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COPING STYLES AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT AS PREDICTORS OF ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY OF PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Ayesha Rania [a*], Abdul Aleem Ali [b], & Noor Zahra [c]

[a] Fazaia Bilquis College of Education for Women, PAF Nur Khan Base, Rawalpindi, Affiliated with Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan
[b] Foundation University School of Science and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: abdulaleemali18@gmail.com
[c] Riphah International University, Gulberg Green Campus, Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: noorzahra670@gmail.com

*Correspondence to: Ayesha Rania, Fazaia Bilquis College of Education for Women, PAF Nur Khan Base, Rawalpindi, Affiliated with Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan. E-mail: ayesharania062@gmail.com. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3025-5685

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ABSTRACT

Romantic relationships are prevalent throughout university life, yet little is known about how conflict with a partner and the way students handle stress relate to their studies and mental health in Pakistan. This study examined whether coping styles and romantic relationship conflict predict academic performance and psychological well-being among young adults, and whether coping differs between men and women. Quantitative cross-sectional design was used. 210 university students aged 20–30 years (105 men and 105 women) in a romantic relationship studying in Islamabad and Rawalpindi were purposively sampled. Romantic Partner Conflict Scale, Brief COPE, Academic Performance Scale and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale were administered. All instruments had acceptable reliability (α=.72–.80). Simple linear regressions showed that neither coping styles nor romantic relationship conflict significantly predicted academic performance (β = .046 and .053 respectively) or psychological well-being (β = .030 and −.013), and each model explained 0.3% of variance or less. Independent samples t tests showed that men and women coped and reported conflict similarly. These results indicate that students in this sample were able to keep relationship problems from spilling over into studies and mental health because of resilience and social support but also point to the need for subscale level and longitudinal designs in future work. Universities still may need confidential counseling and peer support services.

I. INTRODUCTION

University years fall within what Arnett (2000) called emerging adulthood: identity exploration, instability and growing investment in intimate partnerships. For many students a romantic partner becomes a daily source of companionship but also a daily source of friction. In a study involving undergraduates at an Islamic university in Uganda, Kasagga and Nakijoba (2020) discovered that about three-fourths of the students were involved in a romantic relationship, indicating that the scenarios discussed here are quite common among students; the way they handle these situations (and how they deal with issues when they arise) may be significant for two key outcomes that universities prioritize: students' academic performance and their psychological well-being. Disagreement is normal in close relationships. Coser (1956) showed that conflict can serve constructive functions as well as destructive ones and reviews of couple research have shown that the way partners argue — not just whether they argue — differentiates relationships that thrive from those that deteriorate (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Poor relationship quality has also been linked in a meta-analysis of marital studies to modest but reliable health

costs (Robles et al., 2014). Zacchilli et al. (2009) constructed the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale to measure six ways in which partners manage disagreements: compromise, avoidance, interactional reactivity, separation, domination and submission. Compromise is generally considered the constructive end of this range; domination, interactional reactivity and separation are usually viewed as destructive. An attachment perspective adds that conflict is stressful partly because it threatens the sense of security a partner normally provides (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017). And this threat has a physiological side too. Gunlicks-Stoessel and Powers (2009) looked at romantic partners' coping strategies as well as cortisol reactivity and recovery during relationship conflict and their work points to one particular bind: the person you would usually turn to for comfort is the person you are in conflict with. How couples cope together also matters. A meta-analysis of dyadic coping found that partners who coped together and supportedively were more satisfied with their relationship (Falconier et al., 2015).

Coping can be described as the mental and behavioral efforts individuals make to manage demands that exceed their available resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to the transactional model, the choice between problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches is influenced by how an individual assesses the situation. Carver et al. (1989) and Carver (1997) expanded on this framework to develop the COPE inventory along with its shorter version, the Brief COPE, which is commonly used to evaluate 14 different coping strategies. Researchers often categorize these strategies into adaptive groups, including active coping, planning, and positive reframing, as well as maladaptive groups, which encompass denial, self-blame, and behavioral disengagement. A review of coping in childhood and adolescence noted that the usefulness of any strategy depends on the stressor and the context (Compas et al., 2001), and Miller's (1987) monitoring and blunting framework makes a similar point by showing that seeking information helps when a threat is controllable but can backfire when it is not. In young adults, maladaptive coping has been associated with greater depressive symptoms (Thompson et al., 2010). Coping may also differ by gender; a meta-analysis found that women more often reported using support seeking and emotion-focused strategies, although the differences were generally small (Tamres et al., 2002). Psychological well-being is commonly understood through Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model, which includes autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The structure of this model was later examined and supported by Ryff and Keyes (1995), and Seifert (2005) summarized the properties of the scales that operationalize it. Because positive relations with others is one of the six dimensions, a troubled romantic relationship is a plausible threat to well-being, as Erikson's (1950) account of the intimacy versus isolation stage would also suggest. Social exchange and interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) offers a related argument, in that relationships whose costs exceed their rewards tend to be less satisfying and more distressing.

Evidence on academic and psychological outcomes is mixed. Among teacher education students, coping strategies have been examined together with academic progress and psychological distress (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2020), and coping strategies have been related to academic satisfaction among university students (Dorado Barbé et al., 2025). Martínez et al. (2019) asked whether gender shapes the coping strategies that lead to well-being and better academic performance. Regarding romantic involvement, an analysis of young adults in the United States concluded that relationships can support rather than hinder educational attainment (Tin Tin et al., 2022), while Ullah Khan et al. (2025) examined the harmful psychological effects of romantic distraction on academic performance. In Indonesia, Rasyida et al. (2025) studied the relationship between relationship quality and college students' psychological well-being, and Parungao (2024) examined coping styles and perceived social support in relation to anxiety and depression among students. Taken together, this literature leaves three gaps. First, relationship conflict and coping are usually studied separately, even though conflict is exactly the kind of stressor that coping theory is meant to explain. Second, evidence from Pakistani university samples is limited, and these samples often contain unequal numbers of men and women. Third, the two outcomes of interest, academic performance and psychological well-being, are rarely examined in the same study. The present research addressed these gaps by testing, in an equally divided sample of men and women from universities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, whether coping styles and romantic relationship conflict are associated with academic performance and psychological well-being, and whether coping styles differ by gender (see Figure 1).

Objectives of the study

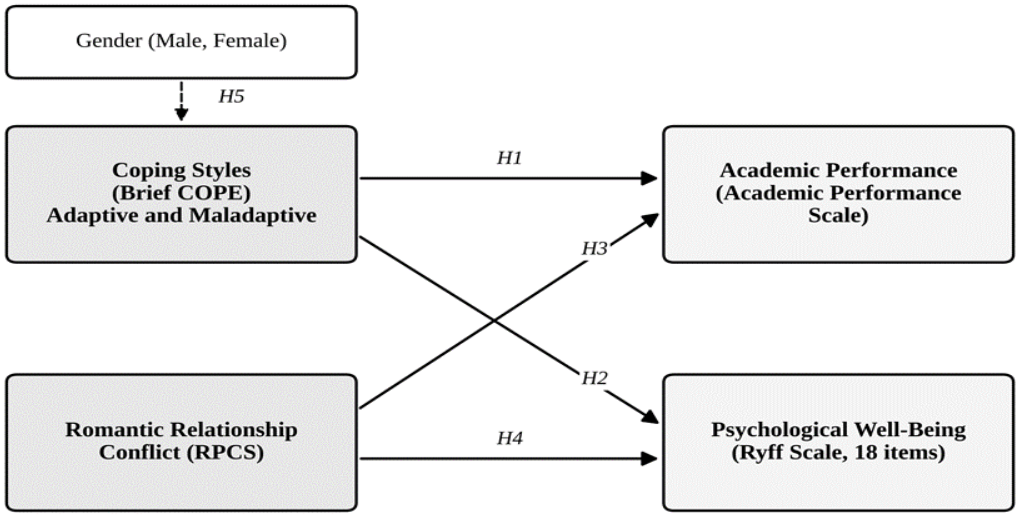
1. To investigate the impact of coping styles on academic performance.

2. To investigate the impact of coping styles on psychological well-being.
3. To investigate the impact of conflicts in romantic relationships on academic performance.
4. To investigate the impact of conflicts in romantic relationships on psychological well-being.
5. To study the difference in coping styles, and its effect on psychological well-being and academic performance, among individuals experiencing romantic relationship conflict.

Hypotheses of the study

H_1: There will be an impact of adaptive and maladaptive coping styles on academic performance.
H_0: There will be no impact of adaptive and maladaptive coping styles on academic performance.
H_2: There will be an impact of adaptive and maladaptive coping styles on psychological well-being.
H_0: There will be no impact of adaptive and maladaptive coping styles on psychological well-being.
H_3: There will be an impact of romantic relationship on academic performance.
H_0: There will be no impact of romantic relationship on academic performance.
H_4: There will be an impact of romantic relationship on psychological well-being.
H_0: There will be no impact of romantic relationship on psychological well-being.
H_5: There will be a difference in adaptive and maladaptive coping styles between males and females experiencing romantic relationships.

Figure I: Conceptual Model of the Study



Group comparison (H5) tests whether coping styles differ between males and females.

II. METHOD

Participants

The study followed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. It was carried out in two phases. The first phase was a pilot with 50 male and female young adults from Foundation University, Air University (E-9 campus), and Fazaia Bilquis College of Education for Women, and its purpose was to check the suitability of the research problem and the reliability of the scales. The second phase was the main survey, which collected data from 210 participants and was used to test the hypotheses. Questionnaires in both phases were administered in person. The main sample consisted of 210 young adults (aged 20 to 30 years) who were equally distributed between men (n = 105) and women (n = 105). They were enrolled in different departments at universities located in twin cities Islamabad and Rawalpindi (Riphah University, Foundation University, Air University, ARID University, Bahria University Islamabad and Fazaia Bilquis College of Education for Women). A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used. Students were eligible if they were enrolled in one of the participating institutions; were between 20 and 30 years old; were currently in a romantic relationship; students outside this age range and those not in a relationship were excluded from the study. Written permission was obtained from each institution before data collection started.

Measures

[I] Demographic Information Form: Participants filled out this form with details about their age, gender, level of education, work status, and marital status. **[II]** Romantic Partner Conflict: Romantic partner conflict was assessed using the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (RPCS; Zacchilli et al., 2009), a 39-item measure that evaluates how partners deal with disagreements and how often they fight. It consists of six dimensions: compromise, avoidance, interactional reactivity, separation, domination, and submission. Originally developed for premarital couples, it has also been used with married couples. Internal consistency in previous work is generally good (Cronbach's alpha > .80 usually and up to .95). **[III]** Academic Performance: Academic performance was assessed using an 8-item self-report scale (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2020). This measure captures perceptions of academic performance relative to study habits, effort, and engagement as opposed to GPA. Other studies have shown an internal consistency of .89 and a test-retest reliability of .85. **[IV]** Psychological Well-Being: Psychological well-being was measured using the 18-item version of Ryff's (1989) scale. Six dimensions are measured by three items each: self-acceptance, personal growth, autonomy, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and environmental mastery. Seifert (2005) reported an internal consistency of about .80 for the scales. Convergent evidence was also reported. **[V]** Coping Styles: Coping was measured using the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997), a 28-item measure that assesses 14 various coping strategies. Two items comprise each strategy. For the purposes of this research, religion and spirituality were combined. Based on the general adaptive-maladaptive classification, positive (adaptive) coping strategies were defined as: religion/spirituality, active coping, planning, acceptance, positive reframing, emotional support, and humor. Maladaptive coping strategies were defined as: self-distraction, self-blame, venting, behavioral disengagement, denial, and substance use. Internal consistency for the subscales was good (Cronbach's alpha range of .72–.84). The inventory possesses good construct validity.

Procedure

Participants received a cover letter describing the purpose of the study together with a consent form, and they then completed a short demographic sheet (age, gender, and education) followed by the four questionnaires. The authors administered the forms face to face at the participating institutions, and data collection took place over a six-month period. Responses were coded and entered into SPSS for analysis. All participants gave their informed consent, guaranteeing their freedom to withdraw at any moment, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The information was utilized only for study, and participants' privacy and identities were protected. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to establish the reliability of each scale. Four simple linear regressions, using the enter method, tested whether coping styles and romantic relationship conflict predicted academic performance and psychological well-being (Hypotheses 1 to 4). An independent-samples t test compared men and women on coping and conflict scores (Hypothesis 5), with Levene's test used to check the equality of variances. The significance level was set at $p < .05$. The sample was balanced by design at 105 men and 105 women.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Psychometric Properties of the Study Variables (N = 210)

Scale	α	No. of items
Romantic Partner Conflict Scale	.801	39
Psychological Well-Being Scale	.789	18
Brief COPE Scale	.722	28
Academic Performance Scale	.791	8

Note. k = number of items; α = Cronbach's alpha.

Reliability coefficients for the four instruments are reported in Table 1. All four scales met the conventional threshold for acceptable internal consistency: the RPCS (α = .801), the Psychological Well-Being Scale (α = .789), the Brief COPE (α = .722), and the Academic Performance Scale (α = .791).

Table II: Regression Coefficients of Coping Styles on Academic Performance (N = 210)

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*p*	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Constant	17.596	2.848	—	6.179	—	11.982	23.210
Coping styles	.027	.041	.046	.671	.503	−.053	.107

Note. $R = .046$, $R^2 = .002$, $F = 0.450$.

A simple linear regression tested whether coping styles predicted academic performance (Table 2). The model was not significant, F(1, 208) = 0.450, p = .503, and it accounted for only 0.2% of the variance in academic performance (R^2 = .002). Coping styles did not significantly predict academic performance (β = .046, t = .671, p = .503). The first hypothesis was therefore not supported.

Table III: Regression Coefficients of Coping Styles on Psychological Well-Being (N = 210)

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*p*	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Constant	53.129	5.604	—	9.48	—	42.080	64.177
Coping styles	.035	.080	.030	.436	.664	−.123	.192

Note. R = .030, R^2 = .001, F = 0.19.

Table 3 presents the regression of psychological well-being on coping styles. The model was not significant, F(1, 208) = 0.19, p = .664, and explained 0.1% of the variance (R^2 = .001). Coping styles did not significantly predict psychological well-being (β = .030, t = .436, p = .664), so the second hypothesis was not supported.

Table IV: Regression Coefficients of Romantic Relationship Conflict on Academic Performance (N = 210)

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*p*	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Constant	17.354	2.848	—	6.136	—	11.778	22.929
Romantic relationship conflict	.018	.023	.053	.762	.447	−.028	.063

Note. $R = .053$, $R^2 = .003$, $F = 0.581$.

As shown in Table 4, romantic relationship conflict did not predict academic performance. The overall model was not significant, F(1, 208) = 0.581, p = .447, and it explained 0.3% of the variance (R^2 = .003). The standardized coefficient was small and not significant (β = .053, t = .762, p = .447). The third hypothesis was not supported.

Table V: Regression Coefficients of Romantic Relationship Conflict on Psychological Well-Being (N = 210)

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*p*	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Constant	56.566	5.57	—	10.156	—	45.586	67.547
Romantic relationship conflict	−.008	.045	−.013	−.186	.853	−.098	.081

Note. $R = .013$, $R^2 = .000$, $F = 0.035$.

Table 5 shows that romantic relationship conflict did not predict psychological well-being. The model was not significant, F(1, 208) = 0.035, p = .853, and it explained virtually none of the variance (R^2 = .000). The coefficient was negligible (β = −.013, t = −.186, p = .853), and the fourth hypothesis was not supported.

Table VI: Independent-Samples t Test of Coping Styles and Romantic Relationship Conflict by Gender (N = 210)

Variable	Group	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	MD	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
RPC	Males	105	121.41	19.70	−0.11	208	−0.28	−5.05	5.00
	Females	105	121.44	17.09					
BC	Males	105	69.48	10.98	.217	208	.31	−2.53	3.16
	Females	105	69.17	9.95					

Note. RPC = Romantic Relationship Conflict; BC = Brief COPE.

An independent-samples t test compared men and women on romantic relationship conflict (RPC) and coping (BC) scores (Table 6). Men and women did not differ on conflict scores, t(208) = −0.11, p = .991, or on coping scores, t(208) = 0.217, p = .828. The fifth hypothesis was therefore not supported.

IV.DISCUSSION

The study was designed to test whether coping styles and conflict in romantic relationships explain how university students do academically and psychologically (and whether men and women cope differently). Every regression model was non-significant (at most 0.3% variance explained) and men and women had almost identical mean scores on both conflict and coping. The hypotheses weren't supported but they are informative anyway: they tell us that for these students' relationship difficulties and coping habits were not strongly related to grades or well-being; there is room for more research along those lines (coping subscales, protective factors like social support etc.), more varied samples etc.; the null results were across all outcomes so this wasn't a statistical fluke.

Coping Styles and Outcomes

Hypotheses 1 and 2 expected coping to be related to academic performance and psychological well-being but coping was unrelated to both. This is in contrast with work showing that maladaptive coping is associated with depressive symptoms (Thompson et al., 2010) and coping relates to academic satisfaction (Dorado Barbé et al., 2025). One reason may be that social support absorbs part of the effect of coping: Parungao (2024) studied coping styles and perceived social support together among university students; it's possible that students whose families and friends are supportive are less affected by the strategy they use. A second reason is theory itself: coping is not good or bad all the time, value of a strategy depends on situation (Compas et al., 2001; Miller, 1987). A student who avoids thinking about an argument during exams might still get high grades even though avoidance is classed as maladaptive. A measurement point deserves equal weight. The hypotheses talked about adaptive and maladaptive coping separately but the regressions used one coping score. Adding adaptive and maladaptive items together can hide opposing effects because strategies that help and strategies that harm would partly cancel each other out. The present analysis cannot rule out that subscale or profile-level analyses would find associations that the aggregate score missed.

Romantic Relationship Conflict and Outcomes

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that romantic relationship conflict would be related to academic performance and well-being (attachment and exchange perspectives see Feeney & Karantzas, 2017; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) but were not supported. These results are consistent with mixed evidence in previous studies Tin Tin et al. (2022) showed relationships can help rather than hinder educational goals whereas Ullah Khan et al. (2025) described harmful effects of romantic distraction on academic performance. Rasyida et al. (2025) examined relationship quality and the well-being of college students in Indonesia, a context that, like Pakistan, places a strong emphasis on family and friend networks. Several features of the present design could also have contributed. Only students who were currently in a relationship took part, so the range of relationship experiences was restricted. The RPCS captures the styles that partners use to handle disagreements, and a total score blends constructive styles such as compromise with destructive styles such as reactivity; these may have opposite associations with outcomes. Academic performance was measured through self-perception, which can be less sensitive than grades. Finally, the associations may be small. A sensitivity calculation for a sample of 210 suggests that, with 80% power and a two-tailed .05 criterion, the study could reliably detect correlations of about r = .19 or larger. The 95% confidence intervals around the coefficients are narrow enough to make large effects unlikely, but they do not exclude small ones.

Gender Differences

Hypothesis 5 was not supported since men and women reported almost identical coping and conflict levels. Meta-analytic evidence shows small average gender differences in coping (Tamres et al., 2002); Martínez et al. (2019) specifically looked at whether gender shapes the link between coping, well-being and academic performance. Because differences in the literature are small a sample this size would have had little power to detect them. The equal gender split here is an advantage because it avoids the male under-representation that limits many earlier samples.

Implications of the Study

The results should not be taken as evidence that students' relationships and coping habits are unimportant — they do show that in this sample academic performance and well-being were not strongly related to either variable (which is consistent with students who manage their personal difficulties and study separately). But difficulties may hide anyway. Universities could provide anonymous, confidential counselling so students who don't want to discuss relationship problems with family or friends have somewhere to go. Workshops on emotional regulation and coping skills and peer support groups would be low-cost options for students who rely heavily on avoidance; trained staff to notice early signs of strain would help ensure that students who appear to be functioning well on the surface are not missed. These recommendations are based on general evidence about student support not an effect detected here.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations here: the design was cross sectional so changes over time cannot be tested; direction of influence is not known; purposive sampling from universities in two cities limits generalizability; all data were self-reported which makes them open to social desirability (especially on sensitive topics like relationship conflict); analyses were done on total scores only; social support, resilience, relationship length or relationship satisfaction weren't measured (all of which might help explain the null results). Future research could use larger more diverse samples, analyse adaptive vs maladaptive coping subscales and individual RPCS dimensions separately, test emotional regulation, emotional intelligence and social support as moderators or mediators, follow couples longitudinally etc. Objective academic records (grade point average), qualitative interviews and additional demographic variables (relationship duration, living arrangements, family background) would also add to the picture. Selecting participants who are currently in high conflict relationships would give a more direct test of the conflict hypotheses too.

V. CONCLUSION

In a balanced sample of 210 Pakistani university students in romantic relationships neither coping styles nor conflict with a partner significantly predicted academic performance or psychological well-being and coping did not differ by gender. These results do not support the view that conflict with a partner or choice of coping strategy has strong direct effect on either outcome in this population but they do indicate that more refined measurement, attention to protective factors (e.g. social support) and longitudinal work are required before conclusions about effects of relationship conflict on student life can be drawn.

Conflict of interest.

There isn't any conflict of interest.

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