Resolving Conflict in Interpersonal Relationships using Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Listening Statements

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Abstract

Anger, an emotion that can emerge during conflict, directly impacts relationships (Björkqvist, 1997; Winer et al., 2024; Winer et al., 2023). One skill that has the potential to reduce anger in conflict is effective listening—as distinct from *hearing*, understood as a purely physiological, auditory process, because *listening* includes interpretation and feedback, such as spoken responses (Udo, 2023). Yet, minimal research has investigated the influence of listening response statements on relational outcomes. As such, the purpose of this research was to examine how six assertive, passive, and aggressive listening response statements affect relational outcomes. There were 975 university student participants in this mixed-methods study. Researchers utilized repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance to examine which of the six listening response statements produced the highest and lowest relational outcomes, such as a willingness to work together with a class partner after a conflict. The quantitative results indicated that assertive listening response statements led to the best relational outcomes. The qualitative findings also support the use of assertive listening to manage conflict in healthy ways. This research provides unique applications and conclusions for both researchers and practitioners.

Introduction

Anger is a complex emotion that is often intensified during discord. While scholars and trainers have long sought to understand the role of anger in interpersonal conflict, there has been a lack of applied research aimed at guiding people in navigating anger to move past conflict and improve relationships (Dunbar et al., 2022). This gap underscores the need for scholars and practitioners to develop research-informed communication strategies for understanding and resolving conflict.

Existing research on communication in relational conflict has often focused on assertive messaging as a key to resolution (e.g., Gambrill & Richey, 1975). This concept of assertiveness, often described as a balance between passive and aggressive interactional postures, has been well-explored (e.g., Hedlund & Lindquist, 1984). Assertive communication is often found to be helpful in conflict because it allows individuals to express their thoughts and feelings openly and honestly while respecting the rights and opinions of others (Winer et al., 2023). This balanced approach helps to mitigate misunderstandings and reduce the escalation of conflict. However, much of the research has emphasized verbal expression and the delivery of messages, with less attention given to the listening component of communication, which is commonly distinguished from the physiological process of hearing, in that listening involves interpretation and usually some form of response (Udo, 2023).

Many studies of effective listening operationalize the concept of 'active listening' (e.g., Udo, 2023), which involves body language and feedback statements meant to convey attention and openness, clarify understanding, and encourage successful interactions. A few concepts, such as empathic or mindful listening, are often modeled as variants of active listening, synthesized with it, or posed as alternatives to it (Drollinger et al., 2006; Gottman, 1999). While these highlight the value of attentiveness and altruism in active, empathic, and mindful listening, the listener may not feel like they can express their viewpoints or maintain self-respect within the conversation.

This study, therefore, proposes the practice of *assertive listening*, which is built upon the foundation of active listening while having a different purpose and focus. Active listening is often used in psychotherapy (Fitzgerald & Leudar, 2010) and is primarily an intrapersonal process. Assertive listening is more effective for conflict resolution and is primarily an interpersonal process. Both are important for anger management, as a listening skill, and at resolving conflict and promoting self-esteem based on feedback from a speaker. The specific differences between the two constructs are clarified within the literature review of this paper.

Assertive listening is a novel, unexplored concept that has yet to be theorized, tested, or applied. It emerged as a category from this paper's reported study, which utilizes a mixed-methods design to test the efficacy of specific listening feedback statements through a survey-based experiment with university students throughout the United States. The project sheds light on different subtypes of passive, aggressive, and assertive listening response statements. By exploring how the different word structures of listening-response statements during conflict may intensify or mitigate anger, express or suppress emotions, resolve or exacerbate conflict, make a person feel listened to or ignored, and improve or impair the relationship, this study has the potential to reframe our understanding and teaching of conflict resolution. Furthermore, this research addresses a specific gap in the empirical literature, with its conception of 'assertive listening' skills, since existing studies on anger resolution have devoted scarce attention to listening and associated feedback, verbal and nonverbal, despite widespread recognition that listening well—as opposed to

merely *hearing* what's said—is crucial to the success of relationships and interactions (Dunbar et al., 2022). This study also examined the effectiveness of listening skills taught in *The Game Changer*, a board game designed to improve conflict resolution and anger management in personal relationships (Winer, in press, 2025). The game helps participants recognize their use of passive or aggressive listening styles and develop assertive listening skills for more constructive communication (Winer, in press, 2025).

Background of the Study

Listening is widely acknowledged as an essential component of quality communication and conflict resolution in various contexts (Udo, 2023). Existing research has emphasized the benefits of effective listening for interpersonal relationships and trust-building, albeit mostly in general (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022) and without a focus on 'assertive listening' response phrasing. Its significance in educational settings, particularly among students, warrants specific attention (Khaydarova, 2023), since collaboration is a pivotal part of students' learning experiences (Deiparine et al., 2023), and communication skills like listening and conflict resolution are essential for fostering effective collaboration (Lailiyah et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding and promoting effective listening among students is paramount.

Given the lack of empirical research examining assertive listening, it is valuable to explore this topic, not least as it applies to students. As such, this study examines the different effects that passive, aggressive, and listening responses have on student-team relational outcomes, such as a willingness to work with the same person again, after conflict resolution. Specifically, this study identifies whether assertive listening responses yield better relational outcomes than passive or aggressive responses and categorizes which responses are perceived as passive, aggressive, or assertive.

Literature Review

The Importance of Listening

The importance of effective listening cannot be understated; it has the potential to be transformative. Yet, individuals often underestimate the complexities involved in the listening process. The act of listening is more than simply hearing a message; this multi-step process also includes accurately interpreting and appropriately responding to the message, depending on the communication context (Udo, 2023). When practiced effectively, listening may improve individuals' attitudes, values, personal philosophies, trust, intimacy, and well-being (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Weinstein et al., 2021). Moreover, those who feel listened to have been shown to demonstrate increased emotional maturity, be more open to new experiences, and manage conflict more effectively (Weinstein et al., 2021).

Listening to Anger in Conflict

Effective listening presents a challenge when strong emotions, like anger, hurt, and pain are involved (Chism, 2020). In these instances, parties might struggle with active listening, which involves "(*a*) unobservable behaviors of the listener (e.g., comprehension), which influence (*b*) observable behaviors of the listener (e.g., their statements, gaze, eye contact, posture), which in

turn inform (*c*) perceptions and evaluations of the speaker (e.g., feeling listened to)" (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022, p. 122). However, this active-listening foundation can still give rise to overly passive or even, perhaps after delay, aggressive listening responses (Schwanke, 2024). Therefore, unintended ill-considered defensive reactions from active listening might be expressed, or conversely, feelings might be suppressed, festering resentment. In either case, the relationship is worsened because the listener may not feel like they can express their viewpoints or maintain self-respect within the conversation (Schwanke, 2024). With the shortcomings of active listening considered, it is important to examine the effectiveness of assertive listening.

Listening Response

Due to the dyadic nature of listening, it must be conceptualized from both the listener's and speaker's perspectives (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Yip & Fisher, 2022), as the listener may switch roles with the speaker and respond with either verbal or nonverbal feedback (Udo, 2023). When this occurs, several types of listening responses might be appropriate in various communication contexts. For example, a listener might respond by paraphrasing to clarify what the speaker has said (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Additionally, a listener might respond by sharing a supportive statement encouraging the speaker to continue talking (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022).

Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Listening Responses

Communication is heavily impacted by the style in which people communicate, and this is often related to the directness of the message. The most common styles include passive, aggressive, and assertive communication (Sherman, 1999). Passive communicators prefer to convey indirect messages that are vaguely agreeable (Hedlund & Lindquist, 1984). Aggressive communicators respond with hostility and pose little regard for others (Hedlund & Lindquist, 1984). Lastly, assertive communicators demonstrate mutual respect by listening for information and not judging the sender.

Past researchers have examined assertiveness in anger-inducing interactions. Deffenbacher et al. (1994) found that individuals who undertook assertiveness social skills training reported reduced anger in comparison to the control group. Further, evidence shows that higher levels of assertiveness reduced anger and violence among health practitioners and their clients in work environments (Wardany et al., 2022; Weger et al., 2014). Studies have also shown that high assertiveness is related to openness and agreeableness (Akkaya & Tuzgol Dost, 2021) and confident expression of individuals' needs (Erbay & Akcay, 2013). Further, assertive communication de-escalates conflict (see, for example, Winer, 2024; Ishi & Kanda, 2019; Rimland, 1982; Scherer, 1986). For instance, assertiveness has been positively related to conflict management patterns such as collaboration and compromising (Rahman et al., 2018).

Winer's Relationship Communication Training (RCT) coding system has been used to study conflict for thirty years—particularly passive, aggressive, and assertive communication in interpersonal contexts, including student relationships (Dunbar et al., 2022). Winer (2024), using this extensive research and his therapeutic experience, identified six listening response archetypes, based on empirical observation and theoretic adaptation from Satir (1972, 1988) and Rogers and Farson (1957/1987), that positively or negatively impacted conflict resolution. They are: (1) Passive Rescuer, (2) Passive Avoider, (3) Aggressive Advice Giver, (4) Aggressive Evaluator, (5) Assertive Probability, and (6) Assertive Certainty. The distinctiveness of these categories from

each other and their relevance to conflict resolution is grounded in their empirical application and refinement over years of therapeutic practice and their derivation from eminent interpersonal-communication theory (Winer et al., 2024; Winer, 2024; Winer, in press, 2025; Rogers & Farson, 1957/1987; Satir 1972; 1988). Depending on the situation, one's listening response can amplify or reduce anger, encourage the expression or suppression of emotions, ease or worsen conflict, make someone feel heard or overlooked, and strengthen or damage the relationship.

Passive Rescuer. This listening archetype is exemplified when individuals are uncomfortable with conflict or strong emotions and respond passively. For example, a Passive Rescuer might minimize the conflict and say, "Don't worry; everything is going to be okay." Often, this response language can come across as comforting, and the initial speaker might feel cared for. Yet, in reality, their feelings are not addressed, and the conflict remains unresolved.

Passive Avoider. This listening archetype includes individuals whose discomfort with conflict leads them to avoid resolution, especially by redirecting the focus away from the conflict. Satir (1972) characterizes this archetype as a distractor who responds with irrelevant actions or communication. The Passive Avoider is unassertive but also uncooperative in the resolution process (Thomas, 2008). For example, they might respond with, "I think I understand why you are angry with me. Let's discuss it at another time," and they might try to postpone the discussion repeatedly. Avoiders often display neuroticism and withdraw from interactions, and their interactors may feel dismissed during conflict (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). Further, they are likely to withdraw from conflict, which can escalate their partners' emotional reactions, such as anger, aggression, and vengefulness (Du et al., 2023; Hample & Hample, 2019).

Aggressive Advice Giver. Individuals exemplifying this listening archetype often feel confident they know the appropriate way to handle conflicts and, as a result, attempt to dominate the conversation. Aggressive Advice Givers' responses are advice-focused and often begin with the word *you* or *why*. For example, an advice giver may respond with, "You know you need my help." This kind of advice-giving is motivated by the desire for control and power (Schaerer et al., 2018). Advice givers have been shown to display fewer backchanneling and paraphrasing behaviors in interactions in comparison to active listeners, causing their interactors to feel ignored (Weger et al., 2014). Findings have also shown that unwanted advice might increase others' defensiveness and cause people to shut down during conflict (Helgeson, 2003; Bodie et al., 2013). It also deters the effective listening process during conflict (Roloff & Ifert, 2014), reduces relationship satisfaction (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006), and elicits negative reactions, making effective dialogue more difficult (Floyd, 2010).

Aggressive Evaluator. People exemplifying the Aggressive Evaluator archetype frequently issue judgments within conflict situations, such as interpreting others' needs and feelings and categorizing or labeling people. For example, an evaluator might respond with, "You're overreacting." Aggressive Evaluators may play the mind reader, seeming to know more about others than they know about themselves (Gibb, 1961). Evaluators also focus on blaming their communication partners and their statements during interactions (Satir, 1972), thereby making individuals feel under attack (Bodie et al., 2013). Evaluating others during the listening process has been correlated with higher levels of neuroticism (Weaver et al., 1996), and it may trigger anger in others. Further, evaluative listening may be perceived as hurtful and dishonest, which may lead to negative relationship outcomes (Zhang, 2009).

Assertive Certainty. In situations of anger or conflict, those exemplifying an Assertive Certainty archetype practice a type of active listening that recognizes their interlocutor's concerns and boundaries while making clear their own; these listening response statements typically use an

"I-You-Me" word structure. An example of an Assertive Certainty response statement would be, "I know you are feeling upset with me, and I want to check it out with you." They demonstrate confidence and assurance in their perceptions of the conflict. Assertive communication allows partners to cope with stress and genuinely express their perspectives, which enhances overall relationship satisfaction (Kuhn et al., 2018; Moss et al., 2021).

Assertive Probability. Similar to Assertive Certainty, individuals representing the Assertive Probability archetype engage conflict with direct communication that honors the boundaries and concerns of all parties involved. However, the listening-response language is more tentative. For example, they might say something like, "This is how I think you are feeling towards me, and I want to check it out with you." They carefully frame their listening responses as just their interpretations of the conflict, and they ask for input from the other to clarify. This offers a softer approach to sensitive conflict topics to reduce the emotional tensions of the conversation. The listener using probability-based language signals that they are not seeking to control the conversation, but rather to share and understand the emotional experience, which can strengthen the bond by fostering trust and a shared responsibility in the relationship (Winer, 2024).

Active Listening versus Assertive Listening

Active listening and assertive listening are similar yet distinct constructs. Active listening was developed by Carl Rogers and Richard Farson (1957/1987). Active Listening is particularly effective in intrapersonal conflict situations, where an individual experiences emotional distress independent of the listener's actions. Assertive Listening, as conceptualized by Winer (2024), is an advanced listening strategy designed specifically for interpersonal conflict resolution, where the speaker's emotional response is directed toward the listener. It extends Active Listening by incorporating an additional acknowledgment of the listener's involvement in the conflict. Active listening is used primarily in therapy and counseling and finds its application in personal relationships when someone is angry, hurt, or anxious from unresolved emotional issues from their childhood, relationships, or traumatic experiences, but is most effective with someone outside the relationship, such as a therapist or counselor. When Active Listening involves verbal feedback, these responses are commonly based on an "I-You" structure, as in, "My thought is you are feeling angry," whereas Assertive Listening is based on an "I-You-Me" structure, e.g., "My thought is you are feeling angry with me."

Past research has established the link between active listening skills and reduced anger (Dil & Cam, 2024), reduced feelings of being ignored (Malesevic et al., 2021), enhanced conflict resolution (Fischer-Lokou et al., 2016), being open to share (Bodie et al., 2015), and enhancing professional relationships outcomes such as relationship satisfaction and commitment (Manusov et al., 2018; Weger et al., 2010). Despite its effectiveness in intrapersonal emotional regulation, Active Listening proves insufficient in interpersonal conflict scenarios, where the speaker's emotional distress is directly linked to the listener's actions. In such contexts, the absence of explicit acknowledgment of the listener's role may lead to unresolved tensions.

For this reason, Winer (2024) added that connection by adding the word "Me" to the "I-You" listening-statement structure. Unlike the Active Listening structure "I-You," which is first person to second person, an Assertive Listening "I-You-Me" structure is first person followed by second person and back to first person (Dunbar et al., 2022). By incorporating the "Me" component, Assertive Listening promotes accountability, making it a more effective strategy for interpersonal conflict. The added "Me" signals that the listener understands and acknowledges that they are a

source of the speaker's feelings. The word "Me" in Assertive Listening brings the speaker to the listener in an interpersonal exchange, and it is thereby instrumental in resolving the conflict. An example of an Assertive Listening response is, "My thought is you are feeling anger toward me." From past research on assertiveness in interactions between listeners and senders, it is known to be linked to reduced anger in relationships (Wardany et al., 2022), increased expression (Erbay & Akcay, 2013), and increased conflict resolution (Winer, 2024; Ishi & Kanda, 2019), as well as positive relational outcomes such as relationship satisfaction and feeling understood (Atristain-Suárez & Castaños-Cervantes, 2024; Ogonwa & Ezenwa, 2024). While both active and assertive listening are effective at reducing anger by increasing the feeling of being listened to, assertive listening is often more proactively effective at resolving conflict in interpersonal relationships. Comparatively, active listening can be said to work more *intra*personally, whereas in conflict situations, assertive listening is more *inter*personally efficacious.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

Both the literature on the importance of effective listening (Satir, 1972; Udo, 2023) and Winer's (2024) practice-based coding of listening responses informed this study. As a result, the researchers searched for empirical evidence of effective listening-response statement types to test the theorization of assertive listening. With that aim, the following hypothesis and research questions were formulated:

H1: An assertive listening response will have better relational outcomes (as measured by relationship harm and the desire to work with a partner in the future) than a passive or aggressive listening response.

Moreover, the researchers were interested in measuring how these six listening responses differ across multiple relational outcomes (both positive and negative). Although the authors predicted that assertive listening would produce better relational outcomes than both passive and aggressive listening, no prior research had empirically examined the differences between these six types of listening statements regarding perceived levels of anger, feeling ignored, being open to sharing, resolving conflict, and improving the relationship. Thus, we proposed a series of research questions:

RQ1a. Are there significant differences in perceived *levels of anger* across the six listening responses?

RQ1b. Are there significant differences in perceived *levels of feeling ignored* across the six listening responses?

RQ1c. Are there significant differences in perceived *levels of open to sharing* across the six listening responses?

RQ1d. Are there significant differences in perceived *levels of resolving conflict* across the six listening responses?

RQ1e. Are there significant differences in perceived *levels of improving the relationship* across the six listening responses?

Lastly, there are benefits of examining how people will perceive each listening response as being passive, aggressive, or assertive. This could help them choose appropriate responses in conflict scenarios. Thus, the researchers proposed a second research question:

RQ2. Which listening responses will most likely be seen as most passive, aggressive, and assertive?

Method

This study utilized a mixed-methods design, which enabled the researchers to answer the research questions and test the hypothesis using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses (Fetters et al., 2013). By utilizing mixed methods to analyze data, researchers can interpret experiences, events, and variables of interest in a systematic and comprehensive way. Qualitative analysis provides in-depth information about participants' perceptions and a focus on the importance of their experiences (Taylor et al., 2016). Quantitative analysis allows researchers to examine the relationship between variables through association and use summary statistics to describe the sample (Thomas, 2004). Our dependent measures constituted five relational outcome measures (i.e., anger, feeling ignored, open to sharing, likely to resolve conflict, relationship satisfaction) all rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Additionally, we had participants rate each listening statement on perceived passiveness, aggressiveness, and assertiveness, rated on a scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). Moreover, we had a personal preference dependent measure, such that participants rated their personal preference for each listening statement, on a scale from 1 (least preferred) to 5 (most preferred).

Recruiting

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), researchers began the recruitment process using a convenience sampling strategy. Students from higher education institutions in California, Texas, and New York were recruited. After students expressed interest in participating, they provided their consent electronically via Qualtrics. Then, they completed the survey.

Participants and Demographics

1,038 participants were initially recruited for the present study. In the process of data cleaning, a small number of participants (n = 66) were excluded from the analysis. The reasons for exclusion included a high number of missing values and patterned responses, which could potentially compromise the integrity of the analysis. Thus, 66 participants were removed if they exhibited response patterns suggestive of non-engagement, such as providing the same rating (e.g., 5, 5, 5) across multiple items, indicating lack of variation in their answers. Additionally, participants with substantial missing data were excluded to ensure the robustness and validity of the findings, as incomplete data can introduce bias and reduce the reliability of the results. As a result, 975 participants remained. By removing these participants, we aimed to enhance the quality and accuracy of the dataset, ensuring that the remaining data truly reflects the intended measures and constructs. After cleaning the data, 975 participants remained. The sample is representative of the diversity in these geographic regions (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Sample Demographics*

Category	Percentages (Actual)
Year in school	
Freshman	10.4% (101)
Sophomore	27.3% (266)
Junior	38.4% (374)
Senior	24% (234)
Major	
Communication	29.2% (291)
Human Sciences	5.7% (55)
Advertising	1.2% (12)
Other	63.9% (617)
Gender	
Male	25.5% (249)
Female	73.1% (713)
Non-binary	0.9% (9)
Confidential	.1% (4)
Race	
White or Caucasian	51.4% (501)
Hispanic or Latino/a	17.3% (169)
Black or African American	4.2% (41)
Asian or Asian American	8.9% (87)
Biracial or multiracial	16.1% (157)
Middle Eastern	0.8% (8)
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.6% (6)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2% (2)
Did not disclose	0.4% (4)
Age	
18-71	
(M = 21.11, SD = 4.45)	100% (975)

Procedures

All participants completed the virtual informed-consent form and answered the verification questions such as their age, gender, ethnicity, along with their level of education, year in school, whether they are enrolled in either a 2- or 4-year institution, and their major. Next, they were presented with a survey describing the following scenario:

> You and your classmate are working on a final-grade group project. As the sender, you express your anger because you feel your coworker is not doing their part. Your coworker will share six listening responses with you, and we want your response to each statement. Imagine that both of you appear non-threatening, standing 3–5 feet away from each other, have slow body movements, use direct eye contact, teeth and lips apart, and speak with a non-threatening tone of voice. Try not to be influenced by any nonverbal behavior of your coworker and only consider their listening statement.

This scenario provided a consistent imagined interaction to help participants picture a similar image when responding to the survey. Also, they were asked to not be influenced by nonverbal behavior that could be imagined during a conflict—for instance, a frown, arms crossed, or yelling behavior— in an attempt to have participants focus solely on the language of the listening statement.

Along with the scenario, participants were provided definitions related to passive, aggressive, and assertive listening, to ensure they all had common knowledge before providing their responses. These definitions defined listening styles to help students understand the difference between *assertive*, *passive*, and *aggressive* in general; however, we did not define specific statements or categories of the study (i.e., avoider, rescuer) to avoid bias. (1) With a *passive* statement, you do not feel heard or understood; you withdraw and do not desire to share your feelings. In this context, the listener wants to avoid listening to how you feel and avoid the possibility of any confrontation. (2) With an *aggressive* statement, you feel attacked, judged, and evaluated and do not want to share your feelings. In this context, the listener wants to change how you feel by judging and blaming and not taking any responsibility for this. (3) An *assertive* statement makes you feel listened to and understood, not judged or evaluated, and safe sharing your feelings. In this context, the listener wants to listen and share with you how they feel.

After reviewing the scenario and provided definitions, participants were given the following statements in the same order and asked to provide their relational outcome responses (angry, ignored, open to sharing, likely to resolve, will improve relational satisfaction) about each statement. Specifically, all participants were presented with the passive rescuer listening statement first, aggressive advice giver statement second, aggressive evaluator statement third, assertive probability statement fourth, and passive avoider statement last. Additionally, the student participants were asked how they would respond (aggressive, assertive, passive). The following statements were adapted from previous scholarship (see Table 2; Winer et al., 2024). After each listening statement, participants were then instructed to indicate their reactions on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). After each listening statement and subsequent reactions, participants were then asked to rate each statement on its perceived level of passivity, aggressiveness, and assertiveness on a 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely) scale. Next, participants were then shown all listening statements and asked to rank order them from 1 (least) to 5 (most) passive, aggressive, and assertive. Finally, participants were asked to rate each listening statement on their personal preference from 1 (least preferred) to 5 (most preferred) and provide an open-ended response to why they chose their most and least preferred. Upon completion, participants were debriefed of the true purpose of the study, thanked for their time, and dismissed.

After participants had completed their responses to each statement, they were directed to rank statements by preference and to provide open-ended statements about why they answered the way they did. Finally, they were asked how likely the most and least preferred statements were to resolve the problem and how likely they were to work with the other individual in the future.

Table 2. *Survey Statements*

Statement	Listening Response Archetype	Category
"I think I understand why you are angry with me. Everything is going to be okay."	Passive Rescuer	Passive 1
"I think I understand why you are angry with me. Let's watch the basketball game instead."	Passive Avoider	Passive 2
"I think I understand why you are angry with me. You know you need my help."	Aggressive Advice Giver	Aggressive 1
"I think I understand why you are angry with me. You should listen to what I have to say."	Aggressive Evaluator	Aggressive 2
"I think I understand why you are angry with me. My thought is that you are angry with me for the way I've treated you."	Assertive Probability	Assertive 1
"I think I understand why you are angry with me. I know that you are angry with me for the way I've treated you."	Assertive Certainty	Assertive 2

Results

Quantitative Results

Researchers ran a repeated measures Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) in the General Linear Model in SPSS version 28.0 to answer hypothesis (H1) and our series of RQs (1a–e), broken down by a series of posthoc pairwise comparisons to answer. Each series of relational outcomes measures (i.e., anger, ignored, open to sharing, likely to resolve conflict, improve the relationship) were run separately because the primary focus of the study was on anger in conflict interactions while examining passive, assertive, and aggressive listening statements; thus, it was important to isolate anger by itself. It was also valuable to examine whether other relational outcomes might capture what is happening conceptually.

First, the researchers ran a manipulation check to ensure the stimuli (passive, aggressive, and assertive statements) were measuring what they were intended to measure. Thus, participants were asked to rate which of the six statements were most assertive, passive, and aggressive. From this, the Passive Avoider statement (M = 3.55, SD = 1.57) was rated the most passive, the Aggressive Advice Giver statement (M = 3.37, SD = 1.57) was rated the most aggressive, and the Assertive Probability statement (M = 3.36, 1.63) was rated the most assertive. Three separate one-way repeated measures ANOVAs were run to determine whether there was a significant difference between each of the rated statements. The results indicated a main effect for *passive statements* (F (4,884) = 43.45, *p* <.001, η2 = .164). A series of paired sample t-tests then determined that the Passive Avoider statement was rated significantly more passive than all other statements, p <.001. Next, a main effect for *aggressive statements* was found (F (4, 491) = 18.02, *p* <.001, η2 = .128). A series of paired sample t-tests determined that the Aggressive Advice Giver was rated significantly more aggressive than all other statements, p <.001. Furthermore, a third main effect for *assertive statements* was found (F (4, 905) = 24.91, *p* <.001, η2 = .099). A series of paired sample t-tests determined that the Assertive Probability stated was rated significantly more assertive than all other statements, p <.001.

Hypothesis (H1) predicted that an assertive listening response would produce better relational outcomes than a passive or aggressive listening response. So, a one-way repeated measures MANOVA was conducted with *listening response* (5 levels) on the relational outcome judgments (anger, ignored, open to sharing, likely to resolve conflict, and relationship satisfaction; see Table 3). A repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of *Listening Statement* on perceived levels of *anger*, *feeling ignored*, *openness to sharing*, *resolving conflict*, and *relationship satisfaction*. The results indicated a significant multivariate effect of *Listening statement,* Wilks' Λ = .297, F (25, 915) = 109.60, p <.001, partial η² = .713.

This indicates that the way different listening statements were presented had a significant impact on how participants perceived levels of anger, feeling ignored, openness to sharing, resolving conflict, and relationship satisfaction. The significant effect shows that these perceptions changed in a meaningful way depending on the listening statement given. Next, to address our series of research questions, we followed up with univariate tests and pairwise comparisons to examine the specific effects on each of these dependent variables separately.

Follow-Up Univariate Tests

Subsequent univariate ANOVAs were conducted to examine the effects of *Listening statement* on each of the dependent variables separately.

Anger

A significant main effect for *listening statement type* occurred on *anger*, F (5, 4695) = 502.74, p < .001, η² = .349). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that participants' perceived *anger* was significantly higher for aggressive advice giver (M = 3.24, SD = 1.15) than passive rescuer (M = 2.28, SD = .98), p < .001. Participants' perceived *anger* was significantly higher for the aggressive advice giver (M = 3.24, SD = 1.15) than the aggressive evaluator (M = 2.66, SD = 1.10), p < .001. Participants' perceived *anger* was significantly higher for aggressive evaluator (M = 2.66, SD = 1.10) than assertive probability (M = 1.90, SD = 0.99), p < .001. Participants'

perceived *anger* was significantly higher for the passive avoider (M = 3.52, SD = 1.22) statement than assertive probability (M = 1.90, SD = 0.99), p < .001 (See Figure 1).
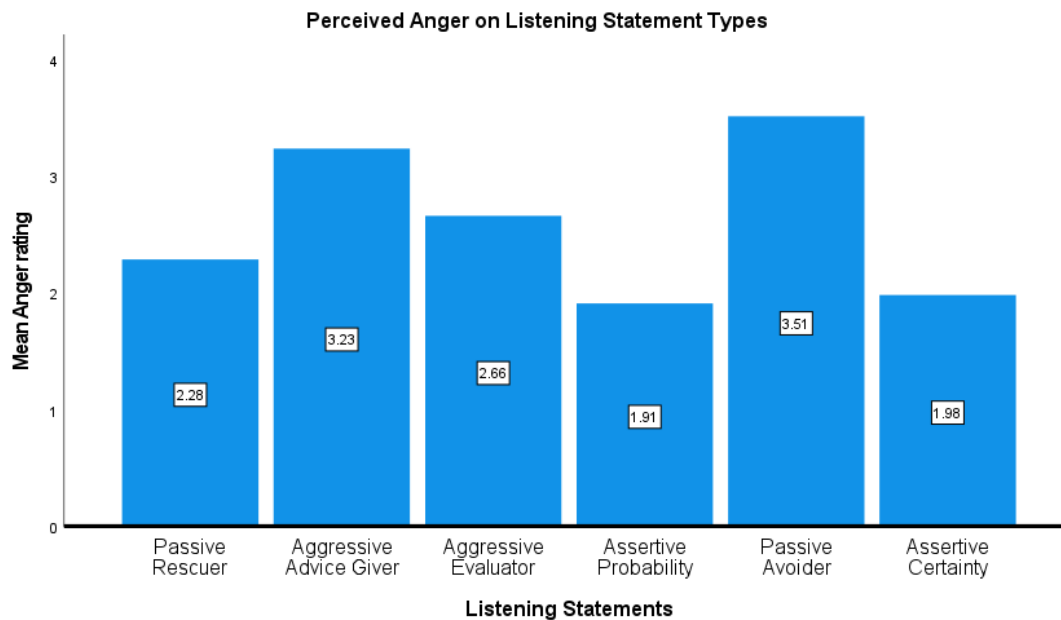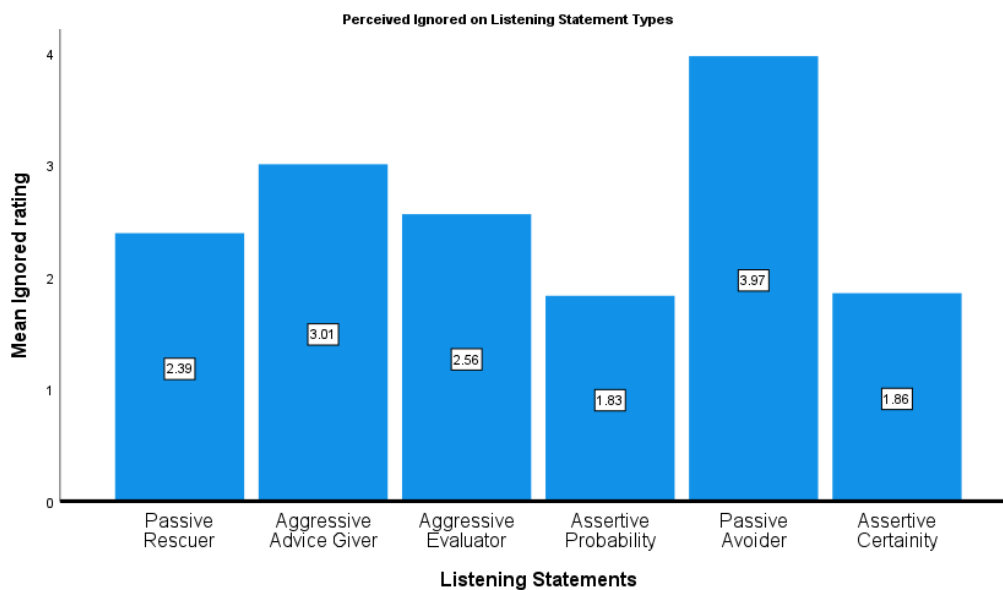
Table 3. MANOVA of Differences in Relational Outcomes

Listening Statement	Statement	Angry	Feeling Ignored	Open to Sharing	Resolve Conflict	Relationship Satisfaction
	P. Rescuer	2.28 (.98)	2.39 (1.16)	3.21 (1.01)	3.28 (1.08)	3.08 (1.15)
	A. Advice Giver	3.24 (1.15)***	3.01 (1.20)***	2.45 (1.07)***	2.40 (1.12)***	2.18 (1.14)***
Passive Rescuer	A. Evaluator	2.66 (1.10)***	2.56 (1.18)***	2.99 (1.07)***	2.99 (1.06)***	2.81 (1.14)***
	A. Probability	1.90 (.99)***	1.82 (1.06)***	3.68 (.98)***	3.73 (.98)***	3.67 (1.03)***
	P. Avoider	3.52 (1.22)***	3.98 (1.17)***	2.15 (1.13)***	1.92 (1.11)***	1.92 (1.12)***
	A. Certainty	1.97 (.99)***	1.85 (1.04)***	3.62 (.97)***	3.67 (.98)***	3.56 (1.05)***
	A. Advice Giver	3.24 (1.15)	3.01 (1.20)	2.45 (1.07)	2.40 (1.12)	2.18 (1.14)
Aggressive Advice Giver	A. Evaluator	2.66 (1.10)***	2.56 (1.18)***	2.99 (1.06)***	2.99 (1.06)***	2.81 (1.13)***
	A. Probability	1.90 (.99)***	1.82 (1.06)***	3.68 (.98)***	3.73 (.98)***	3.67 (1.03)***
	P. Avoider	3.52 (1.22)***	3.98 (1.17)***	2.15 (1.13)***	1.92 (1.11)***	1.92 (1.12)***
	A. Certainty	1.97 (.99)***	1.85 (1.04)***	3.62 (.97)***	3.67 (.98)***	3.56 (1.05)***
	A. Evaluator	2.66 (1.10)	2.56 (1.18)	2.99 (1.06)	2.99 (1.06)	2.81 (1.13)
Aggressive Evaluator	A. Probability	1.90 (.99)***	1.82 (1.06)***	3.68 (.98)***	3.73 (.98)***	3.67 (1.03)***
	P. Avoider	3.52 (1.22)***	3.98 (1.17)***	2.15 (1.13)***	1.92 (1.11)***	1.92 (1.12)***
	A. Certainty	1.97 (.99)***	1.85 (1.04)***	3.62 (.97)***	3.67 (.98)***	3.56 (1.05)***
Assertive Probability	A. Probability	1.90 (.99)	1.82 (1.06)	3.68 (.98)	3.73 (.98)	3.67 (1.03)
	P. Avoider	3.52 (1.22)***	3.98 (1.17)***	2.15 (1.13)***	1.92 (1.11)***	1.92 (1.12)***
	A. Certainty	1.97 (.99)*	1.85 (1.04)	3.62 (.97)*	3.67 (.98)*	3.56 (1.05)***
Passive Avoider	P. Avoider	3.52 (1.22)	3.98 (1.17)	2.15 (1.13)	1.92 (1.11)	1.92 (1.12)
	A. Certainty	1.97 (.99)***	1.85 (1.04)***	3.62 (.97)***	3.67 (.98)***	3.56 (1.05)***

Note. Means listed. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Ignored

A significant main effect for *listening statement type* occurred on feeling ignored, F (5,4695) = 578.98, p <. 001, η² = .381). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that participants' perceived *feeling ignored* was significantly higher at aggressive advice giver (M = 3.01, SD = 1.20) than passive rescuer (M = 2.39, SD = 1.16), p < .001. Participants' perceived *feeling ignored* was significantly higher at aggressive advice giver (M = 3.01, SD = 1.20) than aggressive evaluator (M = 2.56, SD = 1.18), p < .001. Participants' perceived *feeling ignored* was significantly higher at aggressive evaluator (M = 2.56, SD = 1.18) than assertive probability (M = 1.82, SD = 1.06), p < .001. Participants' perceived *feeling ignored* was significantly higher at passive avoider (M = 3.98, SD = 1.17) than assertive probability (M = 1.82, SD = 1.06), p < .05 (See Figure 2).

**Figure 1.** *Perceived Anger Comparing the Six Listening Responses*

Perceived Anger on Listening Statement Types

Mean Anger rating

| Passive Rescuer | Aggressive Advice Giver | Aggressive Evaluator | Assertive Probability | Passive Avoider | Assertive Certainty |
| 2.28 | 3.23 | 2.66 | 1.91 | 3.51 | 1.98 |

Listening Statements

Figure 2. *Perceived Ignored Comparing the Six Listening Responses*

Perceived Ignored on Listening Statement Types

Mean Ignored rating

| Passive Rescuer | Aggressive Advice Giver | Aggressive Evaluator | Assertive Probability | Passive Avoider | Assertive Certainty |
| 2.39 | 3.01 | 2.56 | 1.83 | 3.97 | 1.86 |

Listening Statements

Open to Sharing

A significant main effect for *listening statement type* occurred on openness to sharing, $F (4, 3780) = 414.84$, $p = <.001$, $\eta^2 = .306$. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that participants' perceived *feeling open to sharing* was significantly higher at passive rescuer ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.01$) than aggressive advice giver ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.07$), $p < .001$. Participants' perceived *feeling open*
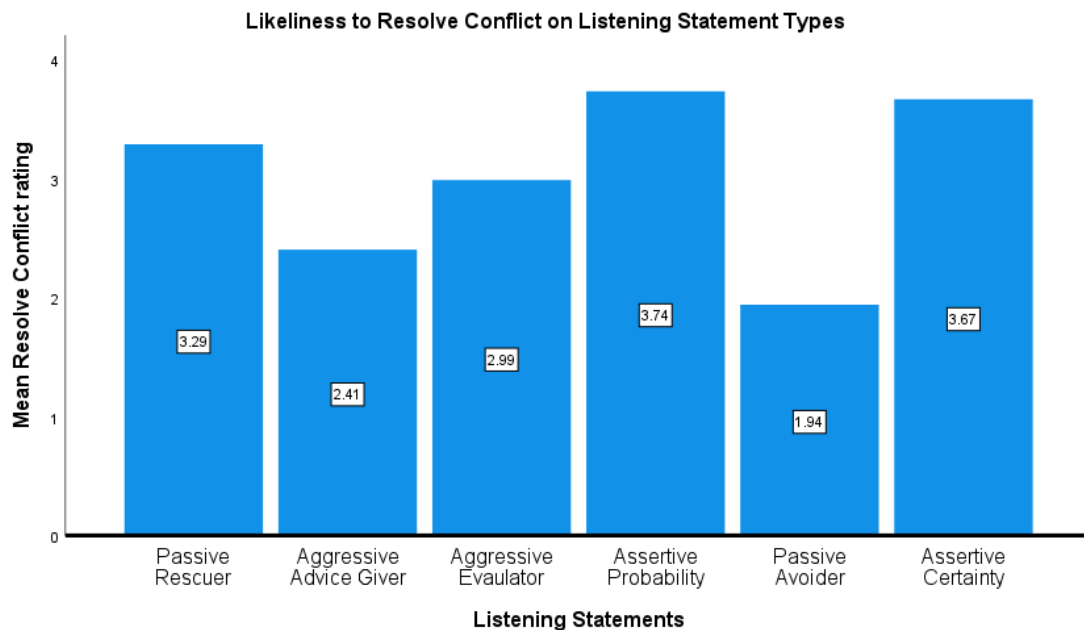
to sharing was significantly higher at aggressive evaluator (M = 2.99, SD = 1.07) than aggressive advice giver (M = 2.56, SD = 1.18), p < .001. Participants' perceived *feeling open to sharing* was significantly higher at assertive probability (M = 3.68, SD = 0.98) than aggressive evaluator (M = 2.99, SD = 1.07), p < .001. Participants' perceived *open to sharing* was significantly higher at assertive probability (M = 3.68, SD = 0.98) than the passive avoider (M = 2.15, SD = 1.13), p < .001 (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Perceived Open to Sharing Comparing the Six Listening Responses*

Open to Sharing on Listening Statement Types
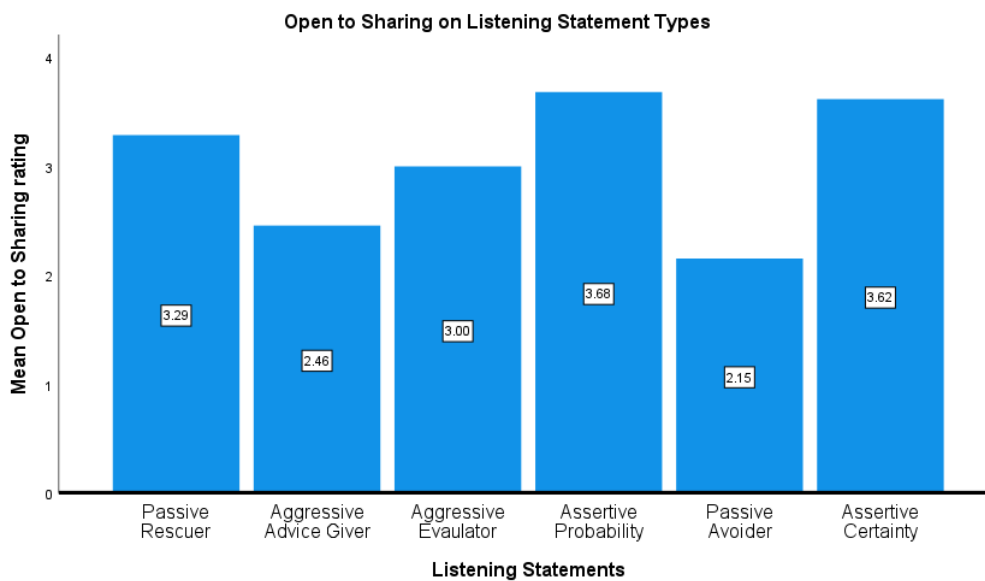
Resolve Conflict

A significant main effect for *listening statement type* occurred on likely to resolve conflict, F (5, 4695) = 541.76, p = <.001, η² = .366. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that participants' perceived *feeling likely to resolve the conflict* was significantly higher at passive rescuer (M = 3.28, SD = 1.08) than aggressive advice giver (M = 2.39, SD = 1.12), p < .001. Participants' perceived *feeling likely to resolve the conflict* was significantly higher at aggressive evaluator (M = 2.99, SD = 1.06) than aggressive advice giver (M = 2.39, SD = 1.12), p < .001. Participants' perceived *feeling likely to resolve the conflict* was significantly higher at assertive probability (M = 3.73, SD = 0.98) than aggressive evaluator (M = 2.99, SD = 1.06), p < .001. Participants' perceived *feeling likely to resolve the conflict* was significantly higher at assertive probability (M = 3.73, SD = 0.98) than passive avoider (M = 1.92, SD = 1.11), p < .001 (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Perceived Likelihood to Resolve Conflict Comparing the Six Listening Responses*

Likeliness to Resolve Conflict on Listening Statement Types

Relationship Satisfaction

A significant main effect for *listening statement type* occurred on perceived relationship satisfaction, $F (5, 4695) = 491.57$, $p = <.001$, $\eta^2 = .344$. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that participants' perceived *relationship satisfaction* was significantly higher at passive rescuer (M = 3.08, SD = 1.15) than aggressive advice giver (M = 2.17, SD = 1.14), $p < .001$. Participants' perceived feeling of *relationship satisfaction* was significantly higher at aggressive evaluator (M = 2.81, SD = 1.13) than aggressive advice giver (M = 2.18, SD = 1.14), $p < .001$. Participants' perceived *relationship satisfaction* was significantly higher at assertive probability (M = 3.67, SD = 1.03) than aggressive evaluator (M = 2.81, SD = 1.13), $p < .001$. Participants' perceived *relationship satisfaction* was significantly higher at assertive probability (M = 3.67, SD = 1.03) than passive rescuer (M = 1.92, SD = 1.12), $p < .001$ (see Figure 5).

Qualitative Findings

The researchers utilized Braun and Clarke's (2023) qualitative thematic analysis to answer RQ2, which inquired about which listening responses will be seen as passive, aggressive, or assertive. This method includes six phases that guide researchers through the data analysis process. First, researchers familiarize themselves with the textual data by noting initial ideas. Then, as they read through the participant responses, they create initial codes. Next, researchers generate themes by connecting similar codes. After reviewing and naming the themes and subthemes, researchers finish the data analysis by selecting the final extracts and writing their findings (Braun & Clark, 2023). By describing and identifying trends and patterns in the data, researchers can extract insights that might otherwise be overlooked (Taylor et al., 2016). Specifically, the researchers were exploring what statements would most likely be seen as passive, aggressive, or assertive and why (see Figure 6).

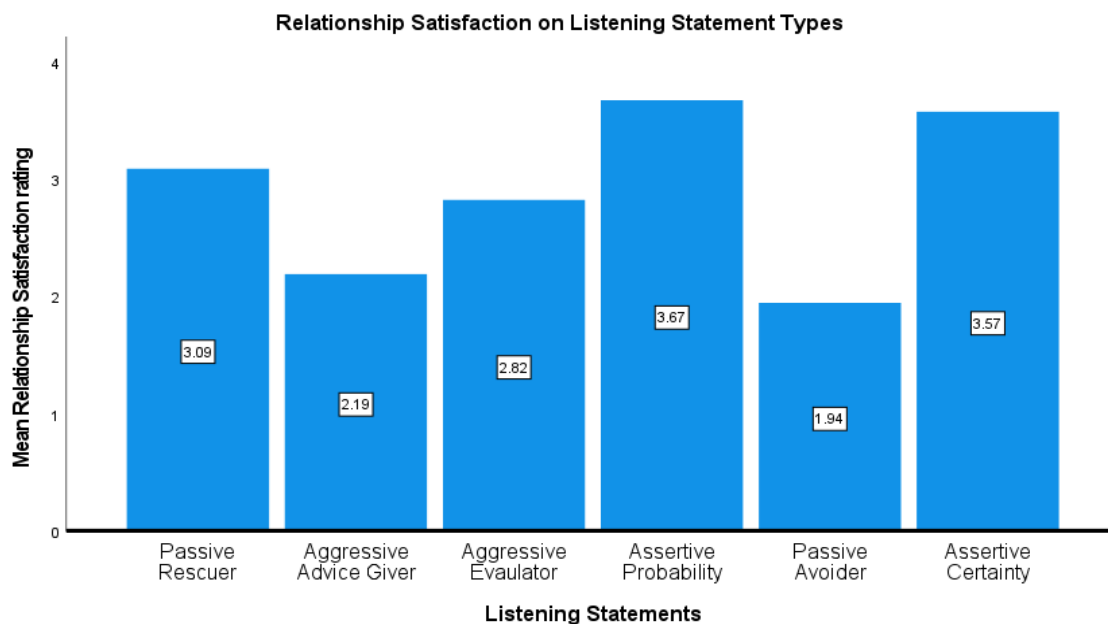**Figure 5.** *Perceived Relationship Satisfaction Comparing the Six Listening Responses*

Relationship Satisfaction on Listening Statement Types

Figure 6. *Listening Responses*

Passive Listening Response	Aggressive Listening Response	Assertive Listening Response

• **Passive Avoidance in Conflict**
  • Indirect Passive Communication
  • Avoiding Conversations
  • Disregarding Listening to Concerns
  • Dismissing Conflict Issues
• **Escalation of Conflict and Emotional Tensions in Relationships**
  • Escalating Conflict and Relationship Tensions
  • Intensifying Anger and Aggression
  • Degradation of Others
  • Lack of Validation of Feelings and Thoughts
• **Lack of Mutual Conflict Resolution**
  • Unwillingness to Collaborate and Work Together
  • Failure to Reach Conflict Resolution
	• **Communicating with Aggression**
	  • Provoke More Anger and Escalate the Conflict
	  • Disrespectful
	  • Combative and Hostile
	  • Evaluative
	• **Dark Personality Traits**
	  • Narcissism
	  • Machiavellianism
	• **Unwilling to Listen**
	• **Display Ignorance**
	• **Conflict Resolution Issues**
	  • Difficulty in Resolving Conflicts
	  • Closed Conflict Communication
	  • Lack of Collaboration
		• **Assertiveness in Communication**
		  • Expressive and Direct Communication
		  • Open Communication and Feedback
		  • Sharing Thoughts and Feelings about the Problem
		• **Owning Up to Problematic Behaviors**
		  • Accountability and Personal Responsibility
		  • Self-awareness of Problematic Behavior Leading to Conflict
		  • Apologetic for Wrongful Treatment
		• **Emotional Validation While Active Listening**
		  • Acknowledgement and Validation of Feelings
		  • Feeling Listened to and Understood
		  • Understanding of Anger and Frustration
		• **Responding with Socio-Emotional Skills**
		  • Empathic and Compassionate
		  • Caring and Kind
		  • Respectful
		  • Non-confrontational
		  • Relatable
		• **Willingness to Resolve the Conflict**

Themes and Codes from the Qualitative Analysis of RQ2

Table 4. *Passive Listening Response*

Themes	Sub-Themes	Example Quotes
Passive avoidance in conflict	Indirect passive communication	*"It is not okay to leave people in the dark and not be straight up with what needs to be addressed."* *"It was the statement that seemed the most passive to me."*
	Avoiding conversations	*"They ignore[d] the entire conversation as a whole."* *"They want the conversation to go away."*
	Disregarding listening to concerns	*"I do not feel understood at all or if the person even listened to my concerns."* *"Refuse to listen and instead want to redirect my attention."*
	Dismissing conflict issues	*"It completely neglects to resolve the conflict rather, pushing it off to do something else without addressing it."* *"They completely ignore the problem and try to set a distraction."*
Escalation of conflict and emotional tensions in relationships	Escalating conflict and relationship tensions	*"They are making the situation worse by doing things not related to the project."* *"They did not seem interested in repairing the relationship."*
	Intensifying anger and aggression	*"It would greatly piss me off, because it sounds like a very smug statement."* *"It was the most unreasonable and aggressive response, which also makes people respond aggressively."*
	Degradation of others	*"If I feel that I did most of the work for the project, that statement feels very degrading and invalidating."* *"I think changing the subject is rude and inconsiderate, especially when there is a problem needing to be addressed."*
	Lack of validation of feelings and thoughts	*"I felt as if they are invalidating my feelings and ignoring what I have to say."*

| Lack of mutual conflict resolution | Unwillingness to collaborate and work together | *"They completely move past why I am upset and want to do what they want to do instead."* *"They don't want to work on the group project and don't take it seriously, and finishing the group project would be the main goal for me."* |
| | Failure to reach conflict resolution | *"They don't seem like they are willing to work."* *"Likely that the person does not wish to solve the conflict."* *"This statement takes us nowhere, and I see no way to reconcile after it."* |

Aggressive Listening Response

Themes	Sub-Themes	Example Quotes
Communicating with aggression	Provoke more anger and escalate the conflict	*"This will only anger me more, as I will want to believe that I do not need this person who I am angry at's help."* *"By acting like they did nothing wrong would make me angrier in this situation."*
	Disrespectful	*"It seems like an insult, like as if they are saying that I need to depend on them."* *"They seemed very disrespectful."*
	Combative and hostile	*"It seemed like the statement most likely to start a fight."* *"I feel that this was more of an attack."*
	Evaluative	*"I don't need someone telling me I am wrong just right away unless they are truly willing to help me."* *"Very judgmental."*
Dark Personality Traits	Narcissism (Self-centered)	*"This response shows that the person is conceited."* *"This just sounds so self-centered."*
	Narcissism (Arrogant)	*"Came off as very arrogant and rubbed me the wrong way."* *"It is a very cocky statement."*
	Narcissism (Condescending)	*"Having someone talk to me like that feels condescending."* *"My classmate is being very condescending."*
	Narcissism (Avoiding blame)	*"They do not take blame for their actions."* *"It deflects blame."*

	Machiavellianism (Manipulation)	*"It sounds a little manipulating."* *"The classmate has their own perception of my feelings and is imposing them onto me."*
	Machiavellianism (Indifference)	*"Indifferent of my feelings and the problem."* *"It completely disregards the entire situation."*
	Machiavellianism (Dismissive)	*"Feels incredibly dismissive."* *"It comes across as dismissive."*
	Machiavellianism (Lacking empathy and caring)	*"It makes me feel like they could care less."* *"They don't care about the way they've treated you."*
Unwilling to Listen		*"I did not feel heard, I felt pushed to the side."* *"Shows a lack of willingness to listen."*
Display ignorance		*"Ignorant tone related to this statement."* *"They sound ignorant."*
Conflict resolution issues	Difficulty in resolving conflicts	*"It allows the situation to be more dramatic and overstimulates everyone involved. It makes it more difficult to reach a solution."* *"Our conflict is not likely to be resolved at all."*
	Closed conflict communication	*"Their response overall left me feeling less likely to continue the conversation and mend the conflict."* *"I believe that they are distracted and going on a tangent, which shows they are not open to having a mature conversation about their lack of consideration, which will not resolve any conflicts."*
	Lack of collaboration	*"It feels like they don't want to work together."* *"The person has already not been helpful with the project."*

Assertive Listening Response

Themes	Sub-Themes	Example Quotes
Assertiveness in communication	Expressive and direct communication	*"The most direct, and it is clear and concise communication in regards to conflict."*

	Open communication and feedback	*"My partner is being entirely upfront with me and gets to the point. It is the most assertive and brings both of our feelings to the table."* *"It gives the most open communication that doesn't attack me as the person being spoken to."* *"Opens up the conversation rather than being defensive."*
	Sharing thoughts and feelings about the problem	*"I could explain to the person that I'm angry because they will not do their work or participate in a group setting to successfully get the task done."* *"It is sharing their thoughts; I would also feel that they are inviting me to share my thoughts in a quite polite way."*
Owning up to problematic behaviors	Accountability and personal responsibility	*"The person recognizes what they have done wrong and is taking responsibility for it."* *"It demonstrates accountability of their behaviors and actions."*
	Self-awareness of problematic behavior	*"Cognizant of the fact that their actions are the cause of the anger. [This] means that they will probably be more open to the idea of listening to the problem and taking steps to fix it."* *"Shows that they are aware of their actions and their words and know I'm upset."*
	Apologetic for wrongful treatment	*"They acknowledge that they treated me wrong."* *"It offers some semblance of an apology for their actions and at least attempts to get to the root of the problem."*
Emotional validation while active listening	Acknowledgement and validation of feelings	*"I personally would like to be acknowledged for my feelings and know that they know why I am upset."* *"This statement makes your feelings and thoughts feel valid and heard."*
	Feeling listened to and understood	*"It is reassuring, and I feel heard and understood."* *"I feel listened to and that my response would matter."*
	Understanding of anger and frustration	*"They understand why I am angry with them."*

		"The person is making an effort to understand my anger."
Responding with socio-emotional skills	Empathic and compassionate	*"Makes me the most likely to empathize with them."* *"Showing compassion."*
	Caring and kind	*"It shows that they care about what I have to say."* *"It is the kindest statement out of all of them."*
	Respectful	*"Directly addresses the main concern in a respectful manner."* *"Most likely to earn some respect from me."*
	Non-confrontational	*"It's non-confrontational."* *"This statement allows for less confrontation. It opens a window to dive into the possibilities of what is making me feel that way."*
	Relatable	*"It related the most with me."* *"It's a response I can see myself giving."*
Willingness to resolve the conflict		*"It addresses the conflict and could lead to a faster way to resolve it."* *"They seem more likely to work things out and settle the conflict by coming to an agreement or doing their work."*

Findings from the qualitative data analysis indicate what listening responses were perceived to be the most passive, aggressive, or assertive (See Table 4). The listening statement, "I think I understand why you are angry with me. Let's watch the basketball game," was seen as the most passive in comparison to other listening statements, which was supported by 5 macro-level themes. When considering aggressiveness, the listening statement, "I think I understand why you are angry with me. You know you need my help" was perceived as the most aggressive in comparison to other listening statements with 5 macro-level codes. Further, the listening statement, "I think I understand why you are angry with me. My thought is that you are angry with me by the way I've treated you," was viewed to be the most assertive in comparison to other listening statements based on 5 macro-level codes.

In further examining the macro-codes, comparisons were made to better understand the listening statements. In examining the *listening reactions* of the different statements, passive listening responses yielded passive avoidance in conflict reactions such as using indirect passive communication, avoiding conversations, and disregarding listening to others' concerns, which make individuals feel unheard. Similarly, with an aggressive listening response, individuals were unwilling to listen during conflicts. Yet, with the assertive listening response, individuals felt validated while listening, from the validation of their feelings and for feeling listened to and understood regarding their anger and frustration.

In examining *emotional reactions* across listening statements, the assertive listening response enabled individuals to respond with socio-emotional skills such as being empathic and

compassionate, caring and kind, respectful, non-confrontational, and relatable. However, the passive listening response escalated emotional tensions in relationships by intensifying anger and aggression and the desire to degrade the responder. The aggressive listening response provoked the most anger and was perceived to be disrespectful, combative and hostile, and evaluative.

Passive and aggressive listening responses also yielded significant *conflict resolution problems*. Passive listening responses were linked with being unwilling to collaborate and work together and a failure to reconcile the problem. Further, aggressive listening responses were based on difficulty in conflict resolution, closed conflict communication and a lack of collaboration. However, assertive listening responses enabled participants to become willing to resolve conflict.

Discussion

This study examined how assertive, passive, and aggressive listening responses affect relational outcomes, including levels of anger, being ignored, wanting to share feelings, desire for conflict resolution, and relationship satisfaction. It also examined the differences between the six categories of listening responses in conflict resolution. Finally, this study investigated how these listening responses would be perceived using communication styles such as passive, aggressive, and assertive. To date, this is the first study to test listening responses empirically in interpersonal relationships using Winer's RTC framework (Dunbar et al., 2022; Winer, 2024) and the first to operationalize the concept of assertive listening and to empirically test six listening-response statements as passive, assertive, and aggressive.

The findings indicate that assertive listening statements, the Assertive Probability and Assertive Certainty categories, in comparison with passive and aggressive listening, were more effective at reducing anger, decreasing feelings of being ignored, increasing levels of openness to share, increasing the likelihood of resolving conflict, and increasing satisfaction with the relationship. These findings contribute to past research that has found that assertiveness can help to reduce anger (Deffenbacher et al., 1994; Wardany et al., 2022) and can enable the expression of personal needs (Erbay & Akcay, 2013).

Aside from further confirming prior findings that assertive communication has positive relational effects, this study provides evidence that this applies also to listening response statements, and it establishes what 'word structures' constitutes such language. More specifically, the language of the assertive probability listening statement (i.e., 'my thought is that you are angry with me for the way I've treated you') was the most effective across our findings. From the results of this study, one can also conclude that the passive and aggressive listening statements, such as the Avoider, Advice Giver, and Evaluator listening statements, were more likely to trigger feelings of being ignored than other statements.

The Avoider, Advice Giver, and Evaluator listening statements were also more likely to increase anger in comparison to other statements. These listening statements relate to past work on avoidance, evaluating, and advice-giving, which are known to induce anger during conflicts (Du et al., 2023; Hample & Hample, 2019). With these statements, individuals are not directly addressing the conflict, which explains why other individuals' anger is increased.

Similarly, results indicated that the Avoider, Advice Giver, and Evaluator listening statements reduced sharing in conflict situations, which could affect resolution. When refusing to share or avoiding conflict entirely, others may withdraw from the interaction (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). In other words, it is important to balance sharing feelings and advice when reconciliation is the goal.

Overall, these findings consistently showed that assertive listening is the best approach for resolving conflict. When examining the assertive listening categories, assertive probability was more effective at conflict resolution than assertive certainty due to the language structure (i.e., *my thought is* vs. *I know*). This finding is consistent to prior assertiveness research (Winer, 2024; Ishi & Kanda, 2019; Rimland, 1982; Scherer, 1986). In contrast, the Avoider, Advice Giver, and Evaluator listening statements were the least likely to resolve conflict. A reason for this is that genuine communication becomes difficult to achieve when using these statements because others are likely to react negatively.

Assertive probability listening was also more likely to improve the relationship during conflict than the other five statements. Our finding contributes to past work that has found that assertive communication improves relationship satisfaction in relationships (Moss et al., 2021; Kuhn et al., 2018). In contrast, the findings indicated that the Passive Avoider, Aggressive Advice Giver, and Aggressive Evaluator were likely to worsen the relationship. This may be due to the fact that individuals who engage in avoidance patterns might also have attachment avoidance, which often decreases relationship satisfaction (Flicker et al., 2021).

Our findings can also be applied using Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which is theoretical framework that enhances interpersonal relationship outcomes during conflict interactions (Giles, 1973; Gallois et al., 2005). From this theoretical perspective, listening statements can be understood based on three strategies: convergence, divergence, and maintenance. For example, I-You-Me statements (assertive listening) statements represent convergence, or an alignment with one's partner through assertive expression and empathic responses. On the other hand, You or Why (the advice-giver and the evaluator) aggressive listening statements represent divergence because these pronouns lead to blame and emotional distancing. The avoider and rescuer (passive listening) reflect maintenance or the status quo through avoiding and restraining emotionally during the interaction. The CAT perspective enables the understanding of the tone and pronoun symmetry of interactions through accommodation techniques. Thus, the present study's findings are strengthened through the lens of CAT in analyzing how student populations accommodate others using pronoun listening language to fulfill effective conflict and relational outcomes.

Implications and Applications

Winer and colleagues' existing research on RCT dissects communication in conflict into specific components, such as verbal communication (Winer et al., 2024) and nonverbal communication (Winer et al., 2023), offering a structured approach to understanding each element. By conducting an empirical study on listening responses in conflict, this research has important theoretical implications; it further develops RCT and also modernizes the communication style categories of Satir (1972, 1988), reinforcing their relevance in contemporary settings. When integrated with the existing research on RCT, the findings of this study may help individuals address communication issues in conflict by identifying and addressing each component of the interaction.

Along with theoretical implications, this study has meaningful practical implications in various settings, such as in personal relationships, classrooms, therapeutic offices, and businesses. In communication classrooms, teachers focus on active listening and empathy when teaching listening (Gable, 2007). Similarly, these skills are often emphasized in personal relationships, therapeutic and business settings. Yet, the results of this study reveal that there may be benefits to

teaching assertive listening skills to improve relationships and de-escalate conflicts. This discovery could enhance our understanding and teaching of conflict resolution, offering a unique and impactful perspective.

This study not only highlights the implications of teaching and learning assertive listening skills but also offers practical applications. For instance, the results show the impact of various word structures on relational outcomes. As such, scholars and practitioners could utilize these phrases as a model for creating guides with user-friendly, easy-to-comprehend, and easy-to-use phrases to reduce conflict. Additionally, since this study clearly details the verbal structure of each listening-response skill (i.e., assertive probability and assertive certainty), individuals could design role-plays and case studies to practice these skills in different environments. Then, as individuals practice assertive listening, they might have improved confidence in practicing these skills in real-life conflict scenarios (see Appendix).

Limitations

While this study offers value and significance to the field of conflict management and resolution, it is important to address its limitations. First, listening statements were presented in the exact same order for all participants. When using a within-subjects design, it is vital to counterbalance stimuli to rid the possibility of order effects. It is plausible that by presenting the same order of listening statements to our participants, they could 'practice' or become better at answering these statements. Second, carryover effects are possible as participants' answers to statements one and two could influence how they answer statements five or six. As a result, the researchers acknowledge that order effects can lead to potential confounding variables, ultimately biasing results. However, while order effects can present problems in the generalizability of research, the data did not show a pattern that would suggest order effects, since the different listening statement types still elicited such varying results amongst our dependent measures. Despite presenting the stimuli in a fixed order to all participants, our results support that the observed outcomes on dependent measures (anger, feeling ignored, openness to sharing, resolving conflict, relationship satisfaction) were driven by the inherent characteristics of the listening statements rather than order effects. First, this conclusion is substantiated by empirical evidence from the MANOVA table (see Table 3) showing significant differences across the statements. Second, Brooks (2012) recommends visual inspection to detect for order effects, and Figures 1 through 5 of the present study consistently reveal equivalence across conditions with no systematic trends or decline in participant responses. In Figure 2, for example, the Passive Avoider statement, presented fifth to participants, elicited the highest ignored ratings, consistent with our theoretical predictions. These patterns are also observed across all five figures, further confirming the absence of order effects and supports the empirical strength of the findings (David & Johnson, 1956). Third, since the students self-reported how they might feel in a conflict scenario, researchers could not corroborate their responses. Fourth, the convenience sampling technique was chosen as researchers had access to students at the institutions where they worked, which might limit the generalizability of the findings. Fifth, in the survey, students were asked to imagine a conflict within a classroom context. Although this is a common activity within classrooms, it is possible that student participants had not previously experienced this type of conflict. Sixth, the hypothetical scenario asked all participants to imagine the same scene to enable them to focus on the language rather than imagined nonverbal cues; however, this can pose an unforeseen bias in some participants. Seventh, this study did not include an active listening condition in the study because

the focus was to conduct an exploratory study on assertive listening in relation to other listening archetypes; however, adding this condition in future research can be beneficial in understanding any statistical differences between active listening and assertive listening statements. Finally, it should be noted that participants were US university students, and cross-cultural differences likely exist concerning what constitutes passive, aggressive, or assertive communication, and the effects of each (Singhal & Nagao, 2009).

Conclusion

This study addresses the gap between conflict research and practice by attempting to identify clear and effective listening statements and specific verbal parameters that can be taught to manage conflict in various contexts of interpersonal relationships. Individuals can benefit from using the results to identify passive and aggressive listening statements as well as develop best practices for using the assertive listening statements, such as by voicing assertive probability, to decrease anger and increase feelings of being listened to and being open to sharing, commitment to resolving conflict, and satisfaction in relationships. Moreover, it supports the notion that adjusting verbal statements can go a long way in resolving conflict peacefully because making clear messages may reduce defensive reactions, which may benefit individuals, couples, practitioners, trainers, and professionals in reconciling interpersonal differences.

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Appendix

Illustrating the statements and potential responses

You are listening to someone you care about who is sharing their anger with you. You have three different response style choices. In this situation, you need to assess how each listening response will affect the sender and their perception of your response. Which would you choose?

Passive Listening Responses

Passive Avoider: "You think you have a problem? What about my problem?"
Passive Rescuer: "Don't worry, everything will be okay."

How might these responses affect the sender?
- This person will often become angrier.
- They might feel ignored.
- They might be resistant to sharing their feelings.
- They will be unlikely to want to resolve the conflict.
- They often see the relationship as less satisfying.

How might the sender perceive this response?
- You might be seen as avoiding, ignoring conflict interactions, and dismissing issues.
- You produce emotional tensions in the relationship, tending to intensify anger.
- You may be perceived as unwilling to collaborate and work together.

Aggressive Listening Responses

Aggressive Advice Giver: "You need to stop being so angry."
Aggressive Evaluator: "You're just over-sensitive."

How might these responses affect the sender?
- This person will often become angrier.
- They will likely feel ignored.
- They will not want to share their feelings.
- They will be unlikely to want to resolve conflict.
- They will see the relationship as less satisfying.

How might the sender perceive this response?
- Provoking more anger and escalating the conflict.
- People might also view you as self-centered, arrogant, condescending, avoiding blame, manipulating, indifferent, lacking empathy, and indifferent.
- Some might see you as unwilling to listen, having difficulty resolving conflict, lacking in collaboration, and unable to work with others during conflict interactions.

Assertive Listening Responses

Assertive Certainty: "I know you are angry with me, and you want me to listen to you."
Assertive Probability: "My thought is you're feeling angry with me, and you want me to listen to you."

How might these responses affect the sender?
- You may move this person from passive or aggressive to assertive.
- This person's anger will lower.
- They more often feel listened to.
- They may be willing to express vulnerability about how they feel.
- They may be more likely to resolve conflict and see the relationship as satisfying.

How might the sender perceive this response?
- You are direct in expressing your thoughts and feelings about the problem.
- You are accountable and personally responsible, self-aware of problematic behavior leading to conflict, and apologetic for wrongful treatment.
- You acknowledge the sender and validate their feelings, enable the mutual expression of feelings, show empathy, caring, kindness, and respect, and are non-confrontational and relatable.