

PARENTAL CONFLICT FREQUENCY AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT AMONG YOUNG ADULTS: EVIDENCE FROM VOI SUB-COUNTY, TAITA-TAVETA COUNTY, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of frequent parental conflicts on romantic relationship commitment among young people in Voi Sub-County, Taita-Taveta County, Kenya. Guided by Bowlby's Attachment Theory, specifically the tenets of secure versus insecure attachments and Internal Working Models (IWMs), the study adopted a descriptive and correlational research design. A sample of 371 young adults from three higher learning institutions was selected through stratified random sampling using the Yamane formula. Relationship commitment was measured using items adapted from The Investment Model Scale; , while parental conflict frequency was assessed using items adapted from the Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC;). Qualitative data were obtained through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 10 counsellors at Voi Youth Center and analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed that parental conflict frequency accounted for 22% of unique variance in relationship commitment beyond demographic controls (standardized beta = -0.418, p less than .001), constituting a moderate-to-large negative effect. Qualitative findings identified two dominant themes: fear of repeating parental patterns, and avoidance of long-term commitment.. The study concludes that frequent parental conflict is a significant independent predictor of reduced romantic relationship commitment among young adults in Voi Sub-County. It recommends the integration of relationship education curricula in higher learning institutions, professional development for youth counsellors, and community-based conflict resolution programs to address the intergenerational transmission of unhealthy relational patterns.

Keywords: Attachment Theory: Internal Working Models: Interparental Conflict: Kenya: Parental Conflict: Relationship commitment

Introduction

Parental conflict is the disagreement between parents and its impact is both on the members of the marital union and also on the children. Especially when destructive, it has consistently been shown to have damaging effects on the offspring's psychological adjustment ([3]; [5]), including on emerging adults' romantic relationships ([6]. [7] established that parental destructive conflict patterns lead children to develop behavioural problems, whereas constructive conflicts characterised by resolution are associated with children's positive reactions to marital problems.

According to Erikson [8], young adulthood is the stage of development of late adolescence between the ages of 18 and 29, where people deal with the psychosocial crisis of intimacy versus isolation. At this stage, individuals begin to explore romantic relationships leading to long-term commitment. As romantic relationship involvement is an important developmental task ([9]), emerging adults in romantic relationships may perceive that they have accomplished an important life task.

Taita-Taveta County is one of the regions in Kenya with the highest incidence of domestic violence. Data shows that 38% of women aged 15–49 have experienced such violence at least once in their lives ([10]; [11]). The county ranks second after Tana River County (42%) in intimate partner violence cases in the larger coastal region and is among the top 10 counties nationally with the highest reported cases. Recent data further underscores the escalating situation, with 640 GBV cases recorded by the Taita-Taveta County Government in 2024 alone ([12]), and 186 GBV cases reported by hospitals and police between January and May 2025 ([13]).

Frequent and intense parental conflict during adolescence has been found to undermine young people's belief in their ability to resolve conflict with romantic partners, resulting in higher levels of conflict and lower relationship quality in adults' romantic relationships ([14]). Although [15] argued that romantic relationship commitment among young people is influenced by parent-adolescent conflict, that study did not empirically examine the specific conflict behaviours within parental interactions; frequency of verbal aggression, physical altercations, and child involvement, that shape romantic relationship outcomes. The current study addresses this gap by systematically measuring the frequency of these specific parental conflict behaviours and determining their influence on relationship commitment among young adults in Voi Sub-County.

Problem Statement

The influence of parental conflict on young people's romantic relationships is a complex and multifaceted issue. Exposure to parental conflict, particularly when it involves aggression or hostility, increases the likelihood of children experiencing or perpetuating these behaviours later in life. Studies indicate that children who witness domestic violence are more likely to accept violence as a normative behaviour in their own relationships, perpetuating a cycle of violence across generations.

As of 2022, Taita-Taveta County was among the regions in Kenya with the highest reported cases of domestic violence, with 38% of residents aged 15–49 having experienced it at least once in their lifetime. Voi Sub-County, in particular, had the highest prevalence of various types of violence, including physical abuse (14%) and sexual violence within relationships (30%) ([16]).

Despite these statistics, limited studies have adequately explored these issues in relation to romantic relationship commitment among young adults in Taita-Taveta County. While research points to a connection between parental conflict and romantic relationship commitment among young people, there is a dearth of context-specific empirical evidence in the Kenyan setting. Against this backdrop, this study evaluated the influence of frequent parental conflicts on romantic relationship commitment in Voi Sub-County, Taita-Taveta County.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question:

What is the influence of frequent parental conflicts on romantic relationship commitment among young people in Voi sub-County, Taita-Taveta County?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory by John [1] guided this study. Bowlby posited that early interactions with caregivers, including the presence of conflict, create a template for how individuals form and maintain relationships later in life. Frequent parental conflict may disrupt this foundation, affecting adult relational outcomes ([17]). The theory highlights two particularly relevant tenets for this objective. First, Secure versus Insecure Attachments: secure attachments, fostered by consistent and supportive caregiving, promote healthy relationships. In contrast, insecure attachments (e.g., anxious or avoidant), often resulting from unstable environments like parental conflict, can lead to difficulties in emotional regulation and relationship commitment ([18]). Second, Internal Working Models (IWMs): mental frameworks developed from early caregiver experiences. Young adults exposed to frequent parental conflict may form IWMs that expect instability or rejection, influencing their behaviour and expectations in romantic relationships ([19]).

Parental Conflict and Relationship commitment in Young People

Commitment in a romantic relationship is defined as the intent or desire of a person to continue maintaining the relationship longer [20] mentioned this metric as being highly influenced by parental conflicts during the adolescent romantic period. According to [21], established that parental divorce and parental conflict were negatively correlated with the quality of romantic relationships. Individuals who experience the dissolution of their parents' marriage demonstrate reduced commitment. Further, [22] identified a significant intergenerational transmission of relationship quality, particularly regarding commitment. Offspring who experience parental conflict and subsequent divorce are likely to replicate the relationship attitudes and behaviors of their parents.

Based on [23] adults who see marriage as not a lifelong or permanent commitment are less likely to show commitment in their relationships. That link is influential even during the dating period or couple's marriage. Despite these relationships between the variables appearing highly bidirectional, there is a clear indication that young adults are developmentally shaped by various experiences and observations of their parents' romantic relationships.

However, [22] did not establish whether other factors like parental conflict may contribute to the success or failure of a romantic relationship. The present study therefore aimed to determine the influence of parental conflicts and relationship commitment in Young People.

In Kenya, [24] identified a positive correlation between parental conflict and victim bullying within school environments in Kiambu County. The research utilised a correlational study design and targeted 13,772 adolescent students and young adults across 55 schools within the Kiambu County region. This study differs from the current investigation in several critical respects. First, the dependent variable was victim bullying in school settings, not romantic relationship quality. Second, the sample comprised secondary school adolescents, not young adults aged 18 to 29 years enrolled in higher learning institutions.

Collectively, while these studies establish the prevalence and general consequences of parental conflict, a notable gap remains. No study identified within the Kenyan literature has empirically examined the influence of parental conflict frequency on romantic relationship commitment among young adults in a higher learning institution setting in Voi Sub-County, Taita-Taveta County. The current study therefore fills this methodological, conceptual, and population-specific gap.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive and correlational research design. According to [28], descriptive research designs are used when the investigator seeks to describe the characteristics of a variable within a study. The correlational design was used because it explored relationships to make predictions ([29]), enabling the researcher to establish whether and to what degree a relationship exists between variables. In this study, the correlational design was used to determine the influence of parental conflict frequency on romantic relationship commitment among young adults in Voi Sub-County, Taita-Taveta County.

Area of Study and Study Population

The study was conducted in Voi Sub-County, Taita-Taveta County, geographically located at Latitude: $-3^{\circ}23'45.78''$ S and Longitude: $38^{\circ}33'21.92''$ E ([30]; 2020). Voi Sub-County has the largest population in the County and records the highest prevalence of domestic

violence in the region ([16]). The study population comprised 5,760 students from three higher learning institutions; Taita-Taveta University (TTU; $n = 2,000$), Taita-Taveta National Polytechnic (TTNP; $n = 3,060$), and Kenya Medical Training College (KMTC), Voi Campus ($n = 700$). In addition, there were 10 counsellors at the Voi Youth Center.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

The Yamane [33] formula was used to determine the sample size at a 93% confidence interval ($e = 0.07$), yielding $n = 400$ students. Stratified random sampling using Probability Proportionate to Size (PPS) was employed to allocate proportional samples across institutions: TTU ($n = 139$), TTNP ($n = 213$), and KMTC ($n = 48$). Following data collection and preliminary data cleaning, 371 questionnaires were deemed suitable for analysis, representing a response rate of 92.75%. Purposive sampling was used to select 10 counsellors from the Voi Youth Center, who were uniquely positioned to provide qualitative insights into how parental conflict shapes young adults' romantic relationship patterns.

Data Collection Instruments

Two data collection instruments were used. The Student Questionnaire comprised four sections. Section B assessed parental conflict frequency using items adapted from the Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; [3]), with responses rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 5 = Always). Section D measured romantic relationship commitment using items adapted from the Investment Model Scale [2], with responses on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree). The CPIC frequency subscale yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.952$, and the Investment Model Scale yielded $\alpha = 0.921$, both exceeding the acceptable threshold of $\alpha = 0.70$ (see table 1) ([35]; [36]).

Table 1. Reliability Analysis Results

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Item Count	Status
Parental Conflict	0.952	10	Acceptable
Relationship commitment	0.921	10	Acceptable

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide was administered to 10 counsellors at the Voi Youth Center and comprised 13 open-ended questions organized into four thematic sections, including a dedicated section on the influence of parental conflict on romantic relationship commitment. Face and content validity were established through expert review by academics in the School of Social Sciences.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using hierarchical linear regression in R-Statistics. Relationship commitment was measured using the Investment Model Scale, with mean scores interpreted as follows: 0.00–1.33 (low), 1.34–2.66 (moderate), and 2.67–4.00 (high). Pearson correlation and hierarchical regression analyses examined the relationship between parental conflict frequency and relationship commitment, with demographic variables (age and gender) entered as control variables in Step 1. Standardised regression coefficients (beta) were interpreted using Cohen's [35] effect size guidelines (small: $r = 0.10$ – 0.29 ; medium: $r = 0.30$ – 0.49 ; large: $r \geq 0.50$). Qualitative data from FGDs were analysed using [4] six-phase thematic analysis framework, with coding conducted inductively and results mapped onto the study objective.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Maseno University Ethics Review Committee (MUERC), and a research permit was issued by the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through anonymous questionnaires, use of pseudonyms in qualitative data, and secure storage of all data.

Analysis, Interpretation and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics

The study achieved a response rate of 92.75%, with 371 of the 400 sampled questionnaires deemed suitable for analysis. The sample was predominantly aged 21–23 years (37.5%), followed by 18–20 years (26.1%), 24–26 years (21.3%), and 27–29 years (15.1%). The gender distribution was fairly balanced: male respondents accounted for 53.6% ($n = 199$) and female respondents for 46.4% ($n = 172$). Age and gender were incorporated as control variables in the hierarchical regression analyses, consistent with prior literature demonstrating their independent associations with relationship outcomes ([27]; [38]). This enabled the isolation of parental conflict's unique predictive effect beyond demographic influences.

Frequency of Parental Conflict

To determine the frequency of parental conflict experienced by young adults, a multi-level descriptive analysis was conducted using the frequency subscale of the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; [3]). Item-level means and standard deviations were computed for each of the ten conflict behaviours and ranked from most to least frequent. The continuous composite parental conflict mean (PC_Mean) was then categorised into three frequency bands: Low (1.00–2.33), Moderate (2.34–3.66), and High (3.67–5.00), derived by dividing the 5-point Likert scale into approximate thirds.

Table 2. Item-Level Descriptive Statistics for Parental Conflict Frequency ($n = 371$)

Rank	Item Description	Mean	SD
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Rank	Item Description	Mean	SD
1	Nag and complain frequently	3.049	1.527
2	Yell during arguments	2.925	1.652
3	Say mean things during arguments	2.903	1.635
4	Insult/blame partner in front of children	2.898	1.482
5	Argue in front of children	2.846	1.448
6	Involve children in conflicts	2.760	1.587
7	Threaten divorce/separation	2.733	1.569
8	Silent treatment	2.650	1.541
9	Throw things during arguments	2.431	1.541
10	Physical fight in presence of children	2.334	1.469

Note. Items ranked by mean score. Scale: 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Low frequency: $M = 1.00\text{--}2.33$; Moderate frequency: $M = 2.34\text{--}3.66$; High frequency: $M = 3.67\text{--}5.00$.

As shown in Table 2, the most frequently reported parental conflict behaviour was nagging and complaining ($M = 3.049$, $SD = 1.527$), followed by yelling during arguments ($M = 2.925$, $SD = 1.652$) and saying mean things ($M = 2.903$, $SD = 1.635$). The top five behaviours all fell within the moderate frequency range ($2.34\text{--}3.66$), indicating that verbal and emotionally charged conflict manifestations constituted the primary mode of interparental conflict experienced by young adults in Voi Sub-County. Behaviours involving direct child exposure — insulting a partner in front of children, arguing in front of children, and involving children in conflicts — all ranked within the top six items, indicating that child exposure was normative rather than exceptional. More severe physical behaviours showed the lowest frequencies, though their relatively high standard deviations ($SD > 1.4$) signal that a meaningful subset of young adults encountered them regularly. The wide standard deviations across all items confirm that conflict exposure was far from uniform: while some young adults rarely witnessed these behaviours, others encountered them very frequently, consistent with Schubert's [39] observation that conflict exposure varies considerably across socioeconomic contexts.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Parental Conflict Categories ($n = 371$)

Category	Score Range	Count	Percentage	Mean	SD
High Frequency	3.67–5.00	112	30.19%	4.319	0.440
Moderate Frequency	2.34–3.66	97	26.15%	3.089	0.354
Low Frequency	1.00–2.33	162	43.67%	1.469	0.433

Note. Categories derived from the 5-point Likert scale divided into approximate thirds. Combined moderate and high frequency = 56.34%.

Table 3 presents the overall distribution across frequency categories. While 43.67% ($n = 162$) of respondents fell within the low frequency category, a combined majority of 56.34% reported moderate-to-high frequency parental conflict. Most notably, 30.19% ($n = 112$) were classified in the high frequency category, representing nearly one-third of the sample. This indicates that for a substantial proportion of young adults in Voi Sub-County, growing up amid parental discord was not an exception but a lived norm, consistent with the county's documented status as one of the highest domestic violence regions in Kenya ([10]; [11]).

FGD data from the 10 counsellors at Voi Youth Center yielded two themes that contextualised these quantitative findings: emotional baggage and trust deficits, and communication breakdown and distorted relational expectations.

. On the first theme, counsellors described young adults from high-conflict homes as carrying relational baggage that impaired their capacity for trust and intimacy. Counsellor 2 observed that young people "They often find it tough to trust or open up. They might be hypersensitive to signs of conflict, or jump into intense relationships seeking love they missed. Communication is a struggle they either dodge issues or explode." Counsellor 7 described it as young people "They are hyper-alert to signs of trouble, often misinterpreting normal things as conflict, and they struggle to communicate their needs without blowing up." On the second theme, counsellors noted that parental conflict as a maladaptive relational blueprint that distorted young adults' expectations of love, trust, and communication. Counsellor 5 noted that "Parental conflict often sets the stage for young people expecting love to be tumultuous, trust to be fragile, and communication to be confrontational. It is a blueprint they are trying to rewrite Counsellor 9 explained that: If they saw love as volatile or untrustworthy, they might expect the same in their relationships. Communication might feel like walking on eggshells, and trust could be hard to build."

These quantitative and qualitative findings directly contextualise the regression analyses that follow. The high prevalence of moderate-to-high conflict (56.34%), the dominance of verbal and child-involving behaviours, and the psychological burden described by counsellors collectively establish that parental conflict was a chronic and normative feature of the developmental environment for the majority of this sample. This contextual backdrop is essential for interpreting the magnitude of parental conflict's effect on relationship commitment reported below.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Relationship Commitment

To examine the influence of parental conflict frequency on romantic relationship commitment, a hierarchical linear regression approach was employed. In Step 1, age and gender were entered as control variables. In Step 2, the parental conflict mean score (PC_Mean) was added to determine its additional contribution to the variance in relationship commitment, Table 4 presents the model summary.

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Model Summary for Relationship commitment, ($n = 371$)

Step	Variables Entered	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	ΔR ²	Description
Step 1:	Age and Gender	0.177	0.031	0.026	—	Control variables only
Step 2: Added PC_Mean	Age, Gender, Parental Conflict	0.502	0.252	0.246	0.220	Added parental conflict

Note. ΔR^2 represents unique variance explained by adding parental conflict in Step 2.

The control block (age and gender) accounted for 3.1% of variance in relationship commitment ($R^2 = .031$, Adjusted $R^2 = .026$). Adding parental conflict in Step 2 increased explained variance to 25.2% ($R^2 = .252$, Adjusted $R^2 = .246$). Most critically, the R^2 change was $\Delta R^2 = .220$, indicating that parental conflict explained an additional 22.0% of unique variance beyond demographics. This represents a meaningful increment demonstrating that parental conflict exposure influences relationship commitment independent of demographic factors. Table 5 presents the regression coefficients.

Table 5. Regression Coefficients for Relationship Commitment ($n = 371$)

Variable	B	β	t	p-value	Significance
(Intercept)	3.500	—	20.390	0.000	Significant
Age	-0.076	-0.064	-1.376	0.170	Significant
Gender	0.070	0.030	0.660	0.510	Not Significant
PC_Mean	-0.443	-0.481	-10.393	0.000	Significant

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; PC_Mean = Parental Conflict Mean Score.

Parental conflict demonstrated a highly significant negative association with commitment ($B = -0.443$, $SE = 0.043$, $\beta = -0.481$, $t = -10.393$, $p < .001$). The standardized coefficient indicates that for each standard deviation increase in parental conflict, commitment decreased by 0.481 standard deviations. According to [35] guidelines, this represents a moderate-to-large effect. Age and gender were not significant predictors in the full model.

Qualitative Findings: Themes from FGD with Counsellors

Analysis of FGD data from the 10 counsellors at the Voi Youth Center yielded two dominant themes: fear of repeating parental patterns,' and 'avoidance of long-term commitment.' On the theme of fear of repeating parental patterns, counsellors consistently described reduced commitment driven by intergenerational fear: Counsellor 2 noted that: Some young adults might avoid commitment entirely, fearing it will turn sour. Others might dive in headfirst, seeking the love they did not get at home. Further Counsellor 8 explained that what young adults see at home sets the blueprint. If conflict was the norm, young people might either mirror that dynamic or hit the brakes the moment things get tough, seeking to break the cycle.

On the theme of avoidance of long-term commitment nine of the ten counsellors confirmed observing young people who actively avoided long-term commitment, either by keeping relationships casual or deliberately sabotaging intimacy before it deepened. Counsellor 2 observed that young people avoid commitment, thinking, 'If my parents could not make it work, why should I?' So they keep things casual or bail when it gets real. Counsellor 9 similarly noted that some young adults are wary of settling down because they fear they will end up like their parents, trapped in a cycle of arguments and resentment. As a result, some may even sabotage their relationships before they become too serious. Notably, all ten counsellors confirmed a dose-response pattern: the more intense and frequent the parental conflict, the greater the relational difficulty observed.

Interpretation and Discussion

The finding that parental conflict frequency significantly and negatively predicts relationship commitment ($\beta = -0.481$, $p < .001$), accounting for 22.0% of unique variance, is consistent with [20], who noted that parental conflict significantly influences relationship commitment during adolescent romantic development. These results also provide empirical support for the claims of [3] and [6] regarding the damaging effects of destructive parental conflict on offspring's relational adjustment.

The findings align with [25] observation that parental conflicts negatively affect adolescents' commitment in romantic relationships. Similarly, [21] found parental divorce and conflict were negatively associated with low relationship quality in Maldivian undergraduates, with 94.5% from divorced families reporting high parental conflict. The current study extends these findings to the Kenyan context.

Theoretically, these findings align that early relationships shape future attachments tenet of Attachment Theory. As posited by [19], young adults exposed to frequent conflict form IWMs that expect rejection or instability. The data confirms this: higher conflict frequency, representing the input to the IWM, predicts lower commitment. The insecure attachment styles; anxious or avoidant, identified by [18] as outcomes of unstable early environments likely act as the mechanism through which parental conflict reduces commitment, as those from high-conflict homes struggle with emotional regulation and openness in their romantic relationships. Frequent exposure to maladaptive verbal conflict models is likely to undermine young adults' belief in their own ability to resolve conflict constructively ([14]), thus lowering relationship commitment.

Other Recommendations

Based on the finding that parental conflict frequency significantly reduces romantic relationship commitment ($\beta = -0.481$, $p < .001$), the following recommendations are advanced:

- Educational institutions and counsellors in Voi Sub-County should integrate relationship education into their curricula or offer specialized workshops focusing on healthy relationship dynamics and conflict management, to equip young adults with the relational skills their family backgrounds may not have provided.
- Counsellors at youth centers should receive professional training to address the unique challenges faced by young adults from high-conflict backgrounds, helping them develop secure attachment styles and positive Internal Working Models (IWMs). Providing psychoeducation on the impact of family-of-origin experiences can empower young adults to navigate their relational challenges more effectively.

- iii. Policymakers and community leaders should prioritize the development of community-based conflict resolution programs in Voi Sub-County that promote constructive communication for parents, mitigating the long-term effects of parental discord on children's relational development and breaking the intergenerational cycle of unhealthy relationship patterns.
- iv. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to establish causal links between parental conflict exposure in childhood and long-term romantic relationship commitment in adulthood, given that the cross-sectional design of the current study precludes causal inferences.

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