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Exploration of Hurtful Events Among Ghanaian Couples

Rhoda Aforkor Quaye , Annabella Osei-Tutu  and Adote Anum 

Department of Psychology, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

ABSTRACT

We explored hurtful events Ghanaian couples encounter and evaluated the uniqueness of gender and age differences among 102 couples aged 24 to 73. A prompt questionnaire recorded hurtful events in the couples relationships, and the data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Results revealed ten types of hurtful events: (1) active disassociation; (2) passive disassociation; (3) infidelity; (4) disrespect; (5) violence; (6) humiliation; (7) criticism; (8) deception; (9) neglect of duty; and (10) insecurity. Gender differences in hurtful events showed that men often engaged in disassociation, infidelity, deception, and criticism, while women were associated with disrespect, insecurity, neglect of duty, and humiliation. Younger adults (20–35 years) experienced disrespect and infidelity, middle-aged adults (36–50 years) faced disassociation and violence, while older adults (51–80 years) reported disassociation, disrespect, and occasional humiliation. Couples with significant age gaps (more than five years) faced challenges like disassociation, disrespect, infidelity, and violence, stemming from different life stages and expectations. This study enhances understanding of hurtful events in Ghanaian marriages, emphasizing gender and age differences, while offering clinical insights to enhance communication and manage hurts.

KEYWORDS

hurtful events; couples; relational hurt; relationships; marriages

Introduction

Hurtful events in romantic relationships are common and can have lasting impacts on couples. Various typologies of hurtful events have been proposed. Leary et al. (1998) identified seven hurtful events: active disassociation, passive disassociation, criticism, betrayal, teasing, feeling unappreciated, and being used or taken for granted. Feeney (2004) identified five categories of hurtful events: active disassociation, passive disassociation, criticism, sexual infidelity, and deception. Utilizing Feeney's (2004) typologies, Osei-Tutu et al. (2019) delineated seven principal marital

offenses in Ghana: active disassociation, passive disassociation, criticism, sexual infidelity, deception, neglect of duty, and disrespect.

Hurts among couples significantly influence relationship outcomes, and how couples handle these hurts influences the overall success of their relationship (Martinez-Diaz et al., 2021). Relationships in which serious offenses remain unaddressed often experience a decline in both satisfaction and stability over time (Fincham & May, 2017). Engaging in open discussions about hurts through vulnerable communication enhances intimacy and reconciliation, fortifies relationships (Waldron & Kelley, 2008), promotes forgiveness, and helps maintain relationship integrity (Quek & Fitzpatrick, 2013).

Theoretical Perspectives on Hurts in Relationships

According to Feeney (2005), the most hurtful events among couples signal both relational devaluation and a threat to positive mental models. One dominant theme that explains victims' emotional reactions to hurtful events is "a sense of injury," that is, damage to the victim's view of self-worth (Feeney, 2005).

According to Feeney (2004), hurt feelings in romantic relationships arise from a complex interplay of perceptions regarding self-value, partner value, and relationship value. Each of these elicits distinct emotional responses that vary according to the nature of the hurtful event. The intrinsic sense of self-value is often undermined by hurtful events, leading individuals to doubt their capabilities or their ability to meet their partner's expectations. This may impede their ability to establish healthy boundaries and assert their own needs. Partner value, the esteem and worth assigned to a significant other, can be altered by hurtful events. Feeney (2004) asserts that such experiences may change perceptions of the partner's character and role. A once reliable and affectionate partner may now seem indifferent or untrustworthy, leading to feelings of resentment. When a hurtful event compromises the value of a relationship, the overall worth of the partnership, along with shared experiences and emotional investment, is significantly undermined. Partners may question whether the relationship is worth the emotional effort and whether its benefits outweigh the pain of unresolved conflicts or repeated offenses.

Other research has confirmed this theoretical viewpoint. Vangelisti et al. (2005) assert that the fundamental categories of hurt are rejection and betrayal. Denial can add to the sense of isolation and betrayal. Hurtful experiences in relationships, such as neglect, public humiliation, and extradyadic conflict, pose challenges to the self-concept and impact emotional reactions and subsequent relationships (Fitness, 2001). This research underlines that the subjective evaluation of hurtful experiences contributes

to the formation of affective and relationship consequences. For instance, in societies such as Ghana, where cultural values are applied to gender roles, communal obligations, and marital obligations, one should be especially aware of such judgments.

Ghanaian culture tends to view marriage and long-lasting relationships as community agreements, rather than individual ones, and expectations extend beyond the couple to include the family and community. Gender roles are highly valued, and women are expected to assume their responsibilities in the household and maintain interpersonal harmony, as men are often perceived as the decision-makers and providers of financial support (Anarfi & Owusu, 2011). The inability to fulfill required roles can be understood as a betrayal of oneself, as well as a disrespect and disregard for the extended family's requirements; these cultural conventions determine the meaning of negligence, disrespect, and disassociation. Hence, the concept of conflict in Ghanaian marriages is not only a matter of personal concern but also affects social status, relationships with the extended family, and the community's reputation (Malm et al., 2023). Such history explains why transgressions, such as disrespect or neglect of duty, are perceived as severe in Ghanaian relationships, and why studying them alongside gender and age disparities is crucial to understanding the dynamics of relationships.

Study Aim

Previous studies on relational hurt have identified the nature and consequences of hurtful incidents, but have left significant gaps. Leary et al. (1998) examined the experience of hurts in individuals, but they overlooked the common dynamics within couples. Feeney (2004) studied the victim's life and the outcomes of their relationships, but did not discuss how the actions and emotions of both partners contribute to these outcomes. The research was also specific to university students and, hence, did not apply to different phases of relationships.

A study by Osei-Tutu et al. (2019) on culturally specific transgressions among married people in Ghana did not incorporate the perspectives of both partners on relational hurts. Although research on relational hurts exist, we have limited understanding of how partners collectively view hurtful incidents and how gender and age influence such views differently. These gaps need to be filled in order to produce culturally and socially nuanced understanding about the dynamics of relationships. It is vital to understand different perspectives because how couples perceive hurtful events can shape forgiveness, conflict management, and overall relationship satisfaction. Additionally, analyzing gender and age differences provides insight into how different social roles and life experiences shape

perceptions of relational hurts. The study on spouses' perceptions of distressing situations will allow for the development of perspectives on relationship processes and the analysis of differences in perceptions of distressing situations by gender and age.

Methods

Research Design

The study used a cross-sectional qualitative research design (Creswell, 2015). The nature of hurtful events in relationships was studied in this way, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Participant Selection

We sampled cohabiting and married couples residing in the Tema Metropolitan Assembly of the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Eligible couples needed to have been in their relationships for at least one year. Participants were selected based on their availability and willingness. The sample was heterogeneous in marital status (married and cohabiting), gender, and age to capture diverse relational experiences. Both partners were required to participate in order for their data to be included in the study.

The use of convenience sampling was deemed appropriate for this qualitative study as it facilitated the recruitment of a large, heterogeneous sample of 102 couples (204 individual responses) who were willing to share sensitive and personal narratives of relational hurts. This method allowed the researchers to capture a wide array of diverse relational experiences across various age groups, relationship statuses, and relationship lengths, which is essential for the depth required in qualitative content analysis. While not intended for statistical representativeness, this approach provided the necessary volume of rich, descriptive data to identify and categorize ten distinct types of hurtful events within the Ghanaian context.

Data Collection Instruments

Demographic data and retrospective reports of hurtful events were collected using a prompt questionnaire. Participants were asked to record one or more hurtful events their partner had caused them within their relationships. The study is part of an extensive study that included additional measures not reported in this paper.

The instrument was developed inductively from a previous study by Osei-Tutu et al. (2019). Although Osei-Tutu et al. (2019) studied married

individuals, rather than couples, the assessed constructs remained relevant to dyadic dynamics.

Coding rigor was ensured by two independent peer coders. The inter-coder reliability indicated substantial to near-perfect agreement across the ten hurt categories (See Table 1). Validity was further strengthened by inductive refinement: narratives that did not fit the initial Western-grounded framework were recoded, producing contextually unique categories such as “insecurity” and “humiliation.”

Procedure

Data collection took place from October to December 2023 and was conducted by four individuals. Questionnaires were administered individually to couples at different times. To address the needs of couples living far apart and to respect participant comfort and confidentiality, an optional digital version of the questionnaire was created via Google Forms. However, to maintain the study's dyadic design, participants who responded online were required to include identifiable features that allowed their responses to be paired with those of their spouses. For participants who preferred the traditional method, 150 printed questionnaires were sealed in envelopes, and pens were provided.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for the Humanities (ECH) at the University of Ghana. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures taken to protect their privacy before providing informed consent.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity between partners, rigorous protocols were applied. First, questionnaires were administered to each partner individually and at different times. This prevented spouses from

Table 1. Inter-rater reliability for typologies of hurt.

Types of hurt	K
Active disassociation	0.77
Passive disassociation	0.79
Sexual infidelity	0.81
Disrespect	0.72
Violence	0.83
Deception	0.88
Criticism	0.81
Insecurity	0.76
Humiliation	0.67
Neglect of duty	0.75

observing, discussing, or influencing each other's narrative reports. For participants using the paper-and-pen method, completed questionnaires were immediately placed in separate sealed envelopes. This ensured that each participant's disclosures remained hidden from their spouse. The process served to protect the couple from any potential relational conflicts as a result of the disclosures.

For couples living apart, an optional digital version of the questionnaire (via Google Forms) was provided. Specific safeguards were implemented to protect privacy and participant comfort. Although identifiable features were required to enable dyadic data pairing, these identifiers were managed solely by the research team. This ensured that data could be linked for analysis without allowing spouses access to each other's digital records or narratives. As a result, participants were protected from potential relational conflict arising from their disclosures.

Data Analysis

Content analysis (Schreier, 2012) was used to analyze the responses to the prompt. This is a methodical way of interpreting text data by dissecting it in an organized manner, coding it, and identifying patterns or themes to establish the meaning of participant narratives (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Our coding scheme for hurtful events was informed by Feeney's (2004) and Osei-Tutu et al. (2019) typologies, which comprised active disassociation, passive disassociation, criticism, sexual infidelity, deception, violence, neglect of duty, and disrespect. Narratives that could not be conveniently fit into these categories were coded and renamed, generating new typologies: 'insecurity' and 'humiliation'. Each hurtful event could be coded under more than one category when applicable (e.g., infidelity also involves deception or disrespect).

The first author aligned the reported hurt narratives with the typologies of hurt events. Narrations that did not align with the hurt typologies were coded and labeled as a sample of participants' responses, thereby developing the initial framework. The other authors reviewed the framework. Then, two peers who were not part of the study applied the framework and analyzed participants' narratives to establish reliability. A coding consistency check was conducted using a reliability matrix, in which participants' responses were coded based on the rate of agreement among several coders. Marginal distributions were estimated to assess chance agreement, and Cohen's kappa (κ) was used to calculate inter-rater reliability (McHugh, 2012). Cohen's kappa of 0.6–0.8 (substantial reliability) and higher than 0.8 (near-perfect agreement) confirmed the reliable categorization of the responses into ten types of hurtful events. Table 1 contains data for inter-rater reliability.

Results

Participants

The study included 102 couples (204 individuals). Out of these, 83 couples (166 individuals) were married, and 19 couples (38 individuals) were cohabiting. In terms of relationship duration, 73 couples (146 participants) had been together for less than 10 years, whereas 16 couples (32 participants) had been together between 11 and 20 years, and 13 couples (26 participants) had been together for more than 21 years. Details of participants' demographics are presented in [Table 2](#).

Hurtful Events

We identified 10 hurt categories through content analysis of participants' narratives. The researchers coded events into typologies based on participants' responses, and each event could be assigned to multiple categories when appropriate. The initial typologies were drawn from Feeney (2004) and Osei-Tutu et al. (2019) and included the following: 1) Active disassociation, 2) Passive disassociation, 3) Infidelity, 4) Disrespect, 5) Deception, 6) Neglect of duty, 7) Violence, and 8) Criticism. Narratives, which could not be placed in the above categories, were coded inductively and resulted in two other categories: 9) Insecurity, and 10) Humiliation. Importantly, participants reported hurtful behaviors they experienced from their partners, rather than their own actions. A summary is provided in [Table 3](#).

Types of Hurtful Events

Active Disassociation

Feeney (2004) defines active disassociation as behaviors that explicitly signal disinterest in the partner, including relationship termination and

Table 2. Participant demographics.

Variable	Frequency (%)
Relationship status	
Married	166 (81.4%)
Cohabit	38 (18.6%)
Age categories	
Below 35	139 (68.1%)
36 to 50	51 (25.0%)
Above 51	14 (6.9%)
Age gap between couples	
0–5	124 (60.8%)
6–10	64 (31.4%)
11+	16 (7.8%)
Length of relationship	
Below 10 Years	146 (71.5%)
11 to 20 Years	32 (15.7%)
Above 21 Years	26 (12.7%)

Table 3. Summary of type of hurt and examples.

Typology	Codes in the present study	Examples
Active disassociation	Unaffectionate Neglect Lack of support Avoidance	<i>[Spouse] not being affectionate</i> <i>He abandoned me for 2 years</i>
Passive disassociation	Ignoring partner Including 3 rd parties Poor communication	<i>Making decisions without informing [spouse]</i> <i>Involving others instead of one's partner in decision-making</i> <i>Not answering [spouse] call</i>
Infidelity	Cheating Extramarital affairs Flirting	<i>Cheating on [spouse]</i> <i>She slept with her work colleague</i> <i>Flirting with his boss</i>
Disrespect	Feeling devalued Disregard Public criticism Raising voices	<i>She disrespected and undermined me</i> <i>Negative attitude toward a friend</i> <i>He snubbed me in public</i> <i>Spoken over when discussing issues</i>
Violence	Verbal abuse Physical abuse Controlling behaviors	<i>Using abusive words</i> <i>He maltreated me and destroyed me to people</i> <i>She is over-controlling as a female</i>
Deception	Lying Complaining to others Hiding vital information	<i>He lied</i> <i>Discussing our personal issues with outsiders...</i> <i>He kept a secret from me</i>
Neglect of duty	Giving excuses Mistaken priorities Unsupportive Behavior	<i>Always giving one excuse ...</i> <i>Majority of her time is spent on church activities.</i> <i>She is unsupportive</i>
Insecurity	Insecure behaviors Trust issues	<i>She overly demands for attention...because of her insecurities</i> <i>I do not think she trusts me</i>
Criticism	Nagging Over-talking Complaining	<i>She likes nagging</i> <i>She complains a lot about everything...</i>
Humiliations	Public humiliation Embarrassment	<i>He humiliated me at a family gathering.</i>

the denial or retraction of feelings of love and commitment. In this study, 32 participants (15.7%) described experiences that were coded under active disassociation. This captures instances where one partner actively disengages from the relationship through actions or behaviors that create emotional or physical distance. These narratives revealed a consistent pattern of emotional abandonment, where the withdrawal of affection served as a tool for relational devaluation that fundamentally wounded the victim's sense of self-worth. Rather than isolated lapses in attention, these experiences were described as a persistent lack of investment that left respondents feeling unloved and socially isolated within their own relationships. Some participants perceived their partners as lacking sufficient affection during their relationships. A lack of affection can include loneliness, neglect, feeling unloved, perceiving one's partner as distant, and interest in others. For instance, one 27-year-old female participant expressed the ongoing distress caused by a partner's emotional coldness, stating, "*He is not being affectionate*" (F300, 27-year-old female) and another participant highlighted a similar disregard for her psychological well-being, noting he was "*not paying attention to my emotional needs*" (F308, 28-year-old female).

Some shared experiences of feeling neglected, intentionally avoided, or even abandoned by their partners, which were all seen as forms of active disassociation. These narratives often depicted a pattern of using physical distance as a tool to avoid marital responsibility or conflict, frequently leaving the spouse to handle difficult family situations alone. For example, one participant described a recurring cycle of abandonment during crises: *“He is out of the scene when a sudden event happens, and this takes some weeks till he is back when it has been resolved”* (F328, 38-year-old female); similarly, a male participant explained how his partner chose to terminate shared residency as a reaction to unresolved tension rather than engaging in communication: *“She moved out of the house because she was angry with me, without us resolving the issue”* (M331, 53-year-old male).

Passive Disassociation

Passive disassociation involves being overlooked or excluded from a partner's plans, activities, conversations, or important information. Sixteen participants (7.8%) described events coded as passive disassociation, where they felt intentionally sidelined or ignored within the relationship's shared life. These narratives revealed “relational invisibility,” where a partner's presence and input are subordinated to the other's autonomy or family influence, subtly eroding the marriage and excluding respondents from decision-making. For instance, hurts often depicted one spouse including third parties in decisions instead of their partner, which served as a primary offense under this theme. One participant highlighted how this lack of prioritization favored the extended family's influence over the couple's established agreements, stating: *“Listening to his family to change our already planned programmed date”* (F329, 35-year-old female).

Passive disassociation also included poor communication, especially when one partner prefers not to hear, see, or communicate with the other. In these instances, the pattern shifted from simple exclusion to a deliberate shutdown of connection, where one partner used silence or unavailability as a barrier to engagement. According to one of the participants who described the emotional frustration of being systematically shut out through the use of technology: *“Not returning my missed calls and not picking up an unknown number”* (M317, 36-year-old male).

Infidelity

Twenty-seven respondents (13.2%) experienced infidelity, which varied between emotional betrayal and physical affairs. Participants described infidelity as a layered violation of relational norms that shattered trust and exclusivity. The secrecy surrounding extramarital relationships carried deep

emotional weight and was often as hurtful as the infidelity itself, fundamentally altering the marital bond. Infidelity was considered when one of the partners engaged in sexual activities or emotional relations with another without the approval of the other partner. One 33-year-old male participant described the repetitive nature of this betrayal, stating, “*She cheated on me several times*” (M300, 33-year-old male). In some cases, the discovery was made through digital evidence, as shared by another participant who noted, “*I saw text messages of her cheating on me*” (M346, 38-year-old male). Furthermore, the betrayal sometimes resulted in lifelong consequences that permanently changed the family structure, as one woman recounted: “*He had a baby outside of our marriage*” (F349, 38-year-old female).

Other participants considered flirting as a form of infidelity, viewing these behaviors as significant threats to relational stability and indicators of a lack of commitment. Examples included boundary violations within the home or professional environment, such as a participant reporting her husband was “*flirting with the house-help [domestic assistant]*” (F374, 35-year-old female) or “*flirting with his boss*” (F391, 39-year-old female). Beyond current actions, the concealment of significant aspects of a partner’s past, particularly secret parental obligations, was categorized as a form of infidelity because it represented a fundamental lack of transparency. As one woman shared: “*Had a child before marriage, which I knew nothing about*” (F357, 39-year-old female). Finally, the recurring nature of these events was highlighted by a male participant who expressed deep frustration over a deceptive pattern that began during the courtship and persisted into the early stages of the marriage: “*She cheated on me while we were dating and repeated the same action in the early months of our marriage*” (M325, 32-year-old male).

Disrespect

Disrespect is an act that implies a lack of consideration, respect, or courtesy toward your partner. In this study, 42 participants (20.6%) reported experiencing disrespectful behavior, characterized primarily by a sense of undervaluation, disregard, or shame. Participants reported feeling disrespected when a partner ignored agreed boundaries or consultation. They felt their status as a spouse was diminished, privately or publicly. This was especially clear when partners favored outsiders’ advice or financial input over the couple’s agreements. Participants viewed this as an attack on their relational worth. Such examples were: “*She borrowed from her friend and a relative without letting me know anything about it*” (M307, 44-year-old male) and another participant described feeling fundamentally devalued in his role as a husband, stating, “*She disrespected and undermined me*” (M342, 33-year-old male).

Other participants saw disrespect as making them feel ignored, or that other views were prioritized. This manifested as a consistent narrative of being “silenced” or “overlooked” in favor of external social circles, which wounded the partner’s sense of authority and inclusion. One participant recorded, *“Imagine given your ‘opinion’ on something that both of us wanted to embark on, only for her to come back and say because a friend suggested the same thing, we should do it...”* (M315, 40-year-old male). Some participants reported disrespectful communication, including raising their voices and using harsh words during conflicts, which they described as a method of intimidation that replaced constructive dialogue. For example, one male participant felt his voice was intentionally suppressed during disagreements, noting he was *“spoken over when discussing issues”* (M307, 31-year-old male), while a female participant highlighted the immediate emotional shock of verbal aggression, stating, *“He yelled at me”* (F314, 29-year-old female).

Violence

Violence encompasses a range of abusive behaviors used by one partner to gain power and control over the other. In this study, 19 participants (9.3%) experienced harsh treatment and abuse, among others. These accounts show a pattern of coercive control. Verbal, physical, and psychological abuse were used to assert dominance and limit independence. Participants described these acts as part of an ongoing climate of intimidation that damaged their self-esteem and sense of safety. Verbal abuse was expressed in the form of harsh words, intimidation, or manipulation. For instance, one male participant highlighted the emotional toll of persistent verbal aggression, mentioning the *“use of harsh words”* (M326, 50-year-old male), and another participant described how relational conflict invariably led to derogatory verbal attacks: *“Uses abusive words whenever there is a misunderstanding”* (M397, 36-year-old male).

Physical abuse was the intentional and premeditated use of force to harm or inflict injury. The narratives indicated that physical harm was often coupled with social sabotage intended to isolate the victim and damage their communal standing within the Ghanaian context. As one participant recounted: *“He maltreated me and destroyed me to people”* (F313, 52-year-old female). Other participants also reported feeling restricted in their autonomy due to control. These accounts depicted a rigid relational dynamic where one spouse dictated all terms of behavior through absolute authority, leaving the other partner with little room for self-expression or decision-making. Examples include: *“He is authoritative”* (F359, 30-year-old female); and another participant who noted the strain of a partner’s dominance, stating, *“She is over controlling as a woman”* (M349, 40-year-old male).

Deception

Twenty-five participants (12.3%) reported deception, which encompasses half-truths, withholding information, and blatant lies, generally with the intention of hiding the truth or controlling the partner's opinion. Thematic synthesis found that deception eroded relational transparency. Intentional concealment of life-changing facts manipulated the partner's view of the relationship. Participants reported violations that went beyond lies to include strategic withholding of information. Such withholding would have influenced marital decisions and self-concept. For instance, one interviewee shared the profound hurt caused by a partner's extensive fabrication regarding her reproductive history, remarking, *"She lied to me about her inability to have a child, despite already having one"* (M313, 58-year-old male). Participants also considered sharing personal information with strangers to be a violation of trust and confidentiality, and thus classified it as deception. This pattern suggested that gossip was viewed as a deceptive act because it involved a breach of the "inner circle" of marital privacy, replacing shared intimacy with external validation. Examples included a participant who felt betrayed by his partner's external communication, stating she would *"gossip about me to friends"* (M355, 64-year-old male) and another who struggled with a spouse *"discussing our personal issues for a second opinion with others"* (M378, 47-year-old male).

Another form of deception was keeping secrets, especially those related to important issues. The narratives indicated that these secrets often involved hidden familial obligations or past identities that participants felt entitled to know before making a long-term commitment. This pattern of concealment was often interpreted as a lack of respect for the partner's right to an authentic relationship. Good examples include: *"He kept a secret from me"* (F307, 29-year-old female) and the significant impact of discovering a partner's hidden parental status: *"Had a child before marriage, which I knew nothing about"* (M357, 24-year-old male). Moreover, exhibiting previously unknown attitudes and behaviors during the early stages of the relationship was considered deception, with participants describing a sense of being "tricked" by a curated version of their partner that vanished after commitment. An example includes a female participant noting her partner's shift in character: *"He is pretentious"* (F388, 38-year-old female).

Neglect of Duty

Six participants (2.9%) reported neglect of duties, primarily due to cultural expectations regarding gender roles and responsibilities. This category demonstrates failure or a lack of willingness to perform the expected duties in the relationship. These accounts show that partners experienced a breach of Ghanaian interdependence when spouses neglected domestic

or relational duties. Tension arose between individual commitments (religious or work) and household responsibilities. Hurt partners felt the relationship had become a lower priority. Such a participant included one who highlighted a pattern of avoidance regarding emotional and physical closeness, stating, *“Always giving one excuse from the other whenever I try to get closer as a male”* (M311, 32-year-old male), and another who expressed frustration over a perceived lack of diligence in household management, described as *“forgetfulness during the performance of her house duties”* (M338, 34-year-old male).

Giving preference to activities that were not related to relationships, especially at the expense of duties to a partner, was also considered an offense. This pattern was characterized by a perceived imbalance in the partner’s time management, where external social or spiritual circles were prioritized over the marital bond. Examples are: a husband who felt his wife’s commitment to her faith outweighed her commitment to their shared life, noting, *“Majority of her time is spent on church activities”* (M358, 39-year-old male); and another male participant who highlighted the distress caused by a general lack of relational investment, which he summarized as *“Misplaced priorities”* (M341, 34-year-old male).

Insecurity

Eighteen participants (8.8%) shared experiences related to insecurity, which often arises when a partner feels mistrusted or doubted, despite having evidence to the contrary. These reveal ongoing relational surveillance and emotional exhaustion. Victims felt constrained by partners who could not move past previous grievances. Insecurity hindered intimacy, replacing trust with suspicion and undermining the partner’s peace and autonomy. Examples of hurts reported under the insecurity category include a 39-year-old male who expressed the frustration of being constantly questioned despite his transparency, stating, *“She doubted me even when I was innocent”* (M312, 39-year-old male); and another participant who described the emotional weight of past issues being used as a recurring source of conflict in the present: *“She does not know how to let go of the past; always holding on to past issues and referring me to them”* (M320, 42-year-old male).

Another type of insecurity is excessive demands for attention and a loss of trust, in which one spouse continuously seeks validation and reassurance, often at the expense of the other partner’s needs and responsibilities. This pattern involved one partner’s anxiety causing major relational strain. Participants saw it as disregard for personal boundaries and professional duties. The constant need for reassurance became a burden that undermined a healthy connection. One participant said their spouse’s persistent need for validation disrupted his daily focus: *“She overly demands attention,*

even when I am busy, just because of her insecurities" (M330, 54-year-old male). Similarly, another male participant summarized the fundamental breakdown of the relational foundation by simply observing, *"I do not think she trusts me"* (M363, 53-year-old male).

Humiliation

Humiliation experiences were reported by 8 participants (3.9%). These public embarrassments, personal attacks, or actions that harm one's reputation or relationship status can lead to feelings of insignificance or demeaning. Thematic synthesis revealed a pattern of social and personal exposure. Partners used public settings or sensitive identity markers to lower victims' social standing. Participants described this as an assault on dignity that produced shame and insignificance, especially harmful within Ghana's communal context. This type of humiliation is especially hurtful in public settings, where the sense of exposure and vulnerability is heightened. For instance, one female participant highlighted the sting of deliberate public dismissal when her partner refused to acknowledge her presence, stating, *"He snubbed me in public"* (F306, 30-year-old female); similarly, another woman described the compounded pain of being ignored in the presence of relatives, which she felt undermined her status within the extended family structure: *"He snubbed me in front of his family"* (F311, 29-year-old female).

Personal attacks on an individual's core identity or traits, especially those that target cultural or ethnic identity, which is integral to self-worth and belonging, are perceived as a form of humiliation. These narratives suggest that attacking a partner's heritage serves to isolate them from their community and devalue their inherent self-concept. For example, one 52-year-old female participant recounted a deeply wounding experience where her partner used her background to justify derogatory treatment, noting, *"He said I did not know how to speak because of my ethnicity and that people from my ethnic group are naturally rude"* (F360, 52-year-old female). Humiliation also results from public actions that damage one's reputation or image, leading individuals to perceive their social status or personal reputation as compromised, intensifying feelings of vulnerability and shame. This pattern of reputational damage was often linked to secret financial behaviors that exposed the partner to external judgment, as one male participant explained how his wife's secret borrowing led to a public loss of face: *"She is borrowing from her friend and a relative without letting me know anything about it. And I think it tarnishes my image"* (M306, 44-year-old male). In another case, a participant described the emotional shock of discovering his spouse had sought financial aid from outsiders during a sensitive family event, despite having been provided with funds,

stating she had *“hidden some issues from me; that is, borrowing money from a friend on her mother’s funeral while I had given her money on that...”* (M315, 45-year-old male).

Criticism

Criticism reported by 12 participants (5.9%), often consists of personal attacks, false accusations, persistent nagging, and a critical attitude. These narratives indicate criticism attacked partners’ competence and character, often targeting their role-balancing. Specific mistakes were turned into broad character flaws. Victims felt misunderstood and emotionally drained. Personal attacks focus on an individual’s behavior, decisions, or character, leading to feelings of inadequacy and misunderstanding. One 34-year-old female participant described the pain of having her professional commitment weaponized against her role as a wife and mother, stating her partner was *“accusing me of prioritizing my work above my family”* (F313, 34-year-old female); similarly, another participant noted the use of *“derogatory statements due to a fault and misunderstanding”* (F304, 33-year-old female) as a recurring response to minor errors.

False accusations, also a type of criticism, show how being wrongly accused and denied the opportunity to defend oneself creates emotional distress, which is considered hurtful in relationships. In these accounts, hurt stemmed from a partner’s refusal to engage in fair dialogue. Victims were silenced by predetermined conclusions. This unilateral judgment betrayed the mutual trust needed for healthy conflict resolution and left no path to reconciliation. For instance, one male participant expressed frustration at being judged without a hearing, stating, *“She accused me falsely without listening to my side of the story before jumping to conclusions”* (M398, 50-year-old male); and in a severe case involving the denial of parental bonds, a female participant recounted how her partner *“denied his son, accusing me of having an extramarital affair”* (F401, 35-year-old female).

Repetitive nagging and judgmental attitudes can leave some participants feeling unappreciated, leading to frustration and resentment. This reflects a chronic environment of evaluation where the victim feels constantly monitored and found wanting, regardless of their efforts to please the spouse. Such behaviors were described as a slow erosion of relational harmony, replacing mutual support with a cycle of negativity that makes the home environment feel hostile. This happens when one is constantly feeling evaluated and criticized by their partner. One participant highlighted the mental exhaustion caused by persistent verbal reminders of his perceived shortcomings, simply stating, *“She nags a lot”* (M380, 58-year-old male), while another summarized the overall tone of his partner’s interactions as being consistently *“judgmental”* (M387, 43-year-old male).

Gender Differences in Hurtful Events

There were also variations in gender-related offenses among couples. Six types of offenses were predominantly reported against males, while four were more commonly reported against females, with one offense unique to females.

Commonly Reported Offenses Involving Males

Most offenses reported against men fell under active disassociation, passive disassociation, deception, infidelity, and criticism. About one-third of female participants ($n=35$, 34.3%) reported hurts related to active disassociation, where male partners were perceived as deliberately withdrawing themselves emotionally or physically. Infidelity was the second most frequently reported offense against men ($n=15$, 14.7%). Other offenses included deception ($n=11$, 10.8%), passive disassociation ($n=10$, 9.8%), violence ($n=10$, 9.8%), and criticism ($n=6$, 5.9%).

Offenses Predominantly Reported Against Females

Four offenses were commonly reported against women: disrespect ($n=31$, 30.4%), insecurity ($n=15$, 14.7%), neglect of duty ($n=6$, 5.9%), and humiliation ($n=8$, 7.8%). Males reported that their spouses tend to question their capabilities and undermine their reputations. Moreover, the issue of females' insecurity in the form of accusations, distrust, and complaints was considered a major source of hurt in relationships. Men in the study exclusively reported neglect of duty, often linked to cultural expectations for family and relationship responsibilities. Financial belittling and public embarrassment were also among the most common forms of humiliation, which males reported.

Age-Based Differences in Hurtful Events

Analysis was also conducted to capture the couple's age gap. First, couples with an age difference of more than 5 years were examined. Then, participants were categorized by age to determine differences in hurtful events across age groups.

Hurtful Events from Couples with Significant Age Differences

Most of the hurtful events in age-gap relationships ($n=68$) were under active disassociation ($n=20$, 29.4%), violence ($n=10$, 14.7%), disrespect ($n=8$, 11.8%), deception ($n=7$, 10.3%), passive disassociation ($n=12$, 17.6%), and humiliation ($n=5$, 7.4%). Among these, we identified that the

older partners withdraw emotionally and physically thus leaving the younger partners feeling abandoned. In addition, younger partners were victims of physical or emotional abuse, which was usually accompanied by power inequalities, with the older partners dominating in the name of disciplining them due to their perceived offenses.

Age Differences in Hurtful Events

We also examined hurtful events among different age groups using the age categorization scheme proposed by Steiner et al. (2011). The most reported hurtful behaviors among younger adults (20–35 years) were disrespect ($n=25$, 24.5%) and infidelity ($n=15$, 14.7%). Active disassociation ($n=14$, 13.7%), neglect of duty ($n=5$, 4.9%), and insecurity ($n=5$, 4.9%) were also offenses committed by younger adults. These hurtful behaviors included dismissive behaviors, public humiliation and lack of affection, which was usually caused by distractions like hobbies or other responsibilities. Female partners were mostly regarded as being irresponsible in their marital or motherhood duties. Insecurity was also associated with feelings of inadequacy or mistrust.

Middle-aged adults (36–50 years) most frequently reported active disassociation ($n=20$, 19.6%) and violence ($n=12$, 11.8%). They described emotional disconnection, silent treatment, and neglect, leading to loneliness. Verbal abuse, anger, and control behaviors are some of the common features of violence reported. Other offenses were passive disassociation ($n=11$, 10.8%), infidelity ($n=10$, 9.8%), and criticism ($n=10$, 9.8%). Middle-aged adults felt excluded in decision-making, and infidelity was associated with flirting and extramarital affairs. Finally, criticism was normally related to the pressure of career or family responsibilities.

In older adults (51–80 years), the most common offenses were the active disassociation ($n=6$, 5.9%), disrespect ($n=6$, 5.9%), violence ($n=2$, 2.0%), deception ($n=3$, 2.9%), and humiliation ($n=4$, 3.9%). They complained of being neglected when their spouses gave others precedence over them, as well as being degraded in front of others and having negative perceptions. While less frequent, violence, secrecy, and pretense persisted in some relationships, and humiliation affected the authority and self-worth of older partners.

Convergence of Hurts Reported by Both Partners

The analysis also indicated convergence situations in which both partners reported similar hurtful experiences ($n=16$). The most common ones were disrespect ($n=5$, 31.3%), passive disassociation ($n=4$, 25%), and active disassociation ($n=3$, 18.8%). In such instances, couples described a similar

cycle of hurtful behaviors in which they undermine decisions, make derogatory or dismissive comments, or focus on outsiders, thereby creating a sense of mutual rejection. This reciprocity is also reflected in withdrawal behaviors, with one partner reporting leaving home without notice or extended absences, and the other partner exhibiting conflict avoidance, which was also reported by both partners.

Further reported offenses included infidelity ($n=1$, 6.3%) and criticism ($n=2$, 12.5%), as both partners admitted to violations of trust and judgmental comments that made them feel inadequate. Also, insecurity ($n=1$, 6.3%) revealed a two-way process, as anxieties about being rejected by one partner and concerns about self-worth by the other partner. These trends imply that, in cases where mutually reported hurts are reciprocated, they tend to be cycles of relationship in which the actions of one partner support the vulnerabilities of the other, resulting in a doubling of distress levels for both partners.

Discussion

The study examined hurtful events experienced by Ghanaian couples and evaluated the uniqueness of gender and age differences in these events among couples. Ten typologies of hurt were identified: five aligning with Western typologies (active disassociation, passive disassociation, infidelity, criticism, and deception), three rooted in the Ghanaian cultural context (disrespect, abuse, and neglect of duty), and two unique to this study (insecurity and humiliation); capturing personal and contextually nuanced forms of relational hurts.

Findings from this study revealed that disassociation was one of the most commonly reported hurtful experiences among couples. Disassociation in relationships hinders emotional connection and intimacy (Feeney, 2004). As identified in the present data, participants described active disassociation as instances of indifference, avoidance, emotional neglect, and a lack of affection, which aligns with earlier findings that such behaviors lead to feelings of rejection and loneliness (Collins & Read, 1990). Passive disassociation, such as excluding a partner from key decisions, was also evident in participants' accounts and has been similarly demonstrated in past studies to increase emotional distance and reduce intimacy (Jacobson et al., 1980). Both types of disassociations in this study and in the literature led to neglect, undervaluation, sadness, anxiety, and dissatisfaction, worsening relational wounds (Metts & Cupach, 2007).

Infidelity involves emotional or sexual connections with others outside a partnership, resulting in trust breaches and violations of relationship norms (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999). Participants in this study reported both sexual and emotional infidelity, reinforcing prior work showing that sexual infidelity

disrupts intimacy while emotional infidelity affects the bond between partners (Roscoe et al., 1988). Infidelity causes emotional distress and betrayal, compromising trust and reducing marital satisfaction, impacting both partners and their relationship over time (Feeney, 2004; Osei-Tutu et al., 2019).

Deception—whether through lies, withholding information, exaggerations, half-truths, or sharing personal concerns—also impacts relationship dynamics. Participants in this study reported experiences of deception that align with earlier research, suggesting it undermines the security and integrity of relationships, resulting in distrust and uncertainty (Feeney, 2004; Leary et al., 1998). Deception, even when intended to preserve harmony, is often perceived as destructive and can be extremely harmful to relationships, leading to anger, disappointment, and mistrust (Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2009; Horan & Dillow, 2009).

Disrespect involves actions that show disregard for a partner, like shouting or using harsh language, leading to feelings of being unappreciated and belittlement. Participants shared experiences of disrespect that mirrored Ghanaian cultural norms surrounding gendered communication. Men reported often feeling publicly undermined, while women emphasized a lack of attention to their emotional needs. This finding aligns with research by Osei-Tutu et al. (2019) and Finkel and Campbell (2001), which demonstrates how these emotions depend on the individual's role in the relationship and that social factors contribute to perceptions of disrespect. Disrespect diminished the partners' value, suggesting that these relationships were not valued (Feeney, 2004).

Our findings indicated that participants perceived humiliation as a form of shame in both social and personal contexts, as well as in situations involving personal insults and reputational damage. The experiences significantly reduced self-esteem and relational security, which is a characteristic of Ghanaian culture that emphasizes preserving a positive social standing (Osei-Tutu et al., 2019; Tsirigotis et al., 2013). Public humiliation, e.g., belittling one's partner, increases the experience of shame and vulnerability, particularly when it is linked to cultural or ethnic identity. Osei-Tutu et al. (2019) identified insults as a distinct offense, emphasizing their public expression rather than their content. Nevertheless, this study explored public insults as a humiliation tactic that can result in lasting impacts, including feelings of inadequacy, social withdrawal, and threats to perceived partner value.

Violence is a controlling tool that reduces self-esteem and independence of the victims (Katz & Arias, 1999). The inflicted harm and trauma of physical abuse were direct effects in the case of reports by participants, with verbal abuse and threats creating distress. The practices were usually accompanied by unequal power relations within the age-gap relationships, with older partners dominating. Manipulation and coercion undermine

self-worth and independence, strengthening the abuser's control. Coercive control, marked by isolation and intimidation, affected autonomy and mental health more severely than physical assault, trapping victims in a fear cycle that harmed their positive attachment models (Dichter et al., 2018; Stark & Hester, 2018).

Neglect of duty, shaped by cultural gender roles, revealed unmet responsibilities and insufficient commitment to a partner's needs. This was reported exclusively by men in this study, highlighting the cultural expectation in Ghana that women fulfill domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Neglect differs from intentional hurt; it stems from carelessness or inattention, making accountability complex. This ambiguity raises the question of whether its consequences require the same accountability as intentional actions (Moore & Hurd, 2011). Regardless, this leads to feelings of disregard for one's partner and the relationship.

Insecurity and criticism impacted relationships extensively. Insecurity, driven by uncertainty and self-doubt, causes imbalance as one partner feels neglected while the other seeks reassurance, resulting in distress and lower satisfaction. This theme emerged strongly in women's accounts, often tied to accusations of infidelity or doubts about their partner's loyalty, reflecting gendered vulnerabilities in Ghanaian relational contexts (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). Personal attacks, false accusations, and nagging breed resentment, erode trust, and compromise emotional safety, thereby escalating conflict and hurting relationships.

Gender Differences in Hurtful Events

Our findings revealed distinct gender trends in hurtful events from partners, reflecting both the current study's data and broader societal norms and expectations. In male-dominated offenses, male partners often reportedly engaged in disassociation, infidelity, violence, criticism, and deception. Active and passive disassociation, such as withholding affection or communication, fosters feelings of neglect and abandonment and diminishes emotional security, causing female partners to feel unsupported (Feeney, 2005; Guerrero, 2014). This was consistent with the reports of women in our study, who frequently described experiences of emotional withdrawal and abandonment.

Infidelity, also often rationalized by cultural practices such as polygamy, represents betrayal and breaches trust, diminishing the emotional connections between couples (Drigotas et al., 1999; Feeney, 2004). Female participants in this study echoed this, describing polygamy and extramarital relationships as major sources of hurt, which demonstrates how cultural practices shape relational injuries.

Male dominance, reflected in violence and controlling behaviors like physical abuse and coercion, among others, impairs the autonomy of female

partners (Metts, 1994). These trends were most evident in couples with significant age gaps. The male partners in these relationships practiced control, which increased their power in the relationship. The use of violence and controlling behaviors keep female partners in a state of fear and dependency.

Criticism, personal attacks, and insults also reduce the emotional safety of women, creating a sense of insecurity (Feeney, 2004; Osei-Tutu et al., 2019). These findings were reinforced by reports given by female participants in our study, where repeated criticism and nagging by male partners led to increased insecurity and reduced self-esteem.

Female partners are mostly associated with neglect of duty, insecurity, humiliation, and disrespect. For instance, neglect of duty, especially toward household responsibilities, is viewed by male partners as a sign of a lack of commitment, and this can lead to dissatisfaction in relationships (Assimeng, 2007; Osei-Tutu et al., 2019). Our own study supported this by the reports of men, who always cast non-adherence to household or caregiving duties as intentional ignorance of relational duties.

Females often face challenges in balancing their personal aspirations with societal expectations, which can lead to confusion and tension in their relationships. This imbalance can result in unmet expectations, which are often exacerbated when male partners perceive these actions as deliberate neglect. Our findings show that the behaviors, as well as the perceptions of the hurtful events, reflected the traditional gender roles and cultural norms. Female partners often perceived disassociation as abandonment and insecurity as indicative of infidelity, mirroring gendered insecurity influenced by societal norms. Male partners tended to conceptualize disrespect or open humiliation as a threat to their authority and masculinity, reflecting the impact of cultural norms on behavior and the perception and evaluation of hurt.

Insecurity, shown through reassurance-seeking or fidelity concerns, heightens emotional vulnerability, which can overwhelm male partners (Ding et al., 2021), resulting in withdrawal and explaining their emotional distance (Feeney, 2004). Our findings reflected this, as men described frequent accusations and suspicions as draining, contributing to their avoidance or disengagement.

Humiliation and disrespect, especially in public contexts, intensify relational hurt. Challenging male authority, primarily through public embarrassment, undermines self-worth and reinforces feelings of devaluation (Tsirigotis et al., 2013). In our sample, male participants often reported feelings of humiliation in financial and public settings, particularly when their authority or masculinity was questioned. They associated all these experiences with cultural ideals of male dominance and reputation. Such humiliation damages a male partner's image, heightening relational insecurity by challenging societal ideals of masculinity and authority.

These gender-specific offense patterns indicate the influence of social regulations and demands of relationships in the development of abusive acts. Relational hurt is a contribution of both male and female partners. However, the behavior of each is often a reflection of standard gender roles and the specific emotional vulnerabilities of one or the other partner.

Age Differences in Hurtful Events

Hurtful events reveal disparities across age groups and couples with age gaps. Our findings demonstrated that the nature and intensity of hurts varied across developmental stages and were often shaped by generational expectations.

The younger individuals are often faced with dissociation and infidelity, and pre-marital infidelity intensifies these challenges in marriage. This trend was highlighted in our findings, with younger couples having a greater focus on betrayal linked to pre-marital affairs and a lack of attention. Lack of insecurity and humiliation is a result of the need to fit in socially (Baumeister et al., 2001). The emotional distress caused by verbal abuse and trouble with relational expectations also contributed to neglect of duties (Fincham, 2004; Steiner et al., 2011).

Middle-aged individuals experience silent treatment, neglect, and exclusion from decision-making (Steiner et al., 2011). Our participants in this age group frequently reported feeling emotionally disconnected and being excluded from important family or financial decisions, aligning with prior findings. Infidelity includes flirting or affairs; verbal abuse and control increase insecurity (Charles & Almeida, 2006). Financial strain was identified as an important contributor to conflict in this study, reinforcing previous research findings.

Older individuals experience relational hurts associated with their life stage (Steiner et al., 2011), where disassociation and infidelity supplant verbal abuse. Insecurity requires attention; humiliation happens privately. Older individuals pointed out emotional neglect and private humiliation, showing a transition from overt conflict to subtler yet damaging forms of hurt. Older adults tend to handle conflict with greater calmness, thereby preserving harmony, in contrast to younger and middle-aged couples (Charles & Piazza, 2009).

In age-gap relationships, older partners often passively avoid and abandon conflict, leading to disassociation, while younger partners typically withdraw emotionally, increasing pain (Cabras et al., 2022; Charles & Carstensen, 2008). This dynamic was evident in our data, where older partners framed avoidance as a sign of maturity, but younger partners interpreted it as neglect. Power imbalances arise from these behaviors as older partners exert control and foster resentment in younger partners. Younger partners may perceive feedback as

oppressive and react aggressively, which can have a negative impact on older partners. Older partners may display violent behaviors to show maturity (Overall et al., 2016). This was supported in our study, where violence in age-gap couples often emerged as a means for older partners to assert authority.

Belittling or dismissive actions provoke strong reactions from younger partners, who perceive passive responses as dismissive, intensifying relational hurt. Differences in generational communication can lead to misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

Younger partners, in our results, explained non-disclosure by older partners as deception. In contrast, older partners emphasized the need to avoid embarrassment, suggesting that disclosure expectations differ across generations. Younger partners often feel that older partners are withholding information, which can lead to mistrust. Young couples are more likely to experience uncertainty and lack of trust; older couples are more likely to escape a potentially embarrassing scenario (Fingerman & Charles, 2010).

Younger partners perceive neglect of duty as a lack of commitment, while older partners attribute it to external factors such as work. Older partners may neglect their responsibilities by focusing on fewer, deeper social interactions, which can potentially lead younger partners to feel overlooked (Helson & Soto, 2005). This difference was evident in the research, as young couples described neglect as an act of deliberate indifference, while elderly people attributed it to changing priorities with age.

Implications

This study has implications for several stakeholders.

Clinical and Counseling Implications. Culturally sensitive counseling is needed. Therapists should address how traditional gender roles and communal expectations shape perceptions of injury. Cognitive-behavioral strategies can help partners reinterpret negative appraisals and reduce the “sense of injury” to self-worth. To further support this, therapists are encouraged to apply models developed by Worthington (2020) and Fincham and Beach (2010), which emphasize forgiveness and reconciliation as central elements of couples’ therapy. Because “neglect of duty” was reported only by men, couples can work to align domestic and caregiving expectations. Also, interventions can be implemented to improve emotional literacy and communication.

Community and Religious Implications. In Ghana, marriage often affects a couple’s social standing and extended-family reputation. Public disrespect or humiliation can therefore have serious social consequences. Community and religious platforms should promote forgiveness education. Organized “forgiveness festivals” and interactive seminars, which can be modeled after campaigns by

the Fetzer Institute, can allow couples to share narratives and strengthen communal understanding of reconciliation (The Fetzer Institute, 2025).

Certification courses for religious and community leaders as “Certified Forgiveness Facilitators” would provide them with the psychological tools to mediate sensitive issues, including power imbalances in age-gap relationships.

Educational and Developmental Implications. Our study findings indicate that hurtful events vary by age; hence, early interventions are encouraged. Emotional intelligence and conflict-resolution skills should be integrated into the national curriculum from elementary through high school. Based on the findings of Goleman (1995), such programs can inform students on how to regulate their own emotions and interpret the feelings of others.

Additionally, cooperative learning programs (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1996) can be utilized in schools to equip students with the knowledge to resolve interpersonal conflicts. These skills help regulate emotions before long-term commitments. Programs for younger couples should foster vulnerable communication to address trust and self-worth, which the study links to a “doubling of distress.”

Theoretical and Research Implications. This study validates some Western typologies while highlighting insecurity and humiliation as context-specific forms of hurt. It shows that hurt is not monolithic but shaped by personal vulnerability and societal norms. Future research should use these typologies to examine the timing and intensity of offenses and how severity affects long-term recovery and forgiveness.

Limitations

Although this study offers important insights, it has several limitations that should be considered. The intensity of hurtful incidents was not analyzed, which might influence relationship dynamics. Minor offenses may have short-term effects, whereas major offenses can have long-lasting effects. Further research can classify hurtful experiences by severity to better understand the effects of varying levels of intensity on relationship processes and emotional recovery. Such classification can provide insight into how couples overcome obstacles and focus on recovery.

A primary limitation is the limited generalizability of the findings due to convenience sampling and geographic focus. Participants were recruited from the Tema Metropolitan Assembly in the Greater Accra Region based on availability. While suitable for rich qualitative narratives, this approach lacks statistical representativeness. The findings may not reflect couples in rural areas or other Ghanaian regions with different socio-cultural

dynamics. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution when applied to the wider Ghanaian population.

In addition, the research instrument was not piloted, which potentially impacts methodological rigor. While the instrument was developed inductively from a theoretically relevant framework previously used in the Ghanaian context, a pilot study could have further refined the instrument specifically for use with couples.

The research did not address the timing of the offenses, which would have affected participants' emotional and behavioral reactions. Older offenses can also diminish the intensity of emotional feelings, facilitating forgiveness, whereas newer offenses are more likely to trigger stronger emotional responses, as people are still preparing to cope with them. Investigating the time dynamics of hurtful experiences to comprehend the influences of emotions, relational recovery, and forgiveness provides insight into the effects of hurtful experiences, both recent and long-term. The study identified hurtful events but did not examine how couples recover. Understanding the recovery processes of hurt, such as communication or forgiveness, can offer a balanced view of relational dynamics.

The study examines gender differences in hurtful events but may reinforce stereotypes by overemphasizing traditional roles between genders. This focus may overlook behaviors that do not fit traditional gender roles but are still important in relationships. Future studies can explore how changes in social norms and nontraditional roles impact hurtful events and how couples respond to them. This would deepen understanding of gender differences in the experience of hurtful events.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of hurtful events in Ghanaian marriages. Ten types of hurt were identified, including recognized behaviors and those rooted in Ghanaian culture, reflecting the impact of societal norms, traditional gender roles, and personal expectations on the perception of hurt. Neglect of duty, disrespect, and insecurity emerged as culturally nuanced offenses, reflecting the collective and traditional nature of Ghanaian society.

Gender and age variations influenced the types of hurtful events couples faced. Gendered offenses such as active and passive disassociation and neglect of duty align with traditional expectations, while age-related patterns show evolving relational challenges across life stages. Age-gap relationships reveal how power dynamics and generational differences influence the hurtful experiences and perceptions of hurt in couples.

These findings emphasize the importance of culturally sensitive counseling and educational programs. Addressing relational challenges faced by males, females, and age-diverse couples in Ghana can promote healthier

communication, mutual respect, and emotional resilience, improving relationship satisfaction and stability. Future research may investigate such dynamics on a broader scale or examine how trends change in response to shifting norms.

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ORCID

Rhoda Aforkor Quaye  <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-9576-8005>

Annabella Osei-Tutu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9407-8770>

Adote Anum  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8680-9203>

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study are available at the Department of Psychology, University of Ghana. Access to the data may be granted upon written request, subject to institutional and ethical guidelines.

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