

Article

Intergenerational Conflict-Initiating Factors and Management Styles: U.S. Older Adults' Report

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Abstract: Guided by the theoretical frameworks of communication accommodation theory and conflict management, this study examines U.S. older participants' (65 or older) written conflict scenario either with a grandchild or a nonfamily young adult. Using content analysis approach, we analyzed these written conflict scenarios to uncover major conflict initiating factors and conflict management styles. Results revealed that intergenerational conflict initiated by *old-to-young criticism* (more frequently reported in conflicts with nonfamily young adults) or *disagreement/generation gap* (more frequently reported in conflicts with grandchildren) was reported most frequently followed by *young-to-old rebuff*, *cumulative annoyance*, and *young-to-old criticism*. Additionally, results indicated that *older adults used the problem-solving style most frequently when disagreement/generation gap initiated the conflict*, especially in the family contexts; *both young and older adults used the competing style most frequently when old-to-young criticism initiated the conflict*, especially in nonfamily contexts. Furthermore, the use of the *competing* and *problem-solving styles* by young adults was significantly associated with the use of the same styles by older adults and vice versa, indicating both positive and negative reciprocation in intergenerational conflict. Results in general show that young and older adults manage intergenerational conflicts in different ways in family versus nonfamily contexts.

Keywords: intergenerational conflict initiating factors and management styles; accommodation and nonaccommodation; family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships; U.S. young and older adults; content analysis



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1. Introduction

Communication scholars have paid increasing attention to communication, aging, and intergenerational relationships over the past several decades due to the growing population of older adults and the prevalent ageist attitudes toward older adults [1–3]. As a powerful theory explaining interpersonal and intergroup dynamics in the field of communication studies for almost five decades, communication accommodation theory (CAT) has provided a major theoretical framework to research examining communication toward and from older adults and its motivations and consequences [3–6]. In the initial but foundational stages of CAT's development in the 1970s, convergence and divergence, defined as how individuals adjust the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of their speech to assimilate to or differentiate from their conversational partners' speech respectively, were communication approximation strategies [7–9]. More recently, the 4th stage of CAT's development has focused on the intercultural sphere of intergenerational communication and health (i.e., 1986–present). In this stage, a major satellite models of CAT (i.e., *the Communication Predicament of Aging Model*; [10]) was conceptualized. Particularly, scholars in communication studies, social psychology, and linguistics have collaborated on research examining motivation and consequences of communication accommodation in communication, intergenerational relationships, and successful aging [5]. Research in this stage and afterwards

has enhanced CAT's development significantly, and major conceptualizations include defining communication accommodation as the perceived communication moves, adjustment or strategies beyond convergence or divergence, individuals use in interactions in response to various factors concerning interpretability, discourse management, interpersonal control, and/or emotional expression in the transactional process of communication¹ [5,12]. For the current study, two strategies of CAT are especially useful to understand intergenerational communication in conflict situations [13]. The first strategy is accommodation—the perceived *attuning, optimally convergent, or appropriate* communicative adjustment in ways that improve communication effectiveness and bridge social distance [14]. For example, in the context of intergenerational communication, prior research indicates that individuals perceive mutual respect, support, and positive emotional expression as accommodative communication behaviors fostering intergenerational solidarity [2].

The second strategy is nonaccommodation (e.g., under- and overaccommodation [14]) which refers to how communicators modify or adjust their “communication in ways that hinder effective communication and/or increase social distance” (p. 2). As a form of nonaccommodation, overaccommodation happens when individuals modify their communication exceeding the needs perceived by the listeners; underaccommodation, another form of nonaccommodation, happens when speakers do not modify their communication adequately, including lack of adjustment, to satisfy the listeners' needs or desires [12,14].

In this stage, convergence or divergence—individuals' communication strategies that speakers use in response to their conversation partner's communication—can be perceived as accommodative or nonaccommodative depending on the communication context [7,9]. Put simply, communication behaviors are not *inherently or objectively* accommodating or nonaccommodating, but rather communicators (message sender, receiver and/or observer) *subjectively perceive* them to be nonaccommodative/inappropriate or accommodative/appropriate in the communication context [9,15]. This is critical in ways that emphasize the importance of perspectives of the conflicting parties (e.g., young versus older adults) and influences of *communication context* (e.g., age identity and family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships) in understanding the transactional process of intergenerational conflict management, which is an integral part of intergenerational relationships. Guided by CAT and conflict management frameworks, the current study examines (1) older adults' experiences of intergenerational conflicts with grandchildren and young people who are nonfamily members to uncover initiating factors and management styles, (2) the association between the two major variables (initiating factors and styles of management), and (3) the association between young and older adults' conflict management styles. This study is meaningful in important ways.

First, the current study examines older adults' views about intergenerational conflict in understanding the role played by communication non(accommodation) in intergenerational relationships, which is largely ignored. The majority of the intergenerational communication literature has examined forms of young-to-old and old-to-young nonaccommodation (e.g., over- and underaccommodative behaviors), their motivations, and negative outcomes *from young adults' perspective* [2,16]. This is especially the case for those studies that guided the CPA model (i.e., the *Communicative Predicament Model of Aging*; [10]), a major satellite model of CAT explaining how the activation of age stereotypes, especially negative ones, influences intergenerational communication and older adults' wellbeing. Guided by the CPA model, prior studies indicate that in response to negative age stereotypes of incompetence and dependence, young adults overaccommodate older adults by using loud and slow speech with exaggerated intonation and pronunciation, repetitions, and exaggerated praise for minor accomplishments [2,17]. However, studies show that older adults tend to use overaccommodative behaviors such as asking overly personal or intimate questions, using inappropriate or patronizing endearments, and giving unsolicited advice in intergenerational interactions as well [2,16,18]. Overall, these studies suggest that both young and older adults use underaccommodative behaviors (e.g., nonlistening, ignoring, disapproving, disrespectful, or condescending comments, dismissive of the other's topics,

and imperative orders) in intergenerational interactions [2,18], which are perceived as more dissatisfying than overaccommodative behaviors [14]. In this study, we argue that older peoples' experiences are valuable, as these intergenerational nonaccommodative behaviors are primarily studied from young people's experiences and perceptions [19].

Older adults' perspective is critical to enhance our understanding of intergenerational conflict as they experience, interpret, and manage conflict differently from young adults [20–22]. For example, prior research indicates that compared to young adults, older adults tend to be less focused on negative experiences [23], respond more positively to social tensions [24], and are more nonconfrontational in managing conflict in the workplace [25]. Hence, contributing to prior literature [26,27], this study emphasizes the importance of conducting more research in intergenerational conflict from the perspective of older adults.

Second, the current study examines older people's experiences of intergenerational conflict with young family (grandchildren) and nonfamily members. While most intergenerational communication occurs in the family context, for example, between grandchildren and grandparents [28,29], a majority of the intergenerational communication studies have focused on intergenerational relationships with strangers, colleagues, or acquaintances [2,22]. Prior research has confirmed that young adults report having a closer relationship with grandparents than with nonfamily older adults and that family older adults are more supportive of them than nonfamily elders [30]. Therefore, contributing to prior literature [31], this study examines older people's experiences of intergenerational conflict with young people who are family and nonfamily members.

2. Conflict and Communication in Intergenerational Relationships

Conflict has been defined as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties” [32] (p. 21), or “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with attainment of their goals” [33] (p. 234). Conflict is an inevitable part of intergenerational relationships, which may occur for various reasons such as differences in values and lifestyles [13]. Essentially, conflict management involves a dynamic communication process of verbal or nonverbal behavioral expressions of incompatible interests and perceived differences in managing specific tasks and relational and communication goals [33].

3. Conflict-Initiating Factors

Conflict initiation has been conceptualized as one party's communicative moves interfering “with the activity of another that escalates a situation into conflict” [30] (p. 345). Zhang and Lin [30] examined a large sample of U.S. young adults' report of conflict with older adults to identify conflict-initiating factors. Their findings indicate that old-to-young criticism is the most common conflict initiating factor (33.8%), followed by old-to-young rebuff (17.0%), disagreement/generation gap (16.4%), and illegitimate demand (13.5%). Although less frequently reported, young-to-old criticism (7.9%) and young-to-old rebuff (5.6%) are also identified as conflict-initiating factors. Additionally, their findings show that disagreement/generation gap, young-to-old rebuff, and old-to-young illegitimate demand are reported more often in intergenerational conflict with family elders, while old-to-young criticism and rebuff are reported more often from nonfamily elders.

These conflict-initiating factors reflect various forms of nonaccommodative communication that have been previously examined in intergenerational interactions [2,18]. For example, criticism has been shown as consisting of disapproving and disrespectful comments (underaccommodative) [30,31]. Additionally, cumulative annoyance, by definition, may include any repeated nonaccommodative behavior that surpasses a certain threshold of an individual [34]. Cumulative annoyance in intergenerational context can consist of either over- (e.g., unsolicited advice, over-parenting, overly personal questions) or underaccommodation (e.g., nonlistening, dismissive of other generated topics). Prior research suggests that intergenerational disagreement due to a perceived generation gap consists of

mostly underaccommodative behaviors (e.g., arguing, interruptions, and ignoring [30,31]). Finally, when comparing prior literature on rebuff with prior nonaccommodation literature, it is clear that this conflict-initiating factor is mostly underaccommodative (e.g., rejecting or dismissive of other-generated conversation topics). Overall, and consistent with prior studies [2,16], intergenerational communication in conflict situations [30] contains various forms of non(accommodative) communication that are important to enhance our understanding of intergenerational relationships [10]. Therefore, from a communication accommodation perspective, the current study examines older adults' written accounts of conflicts with young people in family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships to uncover the major conflict initiating factors. Thus, we propose the following research questions.

RQ1: *From the perspective of U.S. older adults, what are the most frequent conflict-initiating factors in intergenerational relationships?*

RQ2: *Will the frequency of the reported conflict-initiating factors vary in family and nonfamily contexts?*

4. Conflict Management Styles

Scholars have explained that the simultaneous examination of conflict-initiating factors and subsequent conflict management styles enhances our understanding of conflict [31,35]. Thus, in addition to conflict initiating factors, the current study also examines conflict management styles. Kilmann and Thomas' [36] model is a widely accepted and well-acknowledged framework for conflict management styles. This model delineates five main conflict management styles operating on two dimensions (i.e., concern for self and concern for other), four of which (i.e., competing, avoiding, obliging, and problem solving) have been considered distinctive and have been validated in the study of conflict in intercultural [37] and intergenerational relationships [22].

As much of conflict literature builds off this work, it is important to understand the definition of each style as well as how each style relates to CAT. High levels of self-interest and low levels of interest in the other characterize the competing style, which is nonaccommodative in nature. This style is "negative, confrontational, assertive, and uncooperative," and can include communication behaviors as "faulting and rejecting the other, hostile questioning, and denying responsibility" [22] (p. 73). The avoiding style, which is another form of nonaccommodation, is characterized by low interest in the self and the other. This style is "non-confrontational, but under-responsive to the conflict," and includes "minimizing explicit discussion of the conflict, trivializing and downplaying the disagreements, and shifting the topic to withdraw from the conflict" [22] (p. 73).

On the other hand, the obliging style and problem-solving style are accommodative in nature. The obliging style is characterized by a low interest in the self and high interest in the other. This style "emphasizes relational harmony," and it includes such behaviors as "recognizing the other party's needs, affirming the other's position, taking full responsibility for the problem, apologizing, and being unassertive" [22] (p. 730). Finally, the problem-solving style is characterized by high interest in the self and the other. This style is assertive and cooperative. It includes showing "empathy and understanding for the position of the other person, while soliciting input from the other person and engaging that individual in finding a mutually acceptable solution" [22] (p. 73).

Convergence and divergence are also important strategies of CAT to consider in examining conflict management styles used by young and older adults. In conflict management literature, convergence or communication reciprocation takes place when one individual matches the style of another. The idea of reciprocation in intergenerational conflict management styles traces back to foundational studies on cohort differences [21]. When optimally used (e.g., one individual uses an accommodative style such as problem-solving and the other individual converges by using the same accommodative style), it has been shown to have potentially beneficial consequences in interpersonal relationships [38]. However, when convergence is carried out in a nonoptimal or suboptimal way (e.g., one individual uses a nonaccommodative style such as the competing style and the other

individual converges by using the same nonaccommodative style), it could have harmful consequences [39].

Contrastingly, when an individual distances themselves from another individual by using a different conflict management style, it is referred to as divergence [39]. Like convergence, we argue in this study that divergence in conflict management has the potential to be both positive and negative depending on the interactive context in which it is used. Overall, CAT, as a theoretical framework, illustrates both the bright and dark side of intergenerational conflict management interactions by explaining the styles in terms of accommodation and nonaccommodation as well as explaining individuals' use of the conflict management styles as they relate to their communication partners' use of the conflict styles (i.e., convergence and divergence).

The majority of the prior research using CAT in intergenerational communication has examined perceptions, outcomes, and personal/intergroup motivations. From older adults' perspective, the current study focuses on the communicative dynamics and exchanges between young and older people embedded in the written accounts of intergenerational conflicts. Further, conflict initiating factors are examined as they relate to conflict management styles, therefore illustrating what and how intergenerational conflict is initiated. Finally, the current study examines the associations between young and older adults' use of conflict management styles, hence providing insights in understanding how one party's communicative move influences that of the other party. Thus, we propose the following research questions.

RQ3: *What are the most frequently used conflict management styles used by young and older adults reported by U.S. older adults?*

RQ4: *How do the reported conflict styles vary in family and nonfamily contexts?*

RQ5: *How are the intergenerational conflict-initiating factors associated with the conflict management styles for both young and older adults?*

RQ6: *How are the conflict management styles used by older adults associated with the conflict management styles used by young adults?*

5. Method

5.1. Participants and Procedures

U.S. older participants (65 or above; $N = 181$, M age = 74.38, $SD = 6.92$, age range = 63–86) were recruited through a life span institute providing educational programs to older adults in the Midwestern area. We randomly assigned voluntary participants to think of their relationship with a grandchild (18–25 years old) or with a young adult in the same age range who is not a family member. Following that, each participant was asked to answer four questions about a conflict they were experiencing or had recently experienced within that relationship. They were specifically asked to report (1) how the conflict was started, (2) how they became aware of the conflict, (3) how they managed the conflict, including specific communication exchanges with the young adult, and (4) how they felt about the way they handled the conflict and their perceptions of how the young adult handled the conflict. A little over half of those participants reported a family conflict ($n = 96$, M age = 75.38, $SD = 7.02$, age range = 63–95), while the rest reported a nonfamily conflict ($n = 85$; M age = 73.35, $SD = 6.72$, age range = 63–95).

The older participants reported an average age of about twenty-two years (M age = 21.84, $SD = 3.99$, age range = 17–35) of their grandchildren (i.e., 53 grandsons and 43 granddaughters) who were mostly White American ($n = 82$) in the conflict scenarios. There were also five African-American/Black grandchildren, four Asian-American grandchildren, and five grandchildren who were placed into the other category. The average time that had passed from the initial conflict scenario to the report was about nine and a half months ($M = 9.71$, $SD = 11.50$). Eighty-one participants reported that they had not been the caretaker of the grandchild, while thirteen participants had been. Forty-four percent of participants were

related paternally ($n = 41$) to the grandchild they reported, while fifty-six percent ($n = 52$) were related maternally. Ninety-five percent ($n = 85$) of the grandchildren reported were full grandchildren of the participants, while five percent ($n = 5$) were step or half grandchildren. The average participant had about seven grandchildren in total ($M = 6.61$, $SD = 3.84$).

The nonfamily young adults had an average age of about twenty-two years (M age = 21.84, $SD = 3.99$, age range = 17–35) and were fifty-eight percent female ($n = 49$) and forty-two percent male ($n = 36$). Sixty-nine of the young adults (81.2%) were European-American/Caucasian/White, nine were African-American/Black (10.6%), one was Asian-American (1.2%), and six were other (7.0%). Overall, the older respondents reported the nonfamily young adults as co-workers ($n = 15$; 17.4%), acquaintances ($n = 14$; 16.4%), neighbors ($n = 7$; 8.1%), friends ($n = 12$; 13.9%), and other ($n = 28$; 32.8%). The reported intergenerational relationship was 7.14 years in length ($SD = 9.73$).

To provide a better contextualization of our respondents and the reported conflict scenarios, we also measured perceived typicality of the reported conflict scenario. Specifically, we asked the participants to indicate how typical the reported conflict scenario was compared to other conflicts they generally experienced with grandchildren ($n = 96$; $M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.99$) or nonfamily young adults ($n = 85$; $M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.93$) on a 7-point scale with 1 indicating “not typical” at all and 7 indicating “very typical”. A one-sample t -test indicated that the mean typicality score for the conflict scenarios ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.85$) was significantly different from the midpoint scale (i.e., 4), $t(170) = -7.56$, $p < 0.05$. Thus, the reported conflict scenarios are not typical of communication they had with family and nonfamily young adults in general. There was no difference in typicality between the reports of conflict with family ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.88$) and nonfamily ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.83$) relationships, $t(170) = 0.33$, $p > 0.05$.

Further, a four-item measurement [40] was adapted to identify older adults’ perceived closeness with the grandchildren ($\alpha = 0.90$; $M = 6.28$, $SD = 1.35$) or nonfamily young adults ($\alpha = 0.92$; $M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.96$) in the reported conflict scenarios (e.g., “I am close to this young adult/grandchild”). These items were measured on a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). An independent samples t -test revealed that intergenerational family relationships ($M = 6.28$, $SD = 1.19$), were significantly closer than nonfamily relationships ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.75$), $t(169) = 10.47$, $p < 0.001$.

5.2. Procedures: Coding Scheme, Coder Training, and Practice Coding

The length of the intergenerational conflict scenarios reported by the older participants is typically about two to four short paragraphs. A coding scheme consisting of adapted/modified categories from prior literature [22,30,35] and new categories from the written scenarios were created as needed for conflict initiating factors and conflict styles in intergenerational relationships. For example, Witteman studied peer conflict among college students and found that cumulative annoyance is a major conflict initiating factor. However, this factor did not appear frequently in Zhang and Lin’s [30] study of intergenerational conflict. We kept an open mind in reading the scenarios reported by the older respondents and used an inductive process in exploring the data to allow the factors to emerge while being aware of the existing typologies reported in prior studies. We used a similar process in coding the conflict management styles. While we are aware that four major intergenerational conflict management styles (i.e., problem solving, competing, obliging, and avoiding) were reported in Wiebe and Zhang [31] and Zhang et al. [22], third party also appeared in other studies in intergenerational conflict. Each conflict scenario was considered as a unit of analysis. The dominant conflict initiating factor and management style used by the older participant and the young adult were identified in each conflict scenario in line with the two priori coding schemes developed based on studies examining initiating factors of conflict [30,35] and conflict management styles [22,31].

The first author conducted coder training before the coding started. The second author served as one of the two coders. First, coders spent time familiarizing themselves with the adapted lists of operational definitions of the conflict initiating factors and conflict

management styles. After they felt comfortable with the operational definitions, they coded a portion of the randomly selected conflict scenarios individually (i.e., 30 conflicts with grandchildren and 30 with nonfamily young adults). To identify the major conflict initiating factor in each scenario, the coders were asked to focus on how the conflict was initiated. To identify the dominant conflict management style the young and older adult used, coders focused on how they managed the conflict subsequently. Coders compared their findings in the initial coder training process. The coders discussed disagreements with each other and the first author until they reached a consensus. In this stage, we constantly modified the definitions of our major coding categories (i.e., conflict initiating factors and management styles), until the final lists were exhaustive (i.e., five factors; Table 1) and management styles (i.e., five styles; Table 2). The scenarios used for coding practice were put back “to the larger pool for later coding but were not included in the subsequent reliability check” [13,30] (p. 349).

Table 1. Definitions of the intergenerational conflict-initiating factors (adapted from Zhang [13] (p. 305) unless otherwise noted).

“Old-to-young criticism: The older respondent criticizes or finds fault with the young adult’s behavior, opinion, and/or attitude.”
“Young-to-old criticism: The young adult criticizes or finds fault with the older respondent’s behavior, opinion, and/or attitude.”
“Young-to-old Rebuff: The young adult bluntly rejects the older respondent’s request for support, approval, help or need for more attention, affection, or understanding. In other words, the older respondent does not get the desired reaction or response from the young adult. Minimal criticism or demand is indicated.”
“Disagreement/generation gap: The older adult perceives a difference or clash in attitude, values, life style, and/or opinions between him/her and the young adult. Age difference tends to be considered as the cause of this type of conflict. Minimal criticism or demand is indicated.”
Young adults’ cumulative annoyance [35,41]: The young adult’s repetitive activity is perceived as inappropriate, and surpasses a certain threshold. The accumulation escalates the situation to a conflict. The emphasis here is that certain behaviors have happened many times.

Table 2. Definitions of the identified conflict management styles in intergenerational conflict (adapted from Zhang et al. [22] (p. 73) unless otherwise noted).

Competing: “This style is characterized by high levels of self-interest and low levels of interest for the other individual. It is also confrontational, assertive, and uncooperative. It includes communication behaviors such as faulting, rejecting, and questioning the other individual and denying responsibility. The person who demonstrates this style defends his or her position furiously or firmly and disagrees with the other’s interests, needs, and desires.”
Avoiding: “This style is involves low levels of interest for both oneself and the other individual. It is non-confrontational, yet under-responsive to the conflict. It minimizes explicit discussion of the conflict, trivializes and downplays the disagreement, and shifts conversation as a way to withdraw from the situation. This style is passive and often results in the individual’s retreat from the social scene.”
Obliging: “This style is demonstrates low levels of self-interest and high levels of interest for the other individual. It emphasizes relational harmony as the individual recognizes the others party’s needs, affirms the other’s position, concedes, takes full responsibility for the problem, and apologizes. Finally, it is unassertive and lacks collaborative problem solving—the biggest concern of the person in conflict is to please or satisfy the other side.”
Problem-Solving: “This style is characterized by high levels of interest for both oneself and the other individual. This style is assertive and cooperative in initiating a mutually satisfying and acceptable solution. Like the obliging style, it includes empathy and understanding for the position of the other person. Unlike the obliging style, however, it involves soliciting input from the other person and collaborating to find the best solution. Overall, this is a communication style that focuses on cooperation and satisfaction for both parties.”
Third-Party [42,43]: This style is utilized when the individuals involved in the conflict invite an outsider to mediate. It can include any combination of interest for oneself and the other. Usually, one or both parties communicate to the other through a parent or mutual colleague of the young adult.

For conflict-initiating factors, we uncovered five major factors (see Table 1), including four factors from the prior intergenerational conflict literature [13,30] and one factor (cumulative annoyance) from interpersonal conflict with roommates [35]. The four typical styles emerged from the data (i.e., competing, avoiding, problem-solving, and obliging; see [22,31]) as well as an additional style, third-party [42,43]. In the *third-party* scenarios, usually, one or both parties communicate to the other through one of the young adult's parents or a mutual colleague. *Third-party* as a conflict management style exposes the unique complexity of intergenerational conflict management involving more than two parties.

5.3. Coding Categories and Reliability Check

After the training process, each of the two coders individually analyzed 39 scenarios (21.55%) in the coding process for reliability checks. The coders identified the major conflict-initiating factor and management style used by young and older adults in each scenario in two separate passes. If a scenario had an initiating factor or management style that does not fit any of the existing categories, we placed them in "other". The intercoder reliability for initiating factors, young adults' management styles, and older adults' management styles was measured using percent agreement (0.92, 0.95, and 0.88 respectively) and Cohen's Kappa (0.85, 0.80, 0.83 respectively), which was satisfactory. The remaining 142 scenarios were evenly divided and coded by each coder independently.

For conflict-initiating factors, we placed three scenarios (i.e., 1.66%) in the "other" category. These scenarios were initiated by an illegitimate demand by the older adult. Further, for conflict management styles, we placed seven scenarios in the "other" category, as they lacked sufficient data to determine the style. The "other" category for both conflict initiating factors and management styles was not included in later data analysis.

6. Results

6.1. Research Questions 1 and 2

Research Question 1 examined the types of conflict initiating factors the older participants reported in the conflict scenarios. Table 3 presents the frequencies of the five initiating factors (i.e., old-to-young criticism, disagreement/generation gap, young-to-old rebuff, young adults' cumulative annoyance, and young-to-old criticism) identified by older adults in intergenerational conflict scenarios. A one-way chi-square analysis (overall $\chi^2(4) = 39.18, p < 0.05$) and follow-up pairwise comparisons indicated that old-to-young criticism ($n = 57$; 31.49%), disagreement/generation gap ($n = 49$; 27.07%), and young-to-old rebuff ($n = 32$; 17.68%) were the most frequently reported initiating factors. Young adults' cumulative annoyance ($n = 26$; 14.36%) and young-to-old criticism ($n = 14$; 9.40%) were also reported.

Table 3. Frequencies of the identified conflict-initiating factors in family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships.

Factors	Frequency	Type of Intergenerational Relationship		
		Family (%)	Nonfamily (%)	Adjusted Residual
Old-to-young criticism	57 ^a	18 (31.6%)	39 (68.4%)	3.9 ***
Disagreement/ generation gap	49 ^{ab}	34 (69.4%)	15 (30.6%)	2.7 **
Young-to-old rebuff	32 ^{abc}	19 (59.4%)	13 (40.6%)	0.8
Cumulative Annoyance	26 ^{bc}	17 (65.4%)	9 (34.66%)	1.4
Young-to-old criticism	14 ^c	5 (35.7%)	9 (64.3%)	1.4
Other	3	3 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	-
Total count	181	96	85	-
Percentages	100	100	100	-

Note: different superscripts indicate significant differences; overall $\chi^2(4) = 39.18, p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.01$ if adjusted residual is greater than 2.58; *** $p < 0.001$ if adjusted residual is greater than 3.20.

RQ 2 examined how the conflict initiating factors would vary in the frequency distribution depending on the type of intergenerational relationships. Results using a two-way contingency table analysis indicated a significant difference, $\chi^2(4) = 39.18, p < 0.01$. Follow-up one-way chi-square analysis indicated that (1) old-to-young criticism was reported more frequently in intergenerational relationships with young people who are nonfamily members (adjusted residual = 3.9, $p < 0.001$) and (2) disagreement/generation gap was reported more in family relationships (adjusted residual = 2.7, $p < 0.01$). No other differences existed between family and nonfamily relationships and the reported initiating factors (see Table 3).

6.2. Research Questions 3 and 4

Research Question 3 asked about the most frequently reported conflict management styles in intergenerational relationships and Research Question 4 examined the frequency distribution of the conflict management styles in family and nonfamily contexts.

Results using a two-way contingency table analysis (overall $\chi^2(4) = 109.33, p < 0.01$) and follow-up pairwise chi-square analysis, indicated that, within the scenarios reported by older adults, they themselves used the competing style ($n = 67$; 37.02%) and problem-solving style ($n = 73$; 40.33%) most frequently (no statistical difference between them). The avoiding style ($n = 15$; 8.29%), the obliging style ($n = 7$; 3.87%), and the third-party style ($n = 18$; 9.94%) were less frequently reported as the used styles (no statistical difference among them). The competing style was used more in nonfamily scenarios (adjusted residual = 2.6, $p < 0.01$) and the problem-solving style was used more in family scenarios (adjusted residual = 2.2, $p < 0.05$), overall $\chi^2(4) = 109.33, p < 0.01$. No other significant differences existed between older adults' use of conflict management styles with grandchildren and nonfamily young adults. Table 4 presents the frequencies of the five conflict management styles older adults reported themselves using in intergenerational conflict scenarios.

Table 4. Conflict management styles used by older adults in intergenerational conflicts in family and nonfamily contexts.

Styles	Frequency	Type of Intergenerational Relationship		
		Family (%)	Nonfamily (%)	Adjusted Residual
Problem-solving	73 ^a	46 (63.0%)	27 (37.0%)	2.2 *
Competing	67 ^a	27 (40.3%)	40 (59.7%)	2.6 **
Avoiding	15 ^b	11 (73.3%)	4 (26.7%)	1.3
Third-party	18 ^b	9 (50%)	9 (50%)	0.0
Obliging	7 ^b	3 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)	0.6
Other	1	0 (0.0%)	1 (100%)	-
Total count	181	96	85	-
Percentages	100	100	100	-

Note: different superscripts indicate significant differences; overall $\chi^2(4) = 109.33, p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$ if the adjusted residual is greater than 1.96; ** $p < 0.01$ if the adjusted residual is greater than 2.58.

A second two-way contingency table analysis and follow-up comparisons indicated that, within the scenarios reported by older adults, young adults used the competing style ($n = 80$; 44.20%) most frequently, followed by the problem-solving ($n = 26$; 14.36%), avoiding ($n = 38$; 20.99%), and obliging ($n = 22$; 12.15%) styles (not significantly different from each other), overall $\chi^2(4) = 84.57, p < 0.01$. Young adults used the competing style more in nonfamily scenarios (adjusted residual = 2.2, $p < 0.05$), while they used the avoiding style more in family scenarios (adjusted residual = 2.5, $p < 0.05$), overall $\chi^2(4) = 84.57, p < 0.01$. No other significant differences existed between young adults' use of conflict management styles with grandparents and older people who are nonfamily members. Table 5 presents the frequencies of the five management styles used by young adults in the intergenerational conflict scenarios.

Table 5. Frequencies of the identified conflict management styles used by young people with grandparents and nonfamily older adults.

Styles	Frequency	Type of Intergenerational Relationship		
		Family (%)	Nonfamily (%)	Adjusted Residual
Competing	80 ^a	35 (43.8%)	45 (56.2%)	2.2 *
Avoiding	38 ^b	27 (71.1%)	11 (28.9%)	2.5 *
Problem-solving	26 ^{bc}	15 (57.7%)	11 (42.3%)	0.5
Obliging	22 ^{bc}	13 (59.0%)	9 (41.0%)	0.6
Third-party	9 ^c	3 (33.3%)	6 (66.7%)	1.2
Other	6	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	-
Total count	181	96	85	-
Percentages	100	100	100	-

Note: different superscripts indicate significant differences; overall $\chi^2(4) = 84.57, p < 0.01$. * $p < 0.05$ if adjusted residual is greater than 1.96.

6.3. Research Questions 5 and 6

Research Question 5 examined the associations between the initiating factors and the management styles reported by the older respondents. Table 6 presents the results from chi-squared analyses of the frequencies of initiating factors for both young and older adults' management style. Specifically, cross-tabulation results indicated that the older adults' use of the competing style was most associated with the initiating factor of old-to-young criticism. The older adults' use of the problem-solving style was most associated with the young-to-old rebuff and disagreement/generation gap initiating factors.

Table 6. Associations between conflict-initiating factors and young adults' use of management styles in intergenerational relationships.

		Competing	Avoiding	Obliging	Problem-Solving	Third-Party	Total	χ^2 (df = 4 *)
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)		
Older Adults' Styles by Factor	Old-to-young criticism	22 (42.3%)	6 (11.5%)	0 (0.0)	17 (32.7%)	7 (13.5%)	52	14.0 **
	Young-to-old criticism	4 (30.8%)	0 (0.0)	3 (23.1%)	5 (38.5%)	1 (7.7%)	13	2.7
	Cumulative Annoyance	12 (48.0%)	1 (4.0%)	1 (4.0%)	7 (28.0%)	4 (16.0%)	25	11.0
	Young-to-old rebuff	13 (40.6%)	2 (6.3%)	1 (3.1%)	14 (43.8%)	2 (6.3%)	32	26.4 **
	Disagreement/Generation gap	13 (26.5%)	5 (10.2%)	3 (6.1%)	24 (49.0%)	4 (8.2%)	49	32.1 **
	Total	64	14	7	68	18		
Young Adults' Styles by Factor	Old-to-young criticism	29 (55.8%)	6 (11.5%)	11 (21.2%)	2 (3.8%)	4 (7.7%)	52	45.9 **
	Young-to-old criticism	10 (76.9%)	2 (15.4%)	0 (0.0)	1 (7.7%)	0 (0.0)	13	11.2 **
	Cumulative Annoyance	8 (32.0%)	12 (48.0%)	4 (16.0%)	1 (4.0%)	0 (0.0)	25	11.0
	Young-to-old rebuff	14 (43.8%)	7 (21.9%)	4 (12.5%)	5 (15.6%)	2 (6.3%)	32	13.3 **
	Disagreement/Generation gap	16 (32.7%)	10 (20.4%)	3 (6.1%)	17 (34.7%)	3 (6.1%)	49	18.7 **
	Total	77	37	22	26	9		

Note: χ^2 values indicate differences in the frequencies of each initiating factor across management styles; older adults overall $\chi^2(30) = 33.13, p < 0.05$, young adults overall $\chi^2(30) = 54.97, p < 0.05$; * degrees of freedom may vary due to a column with a count of zero; ** $p < 0.05$.

Cross-tabulation also examined the associations between the reported initiating factors and reported management styles used by young adults. Results indicated that young adults' use of the competing style was most associated with old-to-young criticism, young-to-

old criticism, and young-to-old rebuff. On the other hand, the avoiding style was most associated with the cumulative annoyance initiating factor, while the problem-solving style was most associated with the disagreement/generation gap initiating factor.

Research Question 6 examined the associations between the reported young and older adults' management styles in intergenerational relationships. Table 7 presents the results from chi-square analyses and frequencies of young adults' conflict management styles across older adults' management style. Specifically, cross-tabulation results indicated that the reported use of the competing style by young adults was associated with older adults' use of the same style over 75% of the time. The young adults' use of the problem-solving style was most associated with the older adults' use of the same style as well (36.2% of the time).

Table 7. Associations between older adult conflict management style and young adult conflict management style in intergenerational relationships.

YA's Style		Competing	Avoiding	Obliging	Problem-Solving	Third-Party	Total	χ^2 (df = 4 *)
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)		
OA's Style	Competing	47 (72.3%)	6 (9.2%)	11 (16.9%)	1 (1.5%)	0 (0.0)	65	109.9 **
	Avoiding	7 (46.7%)	8 (44.4%)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	15	0.1
	Obliging	5 (71.4%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	7	0.3
	Problem-solving	18 (26.1%)	14 (20.2%)	11 (15.9%)	25 (36.2%)	1 (1.4%)	69	32.5 **
	Third-party	3 (16.7%)	7 (38.9%)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	8 (44.4%)	18	2.3
Total		80	37	22	26	9		-

Note: χ^2 values indicate differences in the frequencies of each initiating factor across management styles; overall $\chi^2(4) = 144.76, p < 0.01$; * degrees of freedom may vary due to a column with a count of zero; ** $p < 0.05$.

7. Discussion

The current study used a content analytic approach to examine U.S. older adults' report of an intergenerational conflict they are experiencing or have recently experienced with a grandchild or a nonfamily young adult to uncover conflict initiating factors and conflict management styles. Our major findings indicate important themes. First, the results reveal both problematic and a brighter side of intergenerational communication, providing an additional perspective to research in intergenerational conflict. Second, this study contributes new perspectives to communication accommodation theory and the family and nonfamily intergenerational conflict literature that enhance our understanding of intergenerational solidarity, mental health, age salience, and successful aging in several meaningful ways.

7.1. Communication Nonaccommodation: Problems in Intergenerational Communication

Prior literature suggests that old-to-young criticism is the most common conflict-initiating factor in intergenerational relationships between young and older people [30] and subsequent competitive or destructive ways of management of the conflict [31]. The current study expands the literature on initiating factors by revealing that older adults also report old-to-young criticism as the most frequent initiating factor in intergenerational conflict scenarios. Old-to-young criticism contains behaviors (e.g., faulting young adults' views, attitudes, and behaviors) that are more problematic than the behaviors that exist within the other initiating factors, leading to communication dissatisfaction, conflict escalation, and negative affective and behavioral responses [44]. The replication of this finding from the older adults' perspective confirms that old-to-young criticism exists within intergenerational relationships and drives, largely, the competitive ways of managing intergenerational conflict between young and older adults, as illustrated by the association between them.

As noted in the introduction, the CPA model [10] guides much of the research on intergenerational communication and describes how dissatisfying and nonaccommodative

communication can be problematic in intergenerational interactions. Young respondents often describe criticism carried out in an inappropriate and patronizing manner as dissatisfying [2,18,30]. Scholars note that when old-to-young criticism initiates conflict, older adults tend to be critically restrictive, interfering, and meddlesome [30]. Considering the CPA model, older adults' critical behaviors could be due to their age-based stereotypes of young adults (e.g., party animals, disrespectful, and irresponsible [45]). The current study suggests that the problematic old-to-young nonaccommodative communication behaviors reported by young adults in prior literature has been confirmed from older adults' perspective as well and can have negative consequences for both young and older adults. In recent research on elder abuse in a caregiving context, Lin [44] found that older adults' communication underaccommodation (e.g., disapproving talk) interacted with care providers' characteristic (e.g., caregiver verbal aggression) in predicting physical elder abuse. Specifically, care providers' verbal aggression was positively associated with physical elder abuse for those care providers perceiving a higher level of patronizing communication from the older care receivers. Additionally, scholars have recently examined the association between intergenerational contact between grandparents and adult grandchildren and depressive symptoms. Results indicate that frequent intergenerational contact increased depressive symptoms for both sides [46]. Hence, it is essential for future research to continue to examine constructive versus destructive ways in expressing criticism and their consequences [22].

Similar to young adults' reports of intergenerational conflict scenarios [30,31], older adults also report that disagreement/generation gap and young-to-old rebuff all exist within intergenerational conflict. Contributing to prior intergenerational conflict literature, older participants' report of cumulative annoyance of young adults' accounts for a significant portion of conflict initiation. Prior literature on conflict initiation in marriage [41] and peer relationships [35] confirms cumulative annoyance as a conflict initiating factor. In the current study, the young adults' repetitive activity surpasses a certain threshold from the perspective of the older adult, escalating the situation to conflict and older adults' use of the competing style and young adults' use of the avoiding style. This initiating factor primarily centers on the young adults' cumulative *annoying* behavior for conflict, which did not show up in the young adults' reports in prior literature [30,31]. This addition to intergenerational literature helps better illuminate conflict from the older adults' perspective.

Regarding conflict management styles, the current study reveals that the older adults' reports of conflict management styles reflect certain aspects of the young adults' experiences [31]. The prevalence of the competing style used in managing intergenerational conflict echoes prior literature. Furthermore, the use of the competing style by young adults was associated with older adults' use of the same style over 75% of the time. This type of negative reciprocity has the potential to prolong, intensify, and harm the intergenerational relationship in certain situations [43,47], and affect adult grandchildren's wellbeing [48] and future care providing intentions for their grandparents [49].

7.2. Communication Accommodation: Brighter Side of Intergenerational Communication

The aforementioned discussion creates a dark picture of intergenerational communication in conflict situations. There are, however, several other findings to consider when examining the results. It is important to recognize that the reported conflict scenarios are atypical interactions. In other words, although the scenarios include nonaccommodative communication and negative reciprocity, the older respondents do not perceive them as representative of their normal interactions with young adults. Thus, the scenarios represent what the older adult might have felt most uncomfortable with or what was most salient and significant at the time of the report, but they are not necessarily reflective of typical communication. However, this does not take away from the negative aspects discussed above, as the conflict scenarios might represent the most negative and memorable, and thus influential, communicative events for older adults in communicating toward and from young adults. From the perspective of intergroup contact theory, prior research has

demonstrated that a single negative contact experience has impact on attitudes formation [50]. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore these conflict scenarios in intergenerational relationships. In other words, although these negative conflict situations do exist, they may not happen as frequently as shown in prior studies.

On the brighter side, although young and older adults frequently use the competing style, both age groups also utilize the problem-solving style. Results indicate that older adults use the problem-solving style just as much as the competing style, while young adults use the problem-solving style second-most frequently to the competing style. The findings of young and older adults' use of the problem-solving style are contrary to prior studies from the young adults' perspective, claiming that individuals rarely utilize the problem-solving style when dealing with intergenerational conflict [31].

This study shows that there is a tendency for reciprocation within the problem-solving style as well. When young adults use the problem-solving style, it is in association with older adults' use of the problem-solving style 36.2% of the time (see Table 6). This type of positive reciprocity, which is referred to in accommodation literature, as optimal convergence [9], can be beneficial to the relationship [51]. Optimal convergence is a useful concept to consider when examining how individuals adjust their communication in conflict situations [8]. In this case, when one individual uses the problem-solving style and the other individual optimally converges (i.e., uses the same positive style), it is considered an accommodative move. Beyond the positive aspects of communication that exist within intergenerational conflict as well as the accommodative communication that has been described, other aspects of the results are valuable in understanding the full picture of the scenarios.

Scholars note that the reciprocation of conflict management styles is an example of convergence [8]. Optimal convergence takes place when the reciprocation is positive (i.e., problem solving reciprocated by problem solving). The current study highlights the young adults' use of the problem-solving style is associated with the older adults' use of the same style significantly. As such, adding to the discussion of the bright side of communication, CAT helps explain how communication can be accommodative in context of conflict (i.e., through optimal convergence). It is important to acknowledge that conflict style reciprocation can also be nonoptimal to a larger degree than optimal reciprocation.

7.3. *Communication Non(Accommodation) in Family and Nonfamily Intergenerational Conflict*

Supporting prior literature, this current study indicates that intergenerational communication in conflict situations differs in family and nonfamily relationships. Older people report themselves as initiating conflict through criticism more towards nonfamily young adults than towards grandchildren. This finding validates that older adults are more nonaccommodative (i.e., critical and less supportive) towards nonrelated young adults than family elders are towards their grandchildren. Alternatively, the reports indicate that older adults initiate conflict through disagreement/generation gap with grandchildren significantly more than with nonfamily young adults. Literature suggests those older adults feel more obligated to grandchildren and as a result tend to be imposing and meddlesome [30]. This could help explain the large amounts of conflict due to disagreement/generation gap within the family relationships. Because older adults tend to be familiar with and close to their grandchildren, they may be less likely to mask their true feelings and more likely to raise the expectations they have for their descendants. Due to the nature of this in-group relationship, characterized by a heightened level of care and a sense of responsibility, grandparents may feel fewer obligations to "mind their own business" and more freedom (e.g., interpersonal boundaries in family intergenerational relationships may be looser) to voice their personal opinions, feelings, and ideas with their grandchildren [52].

This study identifies two main relational differences in the use of conflict management styles. First, older adults use the competing style significantly more with nonfamily members than with family members. Second, older adults use the problem-solving style significantly more with family members than with nonfamily young adults. To conclude, older

adults use the nonaccommodative and negative conflict management style most frequently with nonfamily young adults, while they use the accommodative and positive conflict management style most frequently with family young adults. These findings further the discussion of the influence of shared family identity on intergenerational communication—family conflict seems to be handled in more positive ways than nonfamily conflict.

Similarly, older adults' reports show that young adults use the competing style more with nonfamily older adults than they do with their grandparents. Young adults also use the avoiding style more with grandparents than with nonfamily older adults. Initially, this finding might seem contrary to the positive distinction that the family ingroup typically makes. However, the term *respectfully avoidant communication* indicates that avoidance can show respect in certain situations [53,54]. In an attempt to elude differences so that a conflict does not destructively escalate, grandchildren may have a tendency of removing themselves from certain situations or conversations. Thus, even though the avoiding style is typically negative, it actually can serve as a tool to withdraw from the conflict respectfully.

8. Limitations and Conclusions

The older adult participants reported a current or recent conflict scenario within a family or nonfamily intergenerational relationship with a young person. The written conflict situations, however, were retrospective written accounts from the older respondents' memory. Additionally, older people may not typically experience the reported conflict scenarios. Instead, the reports may reflect those most memorable or salient situations in the participants' memories for various reasons such as recency of the conflict or intensity, valence, and outcomes of the conflict. Overall, our findings indicate the intricacies of communication dynamics in intergenerational conflict accounting for the influences of the type of intergenerational relationships. Most importantly, in approaching the study, we do not equate conflict to problematic communication [55]. Guided by communication accommodation theory, we focus on the ways of communication that initiate conflict and illuminate destructive versus constructive ways of conflict management. Future research should examine how the memorable or salient intergenerational conflicts, including initiating factors (e.g., old-to-young criticism) and management styles (e.g., optimal convergence and negative reciprocation), are associated with perceived age salience, and influence intergenerational relationships and the psychological wellbeing of both young and older adults.

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Notes

- ¹ For further reading on recent developments in innovative contexts and applications of communication accommodation theory, please refer to Giles, Gasiorek, and Soliz [11] and Zhang and Pitts [9].

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