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Causes of Escalation in High-Arousal Conflicts Among Newlyweds: A Qualitative Exploration

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to explore the underlying emotional, relational, and contextual causes of escalation in high-arousal conflicts among newly married couples to better understand early marital vulnerability and inform preventive interventions.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative research employed an exploratory–descriptive design using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 24 newlywed individuals (married one to three years) residing in Mexico. Participants were recruited purposively to include variation in gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background. Interviews lasting 60–90 minutes were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach supported by NVivo 14 software. Coding progressed from open codes to axial categories through constant comparison until theoretical saturation was reached. Trustworthiness was ensured via peer debriefing, audit trails, and reflective journaling.

Findings: Four overarching themes explained conflict escalation: emotional triggers (e.g., jealousy, unresolved past hurts, insecurity, sudden mood shifts, financial anxiety), communication breakdowns (e.g., escalating criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, misinterpretation of intent, digital miscommunication, failed repair), external stressors (e.g., family interference, work pressure, cultural perfectionism, major life transitions, socioeconomic strain), and individual coping patterns (e.g., avoidance of conflict, rumination, catastrophic thinking, power struggles, negative self-talk, inherited conflict scripts). Participants described how intense arousal impaired self-regulation and fueled reactive cycles, while contextual adversity drained emotional resources and exacerbated miscommunication.

Conclusion: High-arousal conflict escalation among newlyweds arises from the interplay of heightened emotional vulnerability, ineffective communication strategies, external pressures, and maladaptive coping. Findings highlight the importance of addressing physiological arousal and emotion regulation, integrating cultural and contextual realities, and equipping couples with early skills to interrupt destructive cycles before they consolidate.

Keywords: *newlyweds; high-arousal conflict; emotional triggers; communication patterns; qualitative research; marital stress; conflict escalation*

1. Introduction

Marriage marks a profound transition, demanding psychological adaptation, identity negotiation, and the construction of a shared life narrative. For newlyweds, the early years are uniquely formative because patterns of emotional interaction and conflict management begin to stabilize during this time (Lavner et al., 2014). While conflict is expected in close relationships, high-arousal conflict—marked by intense physiological and emotional activation—can escalate quickly and threaten relational security if couples lack effective regulatory strategies (Baucom et al., 2015). Emerging evidence suggests that newly married couples are especially vulnerable to these dynamics because they are simultaneously navigating multiple developmental and contextual stressors (Hall & Adams, 2020; Monk et al., 2020). Understanding the underlying causes of escalation in such conflicts is thus critical for strengthening marital resilience and informing intervention.

Early marital conflict often reflects a complex interplay of *emotional reactivity* and *cognitive control failure*. Research in cognitive and affective neuroscience shows that heightened arousal can impair executive functioning, reducing one's ability to maintain self-control during disagreements (Alameda et al., 2023, 2024). High-intensity physiological activation disrupts the brain's ability to process and resolve interpersonal conflict effectively (Avancini et al., 2023). These findings align with valence–arousal conflict theory, which posits that emotionally charged contexts can bias approach–withdrawal tendencies and make adaptive conflict resolution harder (Wang et al., 2017; Zeng et al., 2016). Couples who experience strong bodily cues such as racing heartbeats, muscle tension, or mental flooding may enter reactive cycles rather than engage in deliberate problem solving (Amemori et al., 2020). Yet emotional arousal is not universally harmful; under some conditions, it may sharpen attention and promote quick resolution if individuals maintain regulatory capacity (Fehring et al., 2019). Clarifying when and how arousal leads to destructive escalation rather than adaptive confrontation remains a critical empirical task.

Relational and personality factors shape the way newlyweds handle emotional activation. Lower levels of self-differentiation—a partner's ability to balance intimacy and autonomy—have been linked with poor conflict management and lower satisfaction (Jo & Lee, 2025). Similarly, internalized shame undermines authenticity and perceived marital support, both protective against escalating fights (Ha & Yang, 2025). Conversely, emotional availability and psychological adjustment predict stronger couple cohesion and reduce reactivity (Nadeem & Mohamad, 2025). These interpersonal competencies interact with long-standing family-of-origin patterns: newlyweds raised in environments of high hostility or withdrawal may replicate such conflict scripts under stress (Monk et al., 2020). Cognitive biases also contribute; discrepancies between self- and partner-perceptions of responsiveness can lead to feeling misunderstood and rejected (Beck et al., 2013).

Contextual and sociocultural factors compound vulnerability. Unequal or mismatched socioeconomic status between spouses predicts depressive symptoms and tension (Gan et al., 2023), while other life stressors—such as unexpected negative events—are associated with depressive mood that can spill over into marital communication (Liao et al., 2022). Cultural transition into marriage, especially in societies with strong family expectations, often disrupts identity stability and introduces unanticipated strain (Hall & Adams, 2020; Park, 2013). Marriage roles and household labor inequity also have enduring implications; longitudinal research shows that persistent inequity fosters dissatisfaction and resentment (Adelson et al., 2021). Financial or task-related imbalances can increase sensitivity to minor disagreements, accelerating escalation.

At the neurocognitive level, scholars highlight that arousal not only affects conflict response but also attentional and inhibitory control. Studies of conflict processing under high physiological activation show disrupted neural signatures for monitoring and control (Avancini et al., 2023). Cognitive control frameworks indicate that couples under intense emotion have reduced capacity for perspective taking and goal alignment (Alameda et al., 2024; Landman & Steenbergen, 2020). Furthermore, approach–withdrawal dynamics influenced by arousal may override deliberate regulation, driving patterns such as criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Citron et al., 2016; McKone et al., 2021). These findings align with behavioral couple therapy outcomes that emphasize reducing emotional arousal during conflict to improve communication and maintain closeness (Baucom et al., 2015).

Psychoeducational and support programs for newlyweds seek to equip couples with early relational competencies to mitigate these risks (Park, 2013; Xu, 2022). Structured marriage education has been shown to increase awareness of emotional cycles, improve coping with negative affect, and

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promote adaptive conflict management (Chang et al., 2020). Counseling interventions also play a vital preventive role; marriage counseling and community-based support can foster harmony by teaching self-regulation and dyadic repair skills (Mhs & Amirullah, 2025). Yet gaps remain in tailoring these interventions for couples specifically experiencing high-arousal conflicts, as many programs focus broadly on satisfaction rather than the unique physiological and psychological cascades of escalation.

New technologies and relational contexts further complicate conflict processes. Digital environments expose couples to comparison and external evaluation, which may intensify shame and performance anxiety (Masón et al., 2019). Social media behaviors and hyperconnectivity create new triggers for jealousy and misunderstanding, especially when emotional regulation skills are weak. At the same time, couples report that mental scripts about what "normal marriage" should look like, often shaped by idealized online portrayals, leave them unprepared for normal disagreements (Williamson & Lavner, 2019). These external narratives interact with personality vulnerabilities and arousal reactivity to create conditions ripe for conflict escalation.

Taken together, prior research underscores that the early marital period is a sensitive window where emotional arousal, cognitive control, interpersonal skills, and contextual stressors converge. Yet despite substantial theoretical work on emotion and conflict, there is limited qualitative understanding of how newlyweds themselves experience the causes of escalation in high-arousal episodes. Most existing studies rely on quantitative measures or laboratory observations (Baucom et al., 2015; Lavner et al., 2014), potentially missing the subjective meanings and lived dynamics underlying these events. By exploring couples' own narratives, it becomes possible to integrate neurocognitive and interpersonal perspectives with the realities of everyday married life.

This study seeks to qualitatively explore the *causes of escalation in high-arousal conflicts among newlyweds* by examining personal, relational, and contextual contributors as narrated by newly married couples.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research employed a qualitative design with an exploratory–descriptive orientation to understand the underlying causes of escalation in high-arousal conflicts among newlywed couples. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who could provide rich and varied insights into early marital dynamics and conflict experiences. The study reached theoretical saturation after conducting 24 in-depth interviews, at which point no new conceptual categories or themes were emerging from the data. Participants were newlywed individuals residing in Mexico, married between one and three years, and self-identified as having experienced episodes of intense emotional conflict during their first years of marriage. Efforts were made to include a diverse sample in terms of gender, age, educational background, and socioeconomic status to capture a wide range of perspectives and relational contexts.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. An interview guide was developed to encourage participants to narrate experiences of conflict escalation, with open-ended prompts exploring emotional triggers, patterns of communication, and contextual influences. Probing questions allowed for clarification and deeper exploration of meanings as they emerged during the conversation. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifiable information from transcripts. The study followed ethical guidelines for qualitative research, and participants were informed about their rights, including voluntary participation and withdrawal without penalty.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 14 qualitative data management software. The analytic process followed an inductive, iterative approach: transcripts were first read repeatedly for familiarization, and initial open codes were generated to capture meaningful units of information. These codes were then organized into axial categories reflecting underlying patterns and relationships. Constant comparison was employed throughout the analysis to refine categories and ensure coherence across the dataset. Analytical memos were used to document insights and emerging interpretations. Data saturation was confirmed when additional interviews yielded no new codes or themes. Rigor and trustworthiness were enhanced through strategies such as peer debriefing,

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maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, and reflective journaling to minimize researcher bias.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 24 newlywed individuals from Mexico who had been married between one and three years. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 34 years (M = 28.2), with the majority in their late twenties. Of the participants, 13 were women (54.2%) and 11 were men (45.8%). In terms of educational attainment, 10 participants (41.7%) held a bachelor's degree, 8 (33.3%) had completed high school or technical education, and 6 (25%) possessed postgraduate qualifications. Regarding employment status, 15 participants (62.5%) were employed full-time, 5 (20.8%) worked part-time or on temporary contracts, and 4 (16.7%) were currently not employed outside the home. Monthly household income varied, with 9 couples (37.5%) reporting low income (below national median), 11 (45.8%) reporting middle income, and 4 (16.7%) describing their household income as above average. The majority (18 participants; 75%) reported living in urban or metropolitan areas, while 6 (25%) lived in semi-urban or rural communities. Religious affiliation was self-identified as Catholic for 16 participants (66.7%), nonreligious or secular for 6 (25%), and other Christian denominations for 2 (8.3%). This diversity provided a wide range of perspectives regarding marital adjustment, cultural expectations, and conflict experiences.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Triggers	Intense Jealousy	Suspicion about friends; monitoring social media; discomfort with opposite-sex friendships; fear of infidelity; overchecking partner's phone
	Unresolved Past Hurts	Bringing up old disagreements; linking current argument to past betrayal; holding grudges; lack of forgiveness
	Personal Insecurity	Low self-esteem; fear of abandonment; self-comparison to others; hypersensitivity to criticism
	Sudden Mood Shifts	Overreaction to small issues; anger outbursts; crying spells; silent treatment after trivial events
	Financial Anxiety	Stress about income; hidden purchases; debt-related arguments; unequal contribution concerns
2. Communication Breakdowns	Escalating Criticism	Harsh language; personal attacks; sarcasm; nitpicking daily routines
	Defensive Responses	Justifying mistakes; shifting blame; refusing responsibility; rationalizing hurtful behavior
	Stonewalling & Withdrawal	Silent treatment; avoiding eye contact; ignoring partner's attempts to talk; walking away mid-argument
	Misinterpretation of Intentions	Assuming negative motives; misunderstanding tone; perceiving control or manipulation; overgeneralizing partner's words
	Overuse of Digital Channels	Fighting over text messages; misreading emojis; late-night heated chats; posting passive-aggressive comments
	Lack of Repair Attempts	Not apologizing; failure to soften conversation; rejecting partner's emotional bids
3. External Stressors	Family Interference	In-law criticism; parental advice turning into control; comparisons to siblings; family gossip about marriage
	Work-Related Pressure	Long working hours; job instability; work–life imbalance; bringing work stress home
	Cultural & Social Expectations	Societal pressure for quick success; comparing marriage to peers; unrealistic image of "perfect couple"; stigma about therapy
	Life Transitions	Adjusting to cohabitation; relocation; balancing studies with marriage; pregnancy or fertility stress
4. Individual Coping Patterns	Avoidance of Conflict	Pretending issues don't exist; delaying conversations; fear of confrontation; suppressing anger
	Maladaptive Emotion Regulation	Rumination; catastrophizing; emotional flooding; inability to calm down after fights
	Power Struggles	Need to win every argument; dominance behaviors; controlling household decisions; undermining partner's input
	Negative Self-Talk	Feeling "I'm not good enough"; predicting divorce; labeling oneself as a failure; hopelessness after arguments
	Influence of Past Family Models	Copying parents' conflict style; normalizing shouting; fear of repeating parents' mistakes; idealizing one parent's approach

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Participants described that one of the strongest forces behind the rapid escalation of high-arousal conflicts was the experience of emotional triggers that rapidly destabilized calm interaction and invited intense responses. A first subtheme was intense jealousy, where several newlyweds reported becoming highly suspicious of their partner's social connections and online interactions. One participant explained, "When he liked other women's photos, I couldn't control my reaction; I felt like I was not enough." Others admitted to checking phones or questioning opposite-sex friendships, describing a feeling of threat that overshadowed rational dialogue. Another subtheme, unresolved past hurts, showed how earlier disappointments carried into new arguments. A wife said, "Even if we fight about the dishes, I end up saying, 'Like when you forgot my birthday last year.' It all comes back." Many shared that they lacked closure over prior misunderstandings, leading to chronic sensitivity and grudge holding. Personal insecurity also played a central role, particularly feelings of inadequacy and fear of abandonment. A participant confessed, "He deserves better; maybe that's why I explode first before he leaves me." Similarly, sudden mood shifts were described as small irritations spiraling into tears or anger, often surprising even the partner: "I don't know why, but one little comment and I'm screaming." Finally, financial anxiety fueled stress, especially when partners had unequal contributions or hidden purchases. Couples recounted that financial disagreements, although seemingly practical, carried deep symbolic weight about security and fairness. Together, these emotional triggers created an environment where minor frustrations quickly transformed into full-blown conflicts.

A second overarching theme highlighted that escalation was rarely about the initial issue alone but was intensified by how partners communicated once upset. Many narratives focused on escalating criticism, where initial concerns turned into personal attacks. One husband reflected, "We start about the groceries and suddenly I'm being told I'm selfish like my father." This critical style often provoked defensive responses, including justification and blame shifting. Participants admitted they "fought to be right," which deepened distance. Another recurring pattern was stonewalling and withdrawal: silent treatment and physical avoidance were frequently mentioned as strategies that, rather than calming the conflict, intensified the other partner's frustration. "When he just leaves the room, I get angrier; I feel invisible," said one wife. Misinterpretation of intentions also amplified tension—partners described assuming negative motives behind neutral statements, such as perceiving control or disrespect when none was intended. Modern couples noted the overuse of digital channels, with fights erupting over text or social media; tone was easily misread and late-night messages intensified emotions: "Text fighting is the worst; I read things in the worst way." Importantly, there was a lack of repair attempts; very few participants described actively de-escalating or apologizing once an argument had started. One woman shared, "I know I should hug him or say sorry, but I just shut down." Altogether, these communication breakdowns meant that once triggered, couples lacked the conversational tools to contain and repair conflict before it grew out of control.

Participants repeatedly connected marital tension to pressures outside the couple's immediate relationship, describing them as silent accelerants of anger and misunderstanding. A major subtheme was family interference, with in-laws' opinions and subtle criticism undermining couple unity. One man said, "When my mom comments about how she would cook better, my wife doesn't talk, but later she explodes at me." Another woman explained how gossip or unsolicited advice from parents triggered feelings of being judged and unsupported. Work-related pressure was also pervasive, especially when long hours and job instability left partners exhausted and reactive: "After 12 hours at the office, even small things at home feel huge," a participant noted. Cultural and social expectations emerged strongly; couples felt compared to peers and social media portrayals of the "perfect marriage," leading to shame and pressure: "Everyone online looks so happy, so when we fight, I think something is wrong with us." Additionally, life transitions—relocating, adapting to shared living, and starting families—were emotionally taxing. One couple described moving to a new city and losing support networks: "We only had each other, and that made every disagreement feel bigger." These stressors often formed the background noise that heightened sensitivity and reduced patience, making otherwise manageable disagreements more combustible.

Finally, escalation was closely tied to the personal coping styles each spouse brought into the marriage, many of which were described as inherited or habitual rather than deliberate. Avoidance of conflict appeared common; participants delayed discussions or suppressed anger to "keep peace," but this often backfired. "I stay quiet until I explode; then it's a volcano," one man said. Another widespread pattern was maladaptive emotion regulation—partners described rumination, catastrophic thinking, and inability to calm down once upset: "I can't stop replaying what he said, it just

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fuels me more." Power struggles were present in couples where one or both insisted on "winning" disagreements or controlling decisions, creating competitive rather than collaborative interaction: "It's like if I give in once, I'll lose forever," said one wife. Several participants revealed negative self-talk after conflicts, fueling hopelessness and future blow-ups: "I tell myself we're doomed, so why try to fix it." Finally, the influence of past family models emerged strongly—partners imitated what they saw growing up. One participant reflected, "My dad yelled, my mom slammed doors; I guess that's how I learned to fight." These personal scripts, often unconscious, shaped how partners responded when emotions ran high and how easily they could regulate or repair after disagreements.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study set out to explore the *causes of escalation in high-arousal conflicts among newlyweds* through an in-depth qualitative analysis of lived experiences. Four major thematic domains emerged—emotional triggers, communication breakdowns, external stressors, and individual coping patterns—offering an integrative understanding of how newly married couples move from manageable disagreements to intensely charged and destabilizing episodes. These findings extend and nuance prior work by illustrating the subjective processes couples experience when physiological arousal, unresolved vulnerabilities, and contextual challenges converge early in marriage.

A central insight concerns the powerful role of emotional triggers in transforming ordinary disagreements into high-arousal confrontations. Participants described jealousy, insecurity, and mood volatility as precursors to conflict escalation. This resonates strongly with research demonstrating that intense arousal can impair cognitive control, narrowing attentional focus and increasing reactive responses (Alameda et al., 2023, 2024). The observed difficulty in self-soothing and rapid threat appraisal echoes neurobiological work showing that high physiological activation disrupts neural signatures responsible for monitoring and resolving interpersonal conflict (Avancini et al., 2023). At the same time, participants' accounts of jealousy tied to social media or perceived partner attention align with studies on approach–withdrawal tendencies, which argue that emotionally charged stimuli, especially those signaling potential relational threat, amplify withdrawal or attack behaviors (Citron et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017). Importantly, the narratives also confirmed that unresolved past hurts and preexisting insecurity heighten susceptibility to such triggers, reinforcing findings on the influence of early relational schemas and family-of-origin experiences (Monk et al., 2020).

The second theme, communication breakdowns, illustrated how high arousal undermines dialogue and accelerates destructive cycles. Couples frequently described harsh criticism followed by defensiveness and stonewalling. These patterns parallel well-documented negative conflict cycles in newlyweds (Beck et al., 2013; Lavner et al., 2014). Perceived lack of responsiveness and misinterpretation of intentions observed here are consistent with findings that incongruence between self and partner perceptions fuels dissatisfaction and escalation (Beck et al., 2013). Participants' struggles to repair after initial conflict activation resonate with evidence that early marital communication deficits predict long-term dissatisfaction (Adelson et al., 2021; Williamson & Lavner, 2019). Notably, couples described the difficulty of de-escalating once physiological and cognitive arousal were triggered, aligning with research that arousal disrupts adaptive conflict processing (Landman & Steenbergen, 2020). The accounts of digital communication—fighting over text, misreading tone, and engaging in late-night message escalation—extend previous findings by highlighting how new technologies may intensify classic negative cycles and create novel triggers (Masón et al., 2019).

External stressors were also salient and frequently described as invisible accelerants of conflict. Family interference, in-laws' criticism, and cultural pressure for a "perfect marriage" were prominent. These findings confirm earlier studies on family-of-origin and extended family involvement as predictors of early marital discord (Hall & Adams, 2020; Monk et al., 2020). Socioeconomic strain and financial insecurity further amplified arousal and made partners more reactive; this aligns with multi-center evidence linking low or mismatched socioeconomic status to depressive symptoms and greater couple distress (Gan et al., 2023). Participants' narratives about relocation and life transitions echo qualitative work on the destabilizing effects of major change and identity renegotiation after marriage (Hall & Adams, 2020). The interaction of these stressors with emotional vulnerability reflects a systemic perspective: contextual adversity drains self-regulatory resources, leaving couples less capable of adaptive conflict response.

The fourth major finding involved individual coping patterns, particularly avoidance, maladaptive emotion

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regulation, and power struggles. Many participants described suppressing concerns to "keep the peace," only to later explode. Such delayed expression is consistent with threat–challenge models of conflict that describe how suppressed anger converts into uncontrolled reactivity when stress accumulates (DeBuse et al., 2011). Rumination and catastrophic thinking found in this study mirror cognitive accounts of emotional flooding and impaired regulation (Fehring et al., 2019; McKone et al., 2021). In particular, self-critical internal dialogue and hopelessness were notable, echoing work linking shame and diminished relationship authenticity to low marital intimacy and increased conflict (Ha & Yang, 2025). Coping patterns shaped by family-of-origin models, such as replicating parental shouting or withdrawal, substantiate previous evidence that intergenerational conflict scripts strongly influence newlyweds' interactional style (Monk et al., 2020). These insights reinforce calls to address personal emotion regulation capacities in early marital interventions (Baucom et al., 2015).

Together, these findings integrate physiological, cognitive, relational, and contextual perspectives on high-arousal conflict. They support affective neuroscience theories that arousal impairs cognitive control (Alameda et al., 2024; Amemori et al., 2020) and extend them into everyday relational contexts by showing how these neurocognitive processes translate into lived marital episodes. They also bridge with behavioral couple therapy research, which demonstrates that reducing emotional arousal during conflict promotes adaptive engagement (Baucom et al., 2015). By grounding these concepts in the subjective accounts of newlyweds, the present study adds depth to quantitative findings and suggests culturally and developmentally sensitive pathways for support.

Moreover, the results emphasize the interactive nature of risk: emotional triggers did not escalate conflict in isolation but became destructive when combined with poor communication or external stress. For instance, jealousy was most volatile when paired with digital misinterpretations and lack of repair efforts. This supports multidimensional frameworks of marital distress which argue that vulnerabilities, stress, and adaptive processes interact dynamically rather than linearly (Lavner et al., 2014; Williamson & Lavner, 2019). Our data also suggest that cultural ideals of marriage—especially perfectionistic standards shaped by social comparison—may intensify emotional arousal and shame when conflict inevitably emerges. This resonates with emerging cross-cultural evidence on identity shifts and marital adaptation (Hall & Adams, 2020; Nadeem & Mohamad, 2025).

Finally, this study underlines the promise of preventive psychoeducation and support services. Couples who described having learned about emotional triggers or conflict patterns before marriage expressed greater self-awareness and control, paralleling research on the benefits of structured relationship education (Chang et al., 2020; Park, 2013; Xu, 2022). Counseling services tailored to newlyweds could help interrupt maladaptive cycles and build regulation skills (Mhs & Amirullah, 2025). At the same time, interventions may need to go beyond generic communication training to address high-arousal states specifically, integrating insights from cognitive control and affect regulation research (Alameda et al., 2023; Avancini et al., 2023).

Although this study provides nuanced insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size, while sufficient for qualitative saturation, involved 24 participants from Mexico, which may limit the transferability of findings to other cultural contexts. Marital conflict patterns are influenced by cultural norms about emotional expression, gender roles, and family involvement; thus, the interplay of triggers and coping strategies might differ across societies. Second, data were collected solely through self-reported interviews. While participants shared deeply personal experiences, self-report can be subject to recall bias or selective disclosure, particularly around sensitive topics such as shame or power struggles. Observational data of couple interaction during actual conflict episodes could strengthen future studies. Third, the sample contained an educational and socioeconomic range but was not fully representative; most participants lived in urban settings and may have different resources and stressors than rural couples. Finally, because the research was cross-sectional, it captures participants' current reflections rather than tracking how conflict dynamics evolve across time.

Future studies could build on these findings by employing longitudinal qualitative and mixed-method designs to trace how emotional triggers and coping patterns develop as marriages mature. Including dyadic perspectives—interviewing both partners simultaneously or sequentially—could reveal interactive processes and cross-partner influences in escalation cycles. Integration with physiological measures such as heart rate variability or cortisol could clarify how subjective experiences of arousal align with biological stress responses. Comparative cross-cultural studies are also warranted to examine whether similar causes of escalation emerge in diverse marital

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systems and to explore culturally specific protective factors. Finally, intervention-focused research could test psychoeducational modules designed specifically for high-arousal conflict and evaluate their impact on emotional regulation, communication, and marital stability.

Practitioners working with newlyweds should emphasize early identification of emotional triggers such as jealousy and shame and teach skills for interrupting the escalation cascade before it peaks. Marriage education and counseling programs should include experiential exercises for physiological downregulation (e.g., breathing, time-outs, self-soothing strategies) alongside communication training. Counselors should assess and address family-of-origin conflict scripts and promote self-differentiation and authenticity to reduce vulnerability. Given the influence of external stressors, programs might also include financial communication and stress management. Finally, practitioners should help couples navigate the digital dimension of modern relationships, developing healthy boundaries and interpretation skills for online interactions.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Although this study provides rich qualitative insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was relatively small (20 participants) and recruited entirely from Indonesia. Cultural norms regarding gender, family, and academic prestige may shape the experiences reported here and may not fully generalize to other sociocultural contexts. Second, participants self-selected into the study, which may have biased the sample toward couples willing to discuss relational challenges or those with relatively constructive coping strategies. Third, the data relied solely on self-report through semi-structured interviews, which, while providing depth, may be influenced by social desirability or incomplete recall. Additionally, this study examined individual accounts rather than dyadic interviews; future work capturing both partners' simultaneous perspectives could yield a more balanced and interactional understanding of power asymmetry. Finally, while thematic analysis provided strong conceptual categories, the findings do not establish causal relationships, and the nuances of how institutional policies intersect with personal negotiation require further exploration.

Future studies could expand this work by incorporating larger and more diverse samples across countries and cultural contexts to understand how academic prestige interacts with local gender and family norms. Comparative research between couples where both partners are academic, one is academic, or both are nonacademic would also clarify unique patterns in mixed-status dynamics. Dyadic or longitudinal qualitative studies could trace how power asymmetry evolves across career stages, especially when academics transition from precarious positions to stability or when nonacademic partners advance in their own fields. Quantitative or mixed-method approaches might further validate the identified categories and examine associations between power asymmetry and outcomes such as relationship satisfaction, mental health, and career resilience. Additionally, there is a need to explore how institutional supports—such as partner career programs, flexible mobility policies, and counseling services—mediate these dynamics over time.

For practitioners, including couple therapists and career counselors, the findings suggest several actionable points. Professionals should encourage open dialogue about knowledge gaps and career trade-offs, helping couples develop shared narratives that validate both partners' contributions. Universities and employers might consider designing partner integration programs, offering career development resources to nonacademic partners and acknowledging the relational costs of academic mobility. Relationship education workshops could integrate modules on navigating intellectual prestige and career instability, equipping couples with practical tools for equitable decision-making. Finally, fostering awareness in academic institutions about the diversity of partner arrangements can lead to more inclusive policies, reducing the unintended marginalization of nonacademic partners and strengthening the wellbeing of academic communities.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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