceptions, attributions, judgement and ideas towards the self and others, including the way people face and resolve a conflict (LeBaron, 2003). Culture is, therefore, one of the factors influencing how people conceptualise and manage conflicts in relationships.

Asian people – including Malaysians – also fall into a collectivist culture, valuing the needs of a group or community such as family rather than merely focusing on the individual. According to Triandis (1995), collectivism is characterised by family integrity, group harmony and behaviours in accordance with group norms, and not personal attitudes, which eventually influence the way people deal with conflict. Cai and Fink (2002) and Pearson and Stephan (1998) noted that individuals in a collectivist culture tend to use passive strategies such as avoiding patterns to avoid conflict. In addition, they also prefer to show less self-disclosure and apply high-context communication styles which emphasise the message conveyed by leaving certain things unsaid and communicating indirectly (Cingo¨z-Ulu & Lalonde, 2006; Gudykunst et al., 1992). However, due to the urbanization and varying cultural norms in Asian societies and intense focus on career advancement, Asian women have taken a step forward to focus in pursuing good education and becoming brave and independent. There have been some indications that many successful Asian countries are moving in the direction of individualism and Asian people are now less willing to sacrifice their personal desires and ambitions for marriage (Jaymess & Yahya, 2019; Jenkins, 2016).

METHODOLOGY
Sample
A quantitative survey was applied to examine the connection between adult romantic dimensions and patterns of interaction during conflicts and, thus, to achieve the main objective of this study. Married individuals were mainly selected from the state of Penang in Malaysia using a combination of purposive sampling and a quota sampling technique. Penang was chosen because it is highly diverse in ethnicity, culture, language and religion, and, as such, represents the collective Malaysian population's characteristics. It is also worth noting that this state has among the nation's highest population densities and is one of the most urbanised states in Malaysia. Quota sampling was applied by taking race and gender into consideration. The researcher also sought to ensure that the total sample was made up of respondents who belong to each of the four family life cycles or stages of marriage (pre-parental, parental, launching and post-parental) to ensure greater applicability of the findings

across different family life cycles. Stage of marriage was also a factor to consider when selecting the sample as it is believed that the level, nature and pattern of conflict could be different at the different stages of marriage (Garner, 2012).

According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sample size guidelines for a population size of 75,000 to 1,000,000 is 384. Another study by Gill et al. (2010) also indicated the sample size for a population of 250,000 to 1,000,000 is 384 (N = 648,999 [married individuals in Penang], S = 384). The final sample was rounded up to 400 to include representative samples across ethnicities, genders and stages of marriage. It consisted of 50.3% males and 49.8% females and thus represented an equal gender proportion. In terms of race or ethnic group, the final sample mainly comprised Chinese people (48.5%), followed by Malays (38.8%) and Indian people (12.8%), reflecting the actual distribution of population characteristics in the area and representing the four family life cycles.

Measures
The measurement for adult romantic attachment dimensions was developed from the Experience in Close Relationships Scale (ECR) invented by Brennan et al. (1998). ECR is one of the most commonly used self-reported instruments of romantic attachment. The measures of attachment consisted of two variables: namely, anxiety and avoidance. These variables were measured based on 36 items (18 items for each variable) in order to determine four categories of adult attachment based on the model of the self and the model of others. The present study adopted the continuous rating of attachment dimensions using a Likert-type scale of 1 to 7 which required the respondents to choose the most relevant attachment dimensions based on anxiety and avoidance scales that matched their attachment descriptions. The original measure for anxiety encompassed 18 items. After conducting a pilot test, however, seven items were removed due to low-reliability value. The remaining scale thus comprised 11 items. From the 18 items of the avoidance scale, six were omitted for the same reason, leaving 12 remaining items for avoidance. All remaining items were found to be reliable.

Past research works have mostly utilised the communication patterns questionnaire (CPQ) developed by Christensen and Sullaway (1984) to explore communication patterns during conflicts. Despite its frequent usage in conflict studies, the original form of CPQ is beleaguered with criticisms, particularly related to the low reliability and inconsistent results derived from different studies (Noller & White, 1990; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Futris et al., 2010). A preliminary survey of open-ended questions was conducted to obtain more precise patterns of conflict communication behaviours. The respondents were asked to recall any recent conflicts in their marriage and to briefly elaborate on the issue behind the conflict, when and where the conflict happened and the duration of the conflict. They were also asked to reflect on how they communicated during the conflict situation. The preliminary survey generated rich qualitative data concerning the patterns of communication that the respondents used during their conflict situations. Using thematic analysis, three general themes – constructive, destructive and avoidance patterns – were found. The constructive pattern was made up of eight items (to discuss, to provide advice, to explain, to discuss with others, to convey apologies, to revert to normal, to persuade and to express emotions). The destructive pattern in this research contained eight items (to nag, to be angry, to yell, to fight, to put pressure upon, to blame each other, to argue and never to give in). Finally, the avoidance pattern comprised four items (to walk away, to ignore, to sulk and to act normally).

Surprisingly, the constructive and avoidance subscales were found to be similar to the CPQ. New patterns emerged and were labelled as destructive patterns to reflect overtly negative reactions and behaviour during conflict found among Malaysian samples. Since the constructive and avoidance subscales representing patterns of interaction were found to be similar to the subscales proposed by the CPQ, several items from the current study were adapted and improvised in tandem with the CPQ (e.g. "during a conflict, I try to discuss the problem with my spouse"; "I often compromise to avoid serious conflict"; "I tend to refuse to discuss the matter further"; "I tend to keep silent during a conflict"). For the new pattern derived from the preliminary survey – namely, the destructive pattern – items were constructed by the researcher and included, for example, "I tend to get angry easily during the conflict argument"; "I yell at my spouse during the conflict argument". The present study has adopted a Likert-type scale of 1–5, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree". Each of the items was found to be reliable in pilot test results. Thus, they were retained in the final questionnaire. The final questionnaire was distributed in both English and Malay languages since the latter is the official language of Malaysia.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was first utilised to generate a theme for the preliminary survey of patterns of interaction during conflicts in this study. Braun and Clarke (2006) described six phases in analysing thematic analysis: familiarisation with data and transcription of data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and report generation/production.

Meanwhile, the relationship between adult romantic attachment and patterns of interaction during a conflict was tested using partial least squares (PLS). PLS is a component-based approach for testing structural equation model (SEM) that allow researchers to simultaneously consider relationships among multiple independent and dependent constructs by answering a set of interrelated research questions in a single systematic and comprehensive analysis. According to Urbach and Ahlemann (2010) and Hair et al. (2019), the analysis can either be used for theory confirmation or as a reasonable alternative for theory testing or theory development and can be utilised to explore the relationships between variables. PLS analysis consists of two stages. The first stage is the assessment of the outer model or measurement model, while stage two involves the assessment and evaluation of the inner model or structural model.

RESULTS

Measurement Model

As we have seen, the research model in PLS analysis consists of two phases. The first phase is a measurement model or outer model, which shows how the constructs and their indicators are related at the observational level. In assessing the measurement model, the study focused on the reliability and validity of the indicators in each construct in order to determine the accuracy of the measures before conducting further analysis of the structural model. The present study consists of five constructs. Two constructs represent adult romantic attachment dimensions: anxiety with a spouse and avoidance with a spouse, while the remaining three constructs represent patterns of interaction during conflict: namely, constructive, destructive and avoidance. After analysing the measurement model, the number of indicators in every construct was reduced. Indicators for anxiety with a spouse

were reduced to three; those representing avoidance with a spouse were reduced to eight, constructive to nine, destructive to nine, and avoidance to four indicators.

The reliability of measures and internal consistency of constructs was analysed through composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha. The reliability result, presented in Table 1, ranged between 0.788 and 0.903 and demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency as all the values were larger than 0.6, a figure frequently judged as acceptable (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hair et al., 2017). Secondly, the SmartPLS bootstrap re-sampling procedure (involving 500 re-samples) was assigned to measure the convergent validity via composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE). The composite reliability values, which prioritise indicators according to their individual reliability, recorded a range of acceptable values between 0.859 and 0.920 as recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). The AVE values were within the acceptable range of 0.511 and 0.747, above the recommended value of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2006; Hair et al., 2017). The discriminant validity was also calculated and the results (see Table 2) indicated that all square roots of AVE exceeded the off-diagonal values in their corresponding row and column. Thus, the result showed satisfactory discriminant validity as the loading of each indicator was higher for its own construct than for other constructs, and each of the constructs loaded highest with their own indicators (Chin, 1998; Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 1: Loadings, internal consistency reliabilities and AVE from measures

Latent Variables	Question items	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	Main Loading	AVE
Anxiety-Spouse	I often want to merge completely with my spouse, and this sometimes scares him/her away.	0.831	0.898	0.838	0.747
	My desire to be very close to my spouse sometimes scares him/her away			0.897	
	I find that my spouse doesn't want to get as close as I would like			0.857	
Avoidance-Spouse	Just when my spouse starts to get close to me, I find myself pulling away	0.863	0.893	0.746	0.513
	I get uncomfortable when my spouse wants to be very close to me.			0.730	
	I want to get close to my spouse, but I keep pulling back			0.691	
	I am nervous when my spouse gets too close to me.			0.704	
	I try to avoid getting too close to my spouse			0.755	
	I find it relatively easy to get close to my spouse (R)			0.689	
	I prefer not to be too close to my spouse			0.614	
	It helps to turn to my spouse in times of need (R)			0.746	

Constructive	During conflict, I try to discuss the problem with my spouse	0.878	0.902	0.797	0.511
	During conflict, I suggest possible solutions			0.830	
	I often compromise to avoid serious conflict			0.713	
	During conflict, I try to understand my spouse			0.787	
	I give advice to my spouse during conflict			0.759	
	I tend to provide a lot of explanation during conflict			0.688	
	I often apologize sincerely during conflict			0.612	
	I act as normal because the problem has been solved			0.651	
	I express my feeling to my spouse during conflict			0.638	
Destructive	I nag and demand during the conflict	0.903	0.920	0.625	0.563
	I tend to get angry easily during the conflict argument			0.602	
	I yell at my spouse during the conflict argument			0.806	
	I threaten my spouse with negative consequences during conflict			0.851	
	I push, shove, slap, hit or kick during the conflict			0.782	
	I pressure my spouse to take some action or stop some action during conflict			0.813	
	I blame, accuse, and criticise my spouse during conflict			0.817	
	I often argue with my spouse during conflict			0.655	
	I never give in during the conflict argument			0.755	
Avoidance	I tend to avoid discussing the problem	0.788	0.859	0.839	0.606
	I tend to keep silent during conflict			0.734	
	I tend to refuse to discuss the matter further			0.868	
	I usually ignore the conflict at hand for a while			0.654	

Note. N= 400, AVE= Average Variance Extracted

Table 2: Discriminant validity of constructs

	AN-S	AV-S	Avoid	Construct	Destruct
AN-S	0.864				
AV-S	0.703	0.716			
Avoid	0.404	0.423	0.778		
Constructive	-0.361	-0.464	-0.349	0.715	
Destructive	0.465	0.518	0.523	-0.345	0.750

Note: N= 400, AN-S: Anxiety Spouse, AV-S: Avoidance Spouse

Structural Model
The structural model covers the relationships among hypothetical constructs. The primary criteria for a structural model or inner model assessment are path coefficient (β) and coefficient of determination (R^2). Hypothesis 1 was not supported: anxiety during romantic adulthood is not a direct predictor of constructive patterns of interaction (β = -0.052, t = 0.825). Hypothesis 2, however, was supported. Anxiety during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of destructive patterns of interaction (β = 0.189, t = 2.632, p < 0.01). Hypothesis 3 was also supported: anxiety during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of avoidance patterns of interaction (β = 0.205, t = 2.408, p < 0.01).

In addition, hypothesis 4 was supported: avoidance during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of constructive patterns of interaction (β = -0.426, t = 7.099, p < 0.001). Hypothesis 5 was also supported. Avoidance during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of destructive patterns of interaction (β = 0.381, t = 5.595, p < 0.001). Finally, hypothesis 6 was supported. Avoidance during romantic adulthood is a direct predictor of avoidance patterns of interaction (β = 0.275, t = 3.508, p < 0.001). Table 3 indicates the hypotheses results. The model in Figure 1, meanwhile, shows that anxiety with a spouse and avoidance with a spouse explained 21.7% (R^2 = .217) of variance in constructive patterns. Additionally, anxiety with a spouse and avoidance with a spouse explained 28.6% (R^2 = .286) of variance in destructive patterns, while anxiety with a spouse and avoidance with a spouse explained 19.9% (R^2 = .199) of variance in avoidance patterns.

Table 3: Partial least square Structural Equation Model results:
Direct effect of romantic adulthood attachment (spouse) and patterns of interaction.

Hypotheses	Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	Result
H1	Anxiety spouse→ constructive	-0.052	0.063	0.825	Not Supported
H2	Anxiety spouse→ destructive	0.189	0.072	2.632**	**Supported**
H3	Anxiety spouse→ avoidance	0.205	0.085	2.408**	**Supported**
H4	Avoidance spouse→ constructive	-0.426	0.060	7.099***	**Supported**
H5	Avoidance spouse→ destructive	0.381	0.068	5.595***	**Supported**
H6	Avoidance spouse→ avoidance	0.275	0.079	3.508***	**Supported**

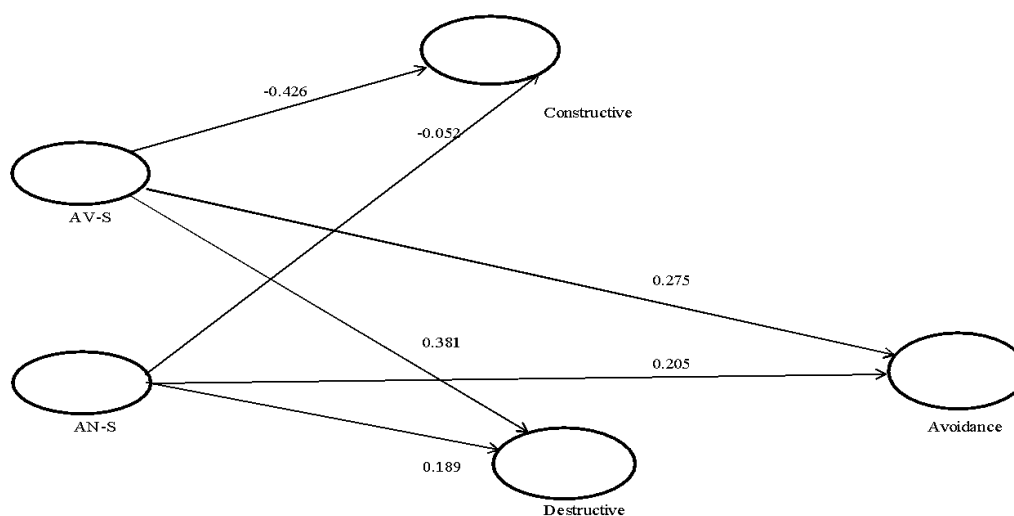Note: *p <.05., **p< .01, ***p<.001

Figure 1: The coefficient of determination (R^2 values). AN-S=anxiety spouse, AV-S=avoidance spouse

DISCUSSIONS

This study set out to understand the underlying relationship between adult romantic attachment dimensions and patterns of interaction during conflicts in a Malaysian context. In general, married individuals who were high in anxiety exhibited destructive and avoidant patterns during a conflict. Similarly, married individuals who were high in avoidance demonstrated high levels of destructive and avoidant patterns of conflict interaction, as well as low levels of constructive patterns during conflicts, and vice versa.

The findings of the present study are consistent with the extant empirical findings that highly anxious individuals have a propensity to apply destructive patterns during a conflict. Those with destructive patterns are highly anxious and tend to commit intimate partner violence (Bonache et al., 2016). The findings of this study also support Baptist's et al. (2012) observation that highly anxious individuals are likely to demand attention – including negative attention – and use aggressive and hostile tactics to engage someone in conflict. According to Firestone (2009), due to the feelings of unworthiness and rejection by others despite their needs to have a close relationship, individuals who have high anxiety tend to act destructively, displaying confusion and unpredictable moods. Overall, this type of individuals perceives more conflict, escalate relational conflict and at the same time experience lower relational quality (Cooper et al., 2018)

In another context, Pietromonaco et al. (2004) identified that avoidance tactics are often employed by individuals with high levels of avoidance who prefer to maintain their interdependence and avoid revelation of personal thoughts, which subsequently leads them to avoid conflict interactions. Highly avoidant individuals have also been found to use more destructive communication patterns during conflicts and exhibit more verbal aggression and withdrawal in delivering and solving emerging issues (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016b). Studies by Lin Shi (2003) and Bartholomew and Allison (2006), finally, indicated that highly avoidant individuals would normally attempt to avoid and confront their partners during a conflict but when the disagreement is unavoidable, they will respond aggressively to eschew intimacy with their partners. This type of insecure attachment style and dysfunctional communication patterns might lead to divorce and barrier to re-partnering after divorce (McNelis & Segrin, 2019).

In contrast, individuals with low levels of anxiety and avoidance exhibited a greater tendency to adopt constructive patterns of communication during conflict. Due to their low levels of anxiety and avoidance, they would view conflict as potentially constructive to the relationship dynamics, making them more oriented and inclined to express their feelings in a positive manner to resolve a dispute (Caughlin & Huston, 2002; Pistole & Arricale, 2003). According to Mardani et al. (2021) secured individuals complain instead of criticising and discuss the conflict issues until they reach an agreement.

In a cultural context, the present study specifically observed a worrying pattern of conflict communication among Malaysian married individuals: namely, the destructive pattern. Destructive patterns in the present study are characterised by aggressive and hostile behaviours, such as pushing, slapping, hitting, kicking, yelling and threatening during a conflict. Indeed, the prevalence of this pattern raises concern as to the wellbeing and emotional health of married couples in Malaysia. Aggressive communication behaviours during a conflict are detrimental to marital satisfaction and relational stability. On the other hand, clear communication among family members will lead to positive and effective interaction (Mustaffa et al., 2021). Past research has evidenced that aggression is often linked to genetic and biological factors, imitation of others aggression, and depression (Liu et al., 2013); thus, a concerted and holistic effort should be meticulously planned and implemented to solve the problem.

LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

Although the findings from the present study indicate interesting and noteworthy results, the study has some limitations. Firstly, the research was conducted using a non-probability sampling technique among respondents in one of the states within Malaysia, thereby reducing the generalizability of the study findings. Future research should thus be conducted in other states so that more representative generalised data can be derived and supported by well-distributed results.

Secondly, the questionnaires were distributed based on self-reported data. None of the items measured the opinions of the respondents' spouses. As such, the researcher needed to rely on the perception of only one spouse reporting on their own and their partner's relational attachment and patterns of conflict communication, which may not be wholly accurate and objective. Future research should, therefore, consider having both partners report on their own attachment styles and comparing their assessment for greater validity and accuracy. Additionally, future research should be conducted by developing a shorter version of the ECR by removing the redundant and low-factor loading items due to deletions of many items representing each dimension.

Regardless of the aforementioned shortcomings, this study notably contributes to a limited number of studies on the relationship between adult romantic attachment dimensions and patterns of interaction during a conflict in a Malaysian context. The results corroborated most of the predicted outcomes and findings from the literature, which advocated that conflicts in marriage are handled in destructive, avoidant and less constructive ways by individuals with high anxiety and high avoidance and vice versa. The findings thus echo results derived from other studies conducted in Western countries. Nonetheless, the discovery of destructive communication patterns among married individuals in Malaysia is a significant concern among the researchers. Despite being known for politeness and courteousness in communicating with others, Malaysians are shown to exhibit negative

communication at home. Therefore, this study proposes that government agencies should design effective couples' therapy programmes for couples in conflict.

From a practitioner's viewpoint, findings from this study would significantly assist counsellors or psychologists in counselling and therapy programmes specifically involving problematic married couples. Marriage counsellors may be able to utilise the ECR questionnaire and the revised version of CPQ in order to identify the clients' attachment styles and interaction patterns during a conflict. Through a more profound understanding of their clients, counsellors may help to shape the clients' behaviour by teaching awareness and educating them towards the secure attachment style and constructive conflict patterns since couples' interactions can easily be manipulated. Findings from this study can also be included in the materials presented during premarital counselling programs to improve couples' interactions towards attachment security and to help them to understand how to react to a couple's sign of distress or dissatisfaction.

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