

Journal of Communication and Education Studies (JCES)

Vol. 1, No. 2 (2026), p. 94-109 | e-ISSN: xxx-xxx

<https://ejournal.mentorta.com/index.php/jces/index>

The Cultural Dimension in Toxic Relationships: Exploring Interpersonal Communication Conflicts Among Ethnic Couples in Makassar, Indonesia

Nurul Fajriah¹, Tuti Bahfiarti², Jeanny Maria Fatimah³

^{1, 2, 3}Department of Communication Science, Faculty of Social and Political Science,
Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

E-mail: ¹fajriahn23e@student.unhas.ac.id*, ²tutibahfiarti@unhas.ac.id,
³jeannyfatimah@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author

Received: November 19, 2025; Accepted: December 23, 2025; Published: April 29, 2026

ABSTRACT

Amidst Indonesia's cultural diversity, communication conflicts in intercultural marriages are a common phenomenon, yet they receive little attention in academia, particularly among Bugis, Toraja, Betawi, and Makassar couples in the city of Makassar. This study aims to explore the types, causes, and effects of interpersonal communication conflicts in toxic relationships among couples with different cultural backgrounds. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, involving three culturally diverse couples selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation, then analysed using systematic thematic analysis techniques. The main findings reveal that conflicts are triggered by differences in communication styles (e.g., gentle vs. loud), differences in social norms in sharing family problems, and an imbalance of roles in the household. Repeated conflicts led to a decrease in self-disclosure, increased alienation, and social depenetration as described in Social Penetration Theory and the Johari Window. These findings expand the understanding of toxic relationship dynamics in the complex Indonesian cultural context, while highlighting the importance of culturally sensitive communication interventions and adaptive conflict resolution. The results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for counsellors, marriage practitioners, and policymakers in designing more effective support programmes for intercultural couples. The results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for counsellors, marriage practitioners, and policymakers in designing more effective support programmes for intercultural couples.

Keywords: Communication conflict, toxic relationship, intercultural couples, Bugis, Makassar, Toraja, Betawi



Copyright © 2026 The Author(s)

This is an open-access article under the **CC BY-SA** license.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, interpersonal relationships in Indonesia, especially among couples from different cultural backgrounds, have attracted increasing attention in interpersonal communication studies. Cultural differences between couples not only create diversity in the way they interact (Uhlich 2021; Seshadri and Knudson- Martin 2013) , but also pose challenges in managing conflicts that have the potential to become toxic relationships (Edmondson and Smith 2006; Nawantara et al. 2025) . Conflict often arises not only from cultural differences, but also from unhealthy communication patterns exacerbated by an inability to resolve tensions constructively (Deep, Mohd, and Hussain 2017; Shearman and Dumlao 2008; Littlejohn and Domenici 2007) .

In Indonesia, where cultural diversity is very strong, this phenomenon is increasingly interesting to study, especially in the context of relationships between couples from different ethnic groups, such as Bugis, Toraja, Betawi, and Makassar, each of which has very different values, customs, and communication patterns. Toxic relationships often occur when ineffective communication and emotional tension are not handled properly (Mukhopadhyay, Singh, and Bhattacharjee 2024; Lubit 2003; Zahiduzzaman 2015) , leading to neglect of emotional needs and ultimately damaging the quality of the relationship. This impacts not only individuals but can also worsen social dynamics within the couple's environment.

Research on toxic relationships in interpersonal communication has developed rapidly with various methodological approaches that provide deep insights into the dynamics of conflict in interpersonal relationships. Several studies, such as those conducted by Suciati & Ramadhanty (2023) and Suryaningtyas & Suciati (2025) , identify various communication styles applied in toxic relationships, such as conflict avoidance, aggressive communication, and restrictive control, which affect the quality of the relationship and the emotional well-being of the couple. These studies used qualitative methods, with in-depth interviews and data triangulation as data collection techniques to validate the findings, as was done in the study (Mahmudah, Astutik, and Rahayu 2021) which explored coping strategies in dealing with toxic relationships.

Another study by Praptiningsih (2024) and (Anugrah, Arianto, and Sudirman 2024) highlights that toxic relationships do not only occur in romantic contexts, but also in relationships with family and friends, which can trigger internal conflicts and emotional or physical violence, as well as impact an individual's mental health. Meanwhile, Tili & Barker,(2015) , who studied communication in intercultural marriages, found that couples who successfully resolved conflicts were better able to adapt to cultural differences and had self-awareness and openness in communication. The findings of relevant studies focus on various types of relationships (romantic, family, and friendship), showing similarities in the importance of communication competence and emotional coping to maintain relationship stability. This development opens up further opportunities to explore how cultural and value differences play a role in shaping communication patterns in toxic relationships, especially in couples from different cultural backgrounds, as will be examined in this study.

Most existing research focuses on couples with more homogeneous cultures, for example in adolescent or premarital relationships. There is a gap in the lack of focus on couples from very different cultures in Indonesia. Research examining Bugis, Toraja, Betawi, and Makassar couples who have differences in values, language, and communication patterns will provide important new insights into understanding conflict in toxic relationships in different cultural contexts.

This study aims to analyse the types, causes and effects of interpersonal communication conflicts in toxic relationships between couples from different cultural backgrounds in Makassar City, focusing on Bugis, Toraja, Betawi and Makassar couples. Thus, this study is expected to provide new insights into the dynamics of toxic relationships in the context of cultural diversity in Indonesia, offering more effective conflict resolution strategies that can be adapted based on cultural differences , in order to improve the quality of communication and interpersonal relationships between couples from different cultural backgrounds.

METHOD

This article uses a case study design with a qualitative approach to explore interpersonal communication conflicts in toxic relationships between couples with different cultural backgrounds in the metropolitan city of Makassar, with its diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and tribes. The case study design was chosen to enable a deep understanding of (Castrén and Ketokivi 2015; Mavhandu-Mudzusi 2018) the dynamics of relationships between couples from very different cultures, namely Bugis, Toraja, Betawi, and Makassar, and to explore communication conflicts in their relationships. The qualitative approach allows for rich and in-depth data collection through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation (Husbands et al. 2017) , which provides insights into the experiences and perceptions of couples regarding the conflicts they face in their relationships.

The characteristics of the informants in this study were selected based on several specific inclusion criteria. The informants involved in this study were married couples from different cultures, with contrasting cultural backgrounds, namely Bugis, Toraja, Betawi, and Makassar couples, all four of which are the most populous ethnic groups in this city. The first criterion was that the couples had been married for more than one year to ensure the development of conflict in a stable relationship. Second, the couples must have experienced conflict that led to a toxic relationship, characterised by poor communication patterns, such as repeated arguments, disrespectful verbal communication, and emotional domination or control in decision-making. Third, couples willing to share their experiences honestly and deeply were selected to provide authentic and rich data. The following table presents the data on the informants – research sources for this study:

Table 1. *List of Key Research Informants*

No	Initials	Description
1	GL - RS	GL (Husband) from the Bugis ethnic group and RS (Wife) from the Toraja ethnic group
2.	AR - UL	AR (Husband) from Bugis culture and UL (Wife) from Betawi culture
3.	B - W	W (Husband) from Makassar culture and (Wife) from Bugis culture

Source: Researcher Data Analysis, 2025

Table 1 above presents information about the key informants involved in the study, who are husband and wife couples with different cultural backgrounds, selected based on predetermined inclusion criteria. The informants selected in this study came from four main cultural backgrounds in the city of Makassar, namely Bugis , Toraja, Betawi, and Makassar. The selection of informants was carried out to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of communication in toxic relationships involving significant cultural differences.

1. Informant 1 (GL - RS): The first couple consisted of GL (husband) from the Bugis culture and RS (wife) from the Toraja culture. This couple represented the dynamics of a relationship between two ethnic groups with very different cultural values, allowing the researcher to explore how these cultural

differences affected communication patterns and conflict resolution in their relationship.

2. Informant 2 (AR - UL): The second couple consisted of AR (husband) from the Bugis culture and UL (wife) from the Betawi culture. The involvement of this couple provided another perspective on intercultural interactions, particularly in the context of interpersonal communication that has the potential to cause conflict in relationships influenced by cultural, normative, and value differences.
3. Informant 3 (B - W): The third couple consists of B (husband) who comes from the Makassar culture and W (wife) who comes from the Bugis culture. Research on this couple provides an opportunity to examine the dynamics of relationships between couples with different cultures even though they come from neighbouring regions, allowing for further analysis of communication differences that can still cause conflict in their relationship.

Each couple in this table was selected because they met the predetermined inclusion criteria, namely having different cultural backgrounds, having experienced or currently experiencing conflict in their relationship that leads to a toxic relationship, and being willing to share their experiences in in-depth interviews.

For data collection, we used two main techniques: non-participant observation and in-depth interviews. Non-participant observation was conducted to observe the daily interactions of couples who met the inclusion criteria. The purpose of this observation was to record communication behaviours, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and emotional responses that indicated signs of conflict in toxic relationships. The observation process was conducted in a natural context, such as when couples were discussing or resolving differences of opinion, without the researchers being involved in the interaction. Data from the observations were then combined with in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face using semi-structured interview guidelines. These interviews were designed to explore the personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by couples in managing conflict in their relationships involving cultural differences.

The data collected from observations and interviews were then analysed using thematic analysis. Using a thematic analysis approach, researchers were able to identify key themes related to communication conflicts, their causes, and their impact on the couple's relationship and emotional well-being. In addition, the main data analysis applied was systematic thematic analysis, popularised by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the aim of identifying patterns and key themes in the interview data obtained from married couples with different cultural backgrounds. This approach is structured and sequential, allowing researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal communication conflicts in toxic relationships. By following proven systematic steps, this method ensures consistency of findings and enables clear connections between data, interpretation, and final conclusions. The following are the steps used in the thematic analysis process:

Step 1: Transcription, Familiarisation with Data, and Selection of Quotes

The first phase of this thematic analysis involved the full transcription of interviews conducted with married couples from different cultural backgrounds. Once the transcription was complete, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading and analysing it in depth to identify initial themes relevant to the research objectives. At this stage, the researcher selected quotations that best represented the experiences, perceptions, and communication patterns that emerged in the interviews. These quotations were selected because they clearly illustrated the dynamics of communication conflicts that occur in relationships affected by cultural differences.

Step 2: Keyword Selection

In the second stage, researchers carefully examine the data from interviews, discussions, and observations. Recurring keywords or important terms that reflect the experiences and perceptions of informants are selected and analysed. These keywords, such as "cultural differences," "verbal communication," "emotional," "emotional manipulation," and "conflict," serve to summarise the important elements present in the data. These keywords also serve to clarify the concepts that emerge from the data and link them directly to the research objectives related to communication conflicts in toxic relationships.

Step 3: Coding

In this step, researchers code the selected data, which has been divided into quotations and keywords. Coding is done by assigning appropriate codes to segments of data that convey core messages or specific significance related to communication conflicts in intercultural relationships. For example, coding is performed on phrases such as "uncontrolled emotions," "language differences," "direct vs. indirect communication," and "emotional manipulation." This coding helps researchers simplify complex textual data and make it more structured, thereby facilitating the identification of relevant themes and patterns.

Step 4: Theme Development

After coding, researchers proceed to the theme development stage. At this stage, the codes that have been identified are grouped into larger, more meaningful themes that describe the patterns that emerge in the data. These themes are not only recurring, but also contain deeper meanings, connecting various elements of the data to provide clearer insights into communication conflicts in toxic relationships between couples from different cultures. Possible themes that may emerge, based on the data collected, are cultural differences in communication patterns, emotion management in conflict, and emotional manipulation that can exacerbate tension in relationships.

Step 5: Conceptualisation Through Interpretation of Keywords, Codes, and Themes

In this stage, researchers conceptualise by understanding and defining the concepts that emerge from the data. Researchers identify social patterns and intercultural dynamics that play a role in shaping interpersonal communication conflicts in toxic relationships. The keywords, codes, and themes that have been identified are developed into broader concepts, such as the influence of culture on communication, differences in perceptions of conflict management, and the impact of negative communication on couples' emotional relationships. Diagrams or visual models can be used to facilitate understanding of the relationships between these concepts.

Step 6: Development of a Conceptual Model

The final step in thematic analysis is the development of a conceptual model that describes the relationships between the themes, concepts, and data that have been found. This model is a more abstract representation that connects cultural differences, communication conflicts, and the impact of toxic relationships. This conceptual model helps answer research questions by describing how different cultures influence the dynamics of communication in toxic relationships. With the development of this model, research can contribute new theories in understanding how cultural differences can exacerbate or overcome conflicts in unhealthy relationships.

The flowchart below shows the stages and processes of systematic thematic analysis:

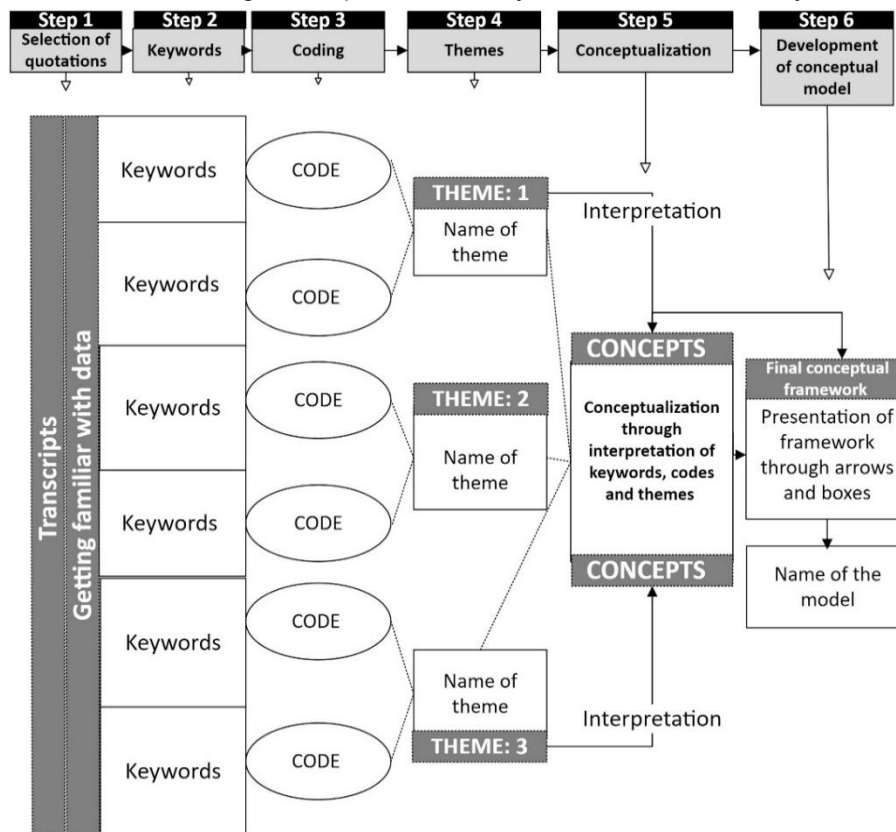


Figure 1. Systematic thematic analysis process: Six new steps in developing a conceptual model of qualitative data
Source: From (Naeem et al. 2023) .

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Types of Interpersonal Communication Conflict in Toxic Relationships Between Partners of Different Cultures

Table 2. Tabulation of Interview Data with Informants

No	Initials	Statements
1.	GL (Bugis, husband)	"I am a Bugis man who values honour... sometimes I hold back my emotions, sometimes I lose control because my wife is confrontational and speaks in a high-pitched tone... she always brings up past issues..."
2.	RS (Toraja, wife)	"When I speak in the Toraja language, he sometimes gets offended. He thinks that using the word 'ko' is impolite."
3.	B (Bugis, wife):	"What I experience most often is conflict over the way we speak. In Soppeng, we speak softly, while my husband from

Makassar is more direct and open... sometimes I feel offended because he speaks without thinking..."

Source: Researcher Data Analysis, 2025.

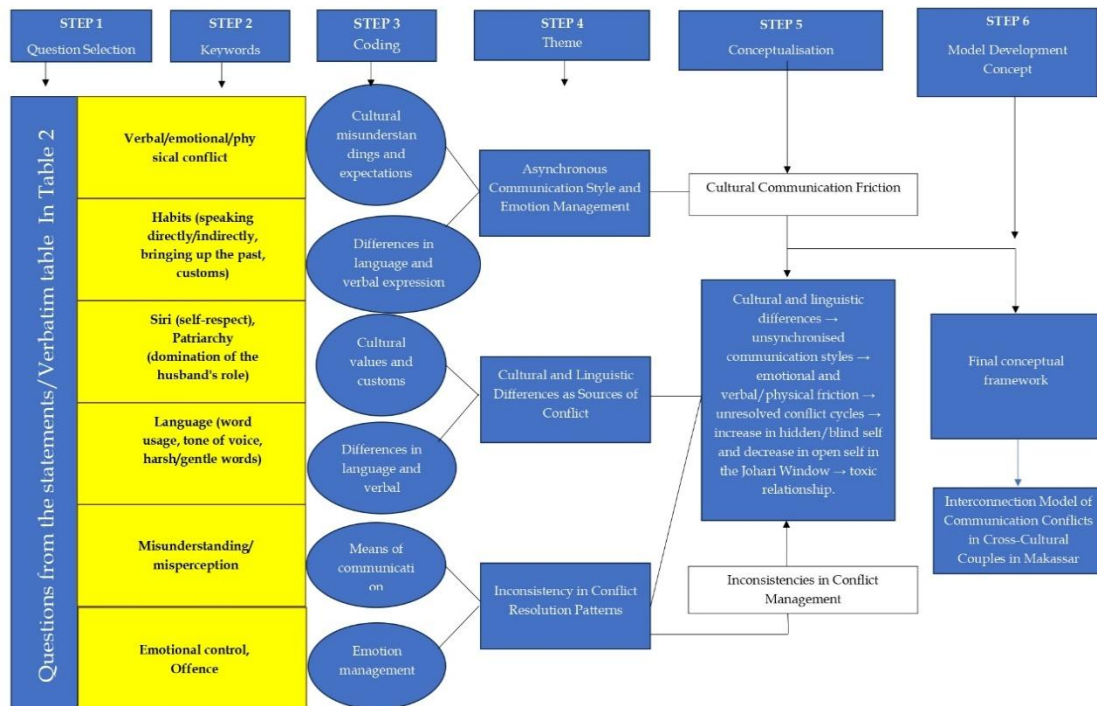


Figure 2. Results of Systematic Thematic Analysis of Types of Communication Conflict Source: Researcher's Data Analysis Results, 2025, viewed from (Naeem et al. 2023) .

The main findings indicate that the types of interpersonal communication conflicts in toxic relationships between couples with different cultural backgrounds are caused by various interrelated factors. Conflicts between couples stem from differences in communication styles, such as the use of different languages, from gentle and indirect (Bugis) to loud and to the point (Toraja), which causes misunderstandings in conveying messages. This exacerbates tension in the relationship, as one party feels misunderstood or unappreciated. In addition, cultural differences also influence how couples manage their emotions. For example, husbands prefer to hold back their emotions while wives tend to speak directly when emotional, creating a lack of synchronisation in conflict resolution. These conflicts often drag on without effective resolution, worsening the quality of their relationship.

Furthermore, differences in social customs also contribute to conflict, where couples from more closed cultures (such as Bugis) tend to resolve problems within the family without involving others, while couples from more open cultures (such as Toraja) are more likely to share problems with their extended family. This incompatibility creates tension in how problems are resolved and affects open communication between couples. On the other hand, an imbalance of roles within the family is a major problem, where one party feels burdened with household chores while the other is more focused on work. This adds tension to the relationship and causes feelings of being unappreciated between partners.

These findings indicate that cultural differences, communication styles, emotional management, and family values are the main factors causing interpersonal communication conflicts in cross-cultural relationships. Incompatibility in communication and problem management worsens relationships and increases toxic relationships. The conceptual model developed reveals that cultural communication mismatches cause unresolved conflict cycles, which in turn enlarge the blind self and hidden self areas in relationships and decrease the open self, contributing to increasingly isolated relationships and damaging the emotional well-being of couples.

Factors Causing Communication Conflicts in Cross-Cultural Couples

Table 3. *Tabulation of Interview Data with Thematic Coding*

Informant	Statements	Thematic Coding
First Couple GL (Husband) from Bugis culture and RS (Wife) from Toraja culture		
GL (Husband Bugis)	"I am a Bugis person who highly values siri", so it is enough that only the two of us know about the problem. Meanwhile, my wife always tells her family about it. Perhaps this is because Toraja has a very strong sense of family."	Social Differences: The custom of sharing problems within the family, vs. keeping problems private.
GL (Husband Bugis)	"I tend to be gentle and indirect, while she is outspoken and to the point."	Differences in Communication Style: Gentle vs. outspoken; direct vs. indirect.
GL (Husband Bugis)	"Sometimes I don't feel like talking when she uses a high-pitched and loud tone."	Communication Misunderstandings: Differences in speaking style and interpretation of tone of voice.
RS (Wife Toraja)	"When I speak in the Toraja language, he sometimes gets offended. He thinks that using the word 'ko' is rude."	Language Differences: Differences in language expression cause tension.
RS (Wife Toraja)	"I prefer to speak softly, but perhaps because I am too annoyed, I tend to speak in a high tone."	Emotional Management: Emotional tension leads to rushed and uncontrolled communication.
Second Couple AR (Husband) from Bugis culture and UL (Wife) from Betawi culture		
AR (Husband Bugis)	"I tend to adapt my wife's language or accent to make it easier for us to resolve issues."	Cultural Adaptation in Communication: Efforts to adapt to reduce conflict ().
AR (Husband Bugis)	"I prefer to get straight to the point without much small talk, while my wife prefers to speak slowly and carefully."	Differences in Communication Style: Direct vs. slow, direct vs. polite.

UL (Wife - Betawi)	- "I am often reprimanded by my husband for being considered impolite in his family."	Social Norms and Etiquette: Differences in behaviour and values of politeness.
UL (Wife - Betawi)	- "Sometimes I feel annoyed, but it's only momentary."	Feelings of Offence and Their Impact: Emotional conflicts that do not last long.

W (Husband) from Makassar culture and B (Wife) from Bugis culture

W (Husband - Makassar)	"I prefer to hold back to calm myself down, while my wife prefers to speak up immediately."	Differences in Emotional Management During Conflict: Holding back vs. addressing the issue directly.
W (Husband - Makassar)	"I often feel that I don't need to share my problems with other people, including my wife."	Closed Communication: Reluctance to share personal problems based on cultural norms.
B (Wife - Bugis)	- "I feel frustrated because everything is dumped on me and I also feel neglected."	Conflict and Role Imbalance: Inequity in the division of household tasks.
B (Wife - Bugis)	- "Harsh words because Makassar is known for its loud way of speaking."	Differences in Communication Style: The use of harsh words and loud speech causes tension.

Source: Researcher Data Analysis Results, 2025.

Based on the thematic coding analysis table above, findings related to the factors causing communication conflicts indicate that cultural differences are the main factor affecting couples' communication when dealing with conflicts. The main findings from the data analysis are as follows:

Differences in social and communication habits are the main factors that trigger tension in relationships. For example, in Bugis and Toraja couples, husbands (GL) from Bugis culture prefer to keep personal problems within the small family circle, while wives (RS) tend to be more open and share problems with their families. These differences lead to conflict, as Bugis culture emphasises privacy and maintaining honour (siri'), while Toraja culture emphasises family openness. These differences in habits regarding sharing problems create tension and discomfort in the way couples resolve their problems.

In addition, differences in communication styles are a significant contributing factor to this conflict. Couples from different cultural backgrounds often have difficulty interpreting tone and expression in language. For example, the Bugis husband (GL) feels that his Toraja wife (RS) speaks in a harsh and loud tone, while the wife feels that her husband is insensitive to the softer manner of speaking in Toraja culture. A lack of understanding of each other's cultural communication styles exacerbates tension in the

relationship, as both partners feel unappreciated and misunderstood. This illustrates that verbal communication in relationships is greatly influenced by cultural values and social customs.

In addition, emotional management also plays an important role in triggering greater conflict in this relationship. Differences in how the couple manages their emotions, such as the Bugis husband (GL) who prefers to hold back his emotions and the Toraja wife (RS) who prefers to speak directly when angry, cause incompatibility in conflict resolution. These differences often lead to hasty communication and mutual blame, which prolongs and exacerbates existing conflicts. The incompatibility in the way couples manage conflict creates emotional tension that often cannot be resolved adequately, thereby worsening the relationship.

Cultural misunderstandings are another factor that worsens communication between couples from different cultures. For example, in a relationship between a Makassar husband (W) and a Bugis wife (B), the husband feels that he does not need to share personal problems with others, while the wife feels neglected due to the lack of open communication. These differences lead to closed communication, where one party feels alienated and unappreciated. A lack of understanding of each other's cultural values creates misunderstandings that damage the relationship, worsen communication, and reduce the quality of their relationship.

Different social norms and behavioural ethics are also important factors that cause conflict. In a relationship between a Betawi wife (UL) and a Bugis husband (AR), the wife feels reprimanded by her husband for being considered impolite in her behaviour according to her husband's family norms. Differences in the way of speaking or showing respect, such as the use of the word "tabe" in Betawi culture, exacerbate tensions in the relationship because each partner has different expectations about politeness and the appropriate way of speaking. This shows how cultural ethics greatly influence the dynamics of communication in intercultural relationships.

Finally, an imbalance of roles within the family also causes significant conflict. For example, in the relationship between a Makassar husband (W) and a Bugis wife (B), the husband feels that his role is more focused on work and earning a living, while the wife feels overwhelmed by the unequal division of household tasks. This imbalance in the division of roles creates tension in the relationship and leads to emotional frustration. The wife feels neglected and burdened, while the husband feels that the wife's role is sufficient in taking care of the children and the household. This imbalance worsens their relationship and the quality of communication. These findings illustrate that cultural differences, social customs, communication values, emotional management, and roles within the family are the main factors that exacerbate conflict in relationships between couples from different cultures in the city of Makassar. Incompatibility in communication, emotional management, and conflict resolution often worsens the relationship and creates a toxic relationship.

The Impact of Interpersonal Communication Conflicts in Toxic Relationships Between Partners from Different Cultures

Table 4. *Tabulation of Interview Data with Informants*

No	Initials	Statements
----	----------	------------

1.	GL (Bugis, husband)	“Of course, the relationship has become less harmonious, cold, and sometimes tense.”
2.	RS (Toraja, wife)	“Our relationship has become somewhat strained. Whenever we face problems, we always end up arguing.”
3.	W (Makassar, husband)	“I feel increasingly isolated. We used to be very close, always talking, but now we are more often silent.”
4.	UL (Betawi, Wife):	“The impact is that I have to adapt to the local customs/culture to avoid conflicts with my husband.”
5.	B (Bugis, Wife):	“I feel the impact both physically and mentally. Physically, I feel like I’m ageing quickly... my mental state has also become chaotic.”

Source: Researcher Data Analysis, 2025.

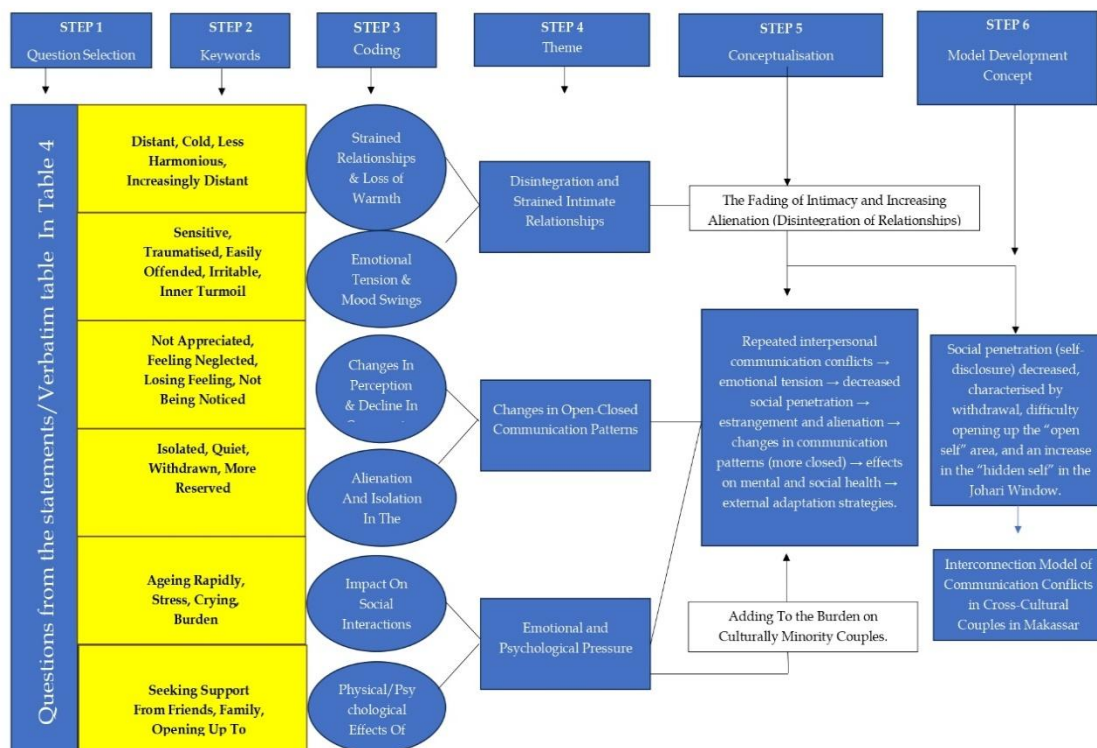


Figure 2. Results of Systematic Thematic Analysis of the Impact of Communication Conflict

Source: Researcher Data Analysis Results, 2025, viewed from (Naeem et al. 2023)

The findings in Figure 2 show that repeated and unresolved conflicts result in disintegration and strained intimate relationships—relationships become distant, full of distance, and lose emotional warmth. Individuals in these relationships tend to exhibit withdrawn behaviour, become more quiet, and experience a decline in open

communication patterns, as reflected in the narrowing of the open self and the enlargement of the hidden self in the Johari Window framework. This process of withdrawal is also accompanied by a decline in social penetration (self-disclosure), making it increasingly difficult for couples to open up to each other, discuss conflicts, and find solutions together.

Prolonged communication conflicts trigger emotional tension and extreme mood swings, worsening perceptions of oneself and one's partner. Individuals often feel unappreciated, ignored, and even lose the meaning and closeness of the relationship. The phenomenon of alienation and isolation not only affects intrapersonal relationships, but also the wider social sphere, where couples are driven to seek external support from friends or family as a coping mechanism. Significant psychological impacts—ranging from stress, mental burden, to declining physical health—are increasingly felt, especially among couples from cultural minorities who face additional adaptation pressures without mutual acceptance.

Conceptually, the model resulting from this study confirms that repeated interpersonal communication conflicts → emotional tension → decreased social penetration → estrangement and alienation → changes in communication patterns (more closed) → effects on mental and social health → external adaptation strategies. This pattern reflects a negative cycle that reinforces relationship disintegration and increases the risk of mental health problems. Thus, the model of communication conflict interconnection developed in this study not only highlights the destructive impact of conflict in cross-cultural relationships, but also provides a new theoretical basis for understanding communication dynamics, changes in interaction patterns, and the need for intervention at various levels to strengthen the psychological resilience of couples in complex and dynamic cultural contexts.

Discussion

Based on an in-depth thematic analysis of interviews with intercultural couples in Makassar City, this study reveals that interpersonal communication conflicts in toxic relationships are triggered by a series of interrelated factors, ranging from differences in communication styles and cultural values to unsynchronised emotion management. Couples with Bugis, Toraja, Betawi, and Makassar backgrounds experienced tension due to differences in social customs. For example, the Bugis culture, which is more closed and protective of honour (*siri'*), tends to resolve problems privately, while couples from the Toraja culture are more open to sharing problems with their extended family. Differences in communication styles are also very prominent, where Bugis couples are accustomed to speaking softly and indirectly, while Toraja, Makassar, or Betawi couples tend to be more vocal, to the point, and expressive. These differences often lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations of tone of voice, and dissatisfaction because each party feels misunderstood or unappreciated by their partner.

In addition, this study found that conflicts that are not resolved effectively will escalate into a cycle of increasingly toxic and alienated relationships. Incompatibility in managing emotions, for example, one party holding back while the other wants to resolve the issue immediately, creates an unsynchronised communication pattern. Over time, individuals begin to withdraw, close themselves off, and experience a decline in social penetration (*self-disclosure*). This phenomenon is in line with Johari Window theory, in which *the open self* narrows and *the hidden self* expands. The relationship becomes increasingly distant, full of distance, and loses its emotional warmth. As a result, alienation, isolation, and the desire to seek external support from friends or family arise as coping mechanisms for the psychological and social

pressures experienced.

The conceptual model developed in this study illustrates how the cycle of recurring communication conflicts creates emotional tension, reduces openness, and reinforces relationship disintegration. This pattern has a broad impact, not only on core relationships, but also on mental health, social adaptation, and the well-being of couples—especially those in a cultural minority position. Thus, the results of this study emphasise the importance of culturally sensitive communication interventions and adaptive conflict resolution strategies in maintaining psychological resilience and harmony in intercultural relationships amid the complexity of multicultural societies such as Makassar City.

The findings show that the process of self-disclosure is central to the development—and deterioration—of relationships between couples of different cultures. At the beginning of a relationship, the process of self-disclosure and exchange of experiences occurs gradually, in line with the theory's assumption that relationships develop from shallow to intimate. However, when communication conflicts remain unresolved, what occurs is *depenetration* (a decline in the depth of interaction). This is reflected in behaviours such as withdrawal, reluctance to talk, and closing oneself off from one's partner, as reported by informants who noted a decline in intimacy, relationships becoming "cold", and a decrease in emotional warmth. The findings also add empirical strength to the Social Penetration theory by describing that cultural factors and unique communication patterns (for example, between the Bugis, who tend to be closed, and the Toraja, who are more open) accelerate depenetration when there is no mutual adaptation. The results of the study confirm that relationship development is not only a matter of time but is significantly influenced by the cultural context and the quality of interpersonal communication. This is where the research model verifies, while also developing contextually, the classical assumptions of Social Penetration Theory in the space of cross-cultural relations in Indonesia.

The findings of this study show that repeated communication conflicts result in a decrease in open self—couples become more closed, reluctant to share thoughts and feelings, and tend to enlarge the hidden self area. Conversely, the blind self area (the part of oneself that is known to others but not realised by oneself) can increase as misunderstandings or perceptions that are never communicated openly increase. Thus, the research findings directly verify the basic assumption of the Johari Window, that a decrease in self-disclosure and a lack of feedback enlarges the hidden self and blind self, which ultimately reduces the quality of the relationship, increases emotional distance, and accelerates the disintegration of the relationship. These findings also model that in the realm of cross-cultural couples, the "window" of communication is not only influenced by psychological factors, but also strongly influenced by cultural context, values, and family norms.

This research not only verifies the theory but also models the cycle of interconnected communication conflicts in cross-cultural couples within the framework of Social Penetration "depenetration" and the "open-hidden self" dynamics of the Johari Window. The resulting conceptual model confirms that, in cross-cultural relationships, recurring communication conflicts → emotional tension → decreased openness/self-disclosure → alienation → changes in communication patterns → decline in mental and social quality. This model extends the application of both theories to the context of cultural minority couples in Indonesia, so that the findings not only reinforce the theory but also provide new nuances (local contextualisation) in the map of interpersonal communication research.

The results of this study are consistent with and expand on previous findings regarding communication conflicts in toxic relationships and intercultural marriages. Suciati & Ramadhanty's research (Suciati & Ramadhanty, 2023) underlines the importance of communication patterns in shaping conflict dynamics—our findings also reveal that differences in communication styles (gentle, indirect vs. loud, to the point) and unsynchronised conflict resolution strategies are the main root causes of prolonged conflict cycles in intercultural couples. However, this study broadens the scope by highlighting how specific cultural factors, such as the value of *siri'* among the Bugis or family openness among the Toraja, shape communication patterns and conflict management in ways that go far beyond personal preferences. Furthermore, referring to the results of Hiew et al. (2016), this study confirms that positive or negative communication behaviour is greatly influenced by cultural background, and that incompatibility in communication styles—which we found to be very contrasting between ethnic groups in Makassar—not only affects relationship satisfaction but also triggers alienation, withdrawal, and even changes in the Johari Window structure (narrowing of the open self and enlargement of the hidden self) conceptually.

The findings of this study also add a new dimension to the literature on adaptation, coping, and the impact of conflict in cross-cultural relationships. If the research by Mahmudah et al. (Mahmudah et al., 2021) and Fonseca et al. (2020) highlight the importance of coping strategies (e.g., seeking social support, self-reflection) and shared relationship goals as predictors of relationship quality, our research shows that the cycle of recurring communication conflicts in cross-cultural couples can create *depenetration* (relationship deterioration) and increase the need for external adaptation—even more significantly in couples from cultural minorities. Furthermore, this study provides a new conceptual model of the interconnection of communication conflicts that reinforces the influence of culture, communication style, and family values as primary determinants, not merely moderating variables. Thus, these findings broaden our understanding of how communication conflicts in cross-cultural relationships are not merely about differences in preferences, but about complex interactions between value systems, social structures, and deeper psychological processes, thereby emphasising the importance of a more culturally sensitive approach to communication and holistic interventions in multicultural societies.

These findings emphasise the need for conflict resolution strategies that consider cultural roots, family norms, and communication patterns of couples, so that the risks of social depenetration and alienation can be minimised. However, this study has limitations in terms of the relatively small number of informants and the ethnic coverage, which only focuses on Bugis, Toraja, Betawi, and Makassar couples, so generalisation of the results to a wider population needs to be done with caution. For further research, it is recommended to expand the participation of couples from other ethnic backgrounds in Indonesia, conduct a longitudinal study to observe changes in relationship dynamics over time, and explore the role of external factors such as economic pressure, education, or the role of technology in mediating communication conflicts and the adaptation of culturally diverse couples.

CONCLUSION

This study stems from the importance of understanding the dynamics of interpersonal communication conflicts in toxic relationships among couples with different cultural backgrounds, particularly in multicultural environments such as Makassar City. The findings confirm that conflicts are often triggered by differences in communication styles, cultural norms, and unsynchronised patterns of emotion management. The

incompatibility between closed cultures (high privacy) such as Bugis and open cultures such as Toraja in dealing with family issues, as well as differences in language expression and division of household roles, give rise to rigid communication patterns, frequent misunderstandings, and a tendency towards closedness. Conflicts that are not resolved effectively result in decreased self-disclosure, an increase in the hidden self in the Johari Window, and increasingly strained emotional relationships. This phenomenon of social depenetration encourages individuals to seek external support to cope with psychological pressure, while at the same time risking worsening alienation in core relationships. The significance of these findings lies in their contribution to expanding our understanding of how communication conflicts in intercultural couples develop, and how the conceptual model of communication conflict that has been constructed can form the basis for culture-based counselling interventions. However, this study has limitations in terms of the number and diversity of informants, and does not consider external variables such as educational level or economic status, which may also influence communication patterns. Further research is recommended to expand the scope of participants across regions and ethnicities, as well as to adopt a longitudinal design to understand the dynamics of intercultural relationships in greater depth over time. Thus, the results of this study are expected to strengthen the resilience of intercultural relationships and increase the effectiveness of intervention programmes for multicultural couples in Indonesia.

REFERENCE

- Anugrah, I. A., Arianto, A., & Sudirman, S. (2024). Analysis of Toxic Relationships In Interpersonal Communication Among Teenagers. *Proceedings of the World Conference on Governance and Social Sciences (WCGSS 2023)*, Wcgss 2023. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-236-1_97
- Castrén, A.-M., & Ketokivi, K. (2015). Studying the complex dynamics of family relationships: A figurational approach. *Sociological Research Online*, 20(1), 108–121. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3539>
- Deep, S., Mohd, B., & Hussain, O. (2017). Exploring the Role of Culture in Communication Conflicts : A Qualitative Study. *The Qualitative Report Article*, 22(4). <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2612>
- Edmondson, Amy C, & Smith, Diana McLain. (2006). Too Hot to Handle? How to Manage Relationship Conflict. *California Management Review*, 49(1), 6–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41166369>
- Fonseca, Ana Laura, Ye, Tony, Curran, Melissa, Koyama, Jill, & Butler, Emily A. (2020). Cultural Similarities and Differences in Relationship Goals in Intercultural Romantic Couples. *Journal of Family Issues*, 42(4), 813–838. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X20929071>
- Hiew, D. N., Halford, W. K., van de Vijver, F. J. R., & Liu, S. (2016). Communication and relationship satisfaction in Chinese, Western, and intercultural Chinese-Western couples. *Journal of Family Psychology : JFP : Journal of the Division of Family Psychology of the American Psychological Association (Division 43)*, 30(2), 193–202. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000144>
- Husbands, S., Jowett, S., Barton, P., & Coast, J. (2017). Using non-participant observation and think-aloud to understand and improve modelling processes. *Qualitative methods for health economics*, 217–227.
- Littlejohn, S. W., & Domenici, K. (2007). *Communication, conflict, and the management of difference*. Waveland Press.
- Lubit, R. H. (2003). *Coping with toxic managers, subordinates... and other difficult people: Using emotional intelligence to survive and prosper*. FT Press.
- Mahmudah, S., Astutik, F., & Rahayu, D. (2021). Coping Strategies in the Toxic Relationships : A Phenomenological Study of Emerging Adults. *International*

- Journal of Body, Mind and Culture*, 12(3), 35–50.
<https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v12i3.869>
- Mavhandu-Mudzusi, Azwihangwisi Helen. (2018). The Couple Interview as a Method of Collecting Data in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Studies. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1), 1609406917750994. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917750994>
- Mukhopadhyay, J., Singh, R., & Bhattacharjee, A. (2024). *Toxic Relationships: A Multidisciplinary Exploration of Mental Health Implications BT - Empowering Indian Women Through Resilience: Recent Developments and Future Perspective* (A. Singh, R. Bhadouria, S. Tripathi, R. Modi, & S. Gupta (ed.); hal. 151–175). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-0986-4_8
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069231205788. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>
- Nawantara, R. D., Arofah, L., Rahayu, D. S., Septiana, N. Z., Amalia, R., & Allsabab, M. A. H. (2025). When love hurts: emotional labor and hidden strains of intimate partner violence in toxic relationships. *Journal of Public Health*, 47(3), e502–e503. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdae280>
- Praptiningsih, N. A. (2024). Toxic relationship in youth communication through self-love intervention strategy. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 14(2). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/14292>
- Seshadri, G., & Knudson-Martin, C. (2013). How couples manage interracial and intercultural differences: Implications for clinical practice. *Journal of marital and family therapy*, 39(1), 43–58. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00262.x>
- Shearman, S. M., & Dumlao, R. (2008). A cross-cultural comparison of family communication patterns and conflict between young adults and parents. *Journal of Family Communication*, 8(3), 186–211. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/15267430802182456>
- Suciati, S., & Ramadhanty, S. (2023). Communication patterns in interpersonal conflict in premarriage couples experiencing toxic relationships. *The International Journal of Communication and Linguistic Studies*, 22(2), 41. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-7882/CGP/v22i02/41-60>
- Suryaningtyas, A. S., & Suciati. (2025). Interpersonal communication style of premarriage couples in toxic relationships. *Borobudur International Symposium on Humanities and Social Science (BIS-HSS) 2024*, 2, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.31603/bishss.293>
- Tili, T. R., & Barker, G. G. (2015). Communication in intercultural marriages: Managing cultural differences and conflicts. *Southern Communication Journal*, 80(3), 189–210. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2015.1023826>
- Uhlich, M. (2021). Cultural diversity within couples: Risk or chance? A meta-analytic review of relationship satisfaction. *Personal Relationships*, 29(1), 120–145. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12405>
- Zahiduzzaman, A. S. (2015). *Toxic Relationship*. AuthorHouse.