



Against the World: Joel's External Conflict in *The Last of Us Season 1*

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Abstract

This research explores the types of external conflicts and conflict management strategies used by the main character, Joel, in *The Last of Us Season 1*. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the research analyzes all nine episodes by observing, identifying, and classifying Joel's external conflicts based on Kenney (1966) theory man vs. man, man vs. nature, and man vs. society. It also applies the conflict management strategies from Thomas & Kilmann (2012): competing, avoiding, collaborating, accommodating, and compromising. The findings reveal 17 external conflicts, with man vs. man and man vs. nature each accounting for 35%, and man vs. society 30%. In responding to these conflicts, Joel mostly uses the competing strategy (53%) and avoiding strategy (47%). Competing is seen when he takes direct, forceful action, while avoiding appears in situations that are emotionally overwhelming or where he lacks control. This research is significant for media and literary studies because it shows how conflict in a post-apocalyptic narrative shapes character development and reflects human survival instincts. By focusing on one character across a full season, the research offers a detailed look at how external pressures influence behavior and decision-making in extreme conditions. However, the scope is limited to Joel and does not cover internal conflict or perspectives from other characters. Future studies are encouraged to explore more characters, compare seasons, or examine similar themes in different genres to gain broader insights.

Keywords: Conflict, External Conflict, Management Strategies, Character Analysis, Series.

Introduction

Conflict refers to a disagreement that arises from differences in needs, values, or opinions between individuals or groups, and it can be either real or perceived. According to Robbins (2024), conflict begins when someone feels that another person has harmed or will harm something they care about. In literature, conflict

is a central narrative element that drives the plot forward and shapes character development. Kenney (1966) categorizes conflict into two main types: internal conflict, which occurs within a character's mind, and external conflict, which involves outside forces such as people, society, or nature.

However, conflict does not appear randomly in a story. It is often triggered by clashing interests, value systems, societal pressure, environmental threats, or difficult moral choices. As Freytag (1863) emphasized, "A drama without struggle is unthinkable," indicating that conflict builds tension and narrative movement. This idea is echoed by Egri (1946), who stressed the importance of uncovering the underlying causes behind a character's actions. Conflict can reveal a character's beliefs, background, and emotional depth.

The theory of conflict management by Thomas and Kilmann (2012) is relevant in this context. It outlines five strategies: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. These approaches are based on varying levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness in managing disputes. The theory helps explain how individuals respond differently to pressure, especially under extreme or stressful conditions. Conflict, after all, is not limited to fiction. It also exists in real-life settings such as families, schools, workplaces, and society, often due to clashing goals or unmet needs (Wahyudi, 2021).

In entertainment media, especially films and TV series, conflict is often used to depict human behavior and relationships. Ellis (2000) explains that while films present conflicts in a compact form due to time limits, TV series develop conflicts gradually. This allows deeper exploration of interpersonal dynamics and character change. Series provide space for more complex, layered narratives that unfold over time, often highlighting recurring or escalating conflicts.

Several previous studies have examined how characters handle external conflict in films. For instance, Maku et al. (2022), Yanti and Skolastika (2024), and Putra et al. (2022) analyzed conflict types using Kenney's theory, but focused only on movies with simplified timelines and resolutions. These studies generally discussed strategies like compromise or avoidance. However, none examined conflict in an episodic, survival-based series format.

This research addresses that gap by analyzing *The Last of Us* Season 1, a post-apocalyptic TV series in which the protagonist, Joel, faces constant external threats. A post-apocalyptic setting refers to a fictional world that exists after a large-scale societal collapse, often caused by war, plague, or disaster. In such environments, survival is a daily struggle. Characters are frequently pushed into moral dilemmas, physical danger, and extreme decision-making. Conflict becomes not just common but essential to their development.

Unlike previous studies, this research not only examines the types of external conflict Joel experiences such as man versus man, man versus nature, and man versus society but also applies the Thomas and Kilmann (2012) model to identify how Joel manages these conflicts across all nine episodes. This approach offers a

more nuanced understanding of conflict in serial storytelling and highlights how survival instincts shape a character's responses under pressure.

The research is guided by two main questions: (1) How are external conflicts portrayed through Joel's character? and (2) What conflict management strategies does he use to respond? These questions aim to reveal how individuals adapt, survive, and evolve in unstable, high-risk environments.

Method

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design to analyze the types of external conflict experienced by the main character, Joel, in all nine episodes of *The Last of Us* Season 1. The focus lies on dialogues spoken by Joel that contain elements of external conflict, specifically human-versus-human, human-versus-nature, and human-versus-society.

Data were collected through observational methods by watching *The Last of Us* on the LK21 streaming platform. This platform was selected due to limited availability of the series on official platforms such as Netflix, Viu, or Loklok. While LK21 provides full access to all episodes, it comes with certain limitations such as frequent advertisements and the possibility of inaccurate subtitles, which were taken into account during the verification process.

The criteria for selecting data involved identifying utterances in which Joel is directly engaged in a conflict with another character, nature, or society. Dialogues were categorized as external conflict if they showed signs of disagreement, resistance, tension, or confrontation beyond Joel's internal emotions. For instance, a scene in which Joel argues with Ellie over their next course of action, or one where he physically defends himself from raiders, was considered to involve human-versus-human conflict.

To ensure data reliability, each identified instance of external conflict was analyzed twice by the primary researcher. Additionally, a second researcher independently reviewed all conflict classifications and corresponding management strategies. The final results presented in this research represent the agreement between both researchers after a joint revision process. Verifying relevant utterances was carried out by comparing each dialogue with the episode's subtitle file to ensure consistency and accuracy in transcription. While no official script was available, the use of subtitle files served as the primary reference for textual accuracy.

In analyzing the data, the research employed Kenney's (1966) theory of conflict, which categorizes external conflict into three types: human-versus-human, human-versus-nature, and human-versus-society. To examine how Joel responds to these conflicts, the conflict management strategy model by Thomas and Kilmann (2012) was applied, which includes five response styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating.

Data analysis was conducted using both formal and informal methods

Sudaryanto, (1993). The formal method includes tables and diagrams to show the distribution and percentages of each type of conflict and management strategy. The informal method involves descriptive explanations and interpretations of the patterns observed in Joel's dialogues.

Finally, this research acknowledges the inherent subjectivity in identifying and interpreting conflict in fictional narratives. Although efforts were made to ensure reliability and consistency, personal judgment in classifying and analyzing scenes remains a methodological limitation.

Results and Discussion

Based on the data shown in the table, the most common types of conflict in *The Last of Us Season 1* are Man vs. Man and Man vs. Nature, each appearing 6 times (35%). This shows that many conflicts in the story involve the main character either fighting against other people or struggling with natural forces, such as the Cordyceps outbreak. Meanwhile, Man vs. Society conflicts appear a bit less, with 5 instances (30%), showing resistance against rules or control from the system. Overall, the data suggests that personal and environmental challenges are the most dominant, but fighting against society is also an important part of the main character's journey.

Table 1. Types of External Conflict in *The Last of Us Season 1*

No	Types of External Conflict	Frequency	Percentage
1	Man VS Man	6	35%
2	Man VS Society	5	30%
3	Man VS Nature	6	35%
Total		17	100%

Based on Table 1, it shows that man against society and man against nature are the most dominant types of conflict. The man against man conflict occurred 6 times, the man against society conflict occurred 5 times, and the man against nature conflict occurred 6 times. The total number of conflicts recorded was 17 occurrences.

Table 2. Conflict Management Strategies in *The Last of Us Season 1*

No	Types of Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
1	Avoiding	8	47%
2	Competing	9	53%
Total		17	100%

Based on the information presented in the table, the conflict resolution strategy most commonly applied is competing, appearing 9 times or 53% of the total cases. This suggests that the majority of respondents prefer to handle conflicts head-on and are focused on achieving victory in disagreements. The avoiding strategy comes in second, with 8 occurrences or 47%, indicating that a significant portion of respondents tend to steer clear of conflict or delay addressing it rather than confronting it directly. Interestingly, the strategies of collaborating, accommodating, and compromising were not utilized at all, each showing a frequency of zero (0%). This pattern reveals that respondents generally do not emphasize cooperative problem-solving, yielding, or seeking balanced solutions. Instead, they are more inclined to adopt assertive approaches or choose to disengage from the conflict entirely.

Discussion

Data 1 (Man Vs Society)

(Joel's daughter Passed Away. Eps. 1, 34:00-35:00)

Soldier : Don't move
Joel : My daughter's hurt her ankle
Soldier : Stop right there!
Joel : Okay easy down, we're not sick
Soldier : Yes sir. Yes sir, I'm sorry!
Joel : We're not sick?! We're not sick!!

This scene happens in the first episode of *The Last of Us*, during a very emotional moment when Joel's daughter, Sarah, dies. It takes place in the middle of the chaos as the Cordyceps outbreak begins. Joel, his daughter Sarah, and his brother Tommy are trying to escape the city. As they search for safety, a FEDRA soldier receives a radio command to shoot them even though they are not infected and are not fighting back. This moment clearly shows an external conflict of **Man vs. Society**. Joel is not facing a personal enemy, but a soldier who follows orders without thinking about the people he is harming. It shows how unfair systems and strict rules can take away someone's power and freedom during a crisis.

In this situation, Joel does not resolve the conflict. Instead, his brother Tommy shoots the soldier after Sarah is already badly hurt. Joel does not fight back because he is frozen by sadness and shock. According to Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) conflict management theory, Joel uses the **avoiding** strategy. He realizes that resisting won't change anything, especially because the soldier is just doing his job. Joel stays passive because of his emotional pain, while Tommy, who is not as emotionally overwhelmed, takes action. This shows that sometimes power in

a conflict comes not from status or strength, but from someone's ability to stay calm and respond quickly in a tough situation.

Data 2 (Man Vs Man)

(Joel Vs Marlene. Eps 9, 33:00-35:00)

Marlene : No matter how hard you try, no matter how many people you kill, she's gonna grow up, Joel. And then you'll die, or she'll leave. Then what? How long till she's torn apart by Infected or murdered by raiders? Because she lives in a broken world that you could have saved

Joel : Maybe. But it isn't for you to decide

Marlene : Or you. So what would she decide, huh? 'Cause I think she'd want to do what's right

The second major conflict happens between Joel and the Fireflies, and it is a clear example of **Man vs. Man** conflict. This conflict involves two different sides with opposite goals. The Fireflies want to save the world by using Ellie to make a vaccine for the Cordyceps infection, even though it means sacrificing her life. On the other hand, Joel sees Ellie not just as a possible cure, but as someone he loves deeply almost like a daughter. Because of this, the conflict becomes emotional and morally difficult. Joel must choose between what is best for everyone and what he feels is right for someone he personally cares about.

In this situation, Joel decides to solve the conflict by taking full control of the situation. He uses a **competing** conflict management strategy, based on Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) theory, where someone fights for their own choice without trying to compromise. Joel fights the fireflies, kills those who stop him, and saves Ellie without telling her the truth. His decision is guided by love and a strong feeling to protect her, even if it means going against the bigger goal of saving humanity. Joel is able to act this way because he has the power to do so he is armed, experienced, and emotionally driven. His role as Ellie's protector gives him the strength and authority to end the conflict the way he chooses, showing how personal values and emotions can overpower collective needs.

Data 3 (Man Vs Nature)

(Uncontrolled Infection. Eps 2, 30:00-40:00)

Joel : Why didn't we pass by this strange place yesterday!?

The third conflict happens when Joel, Ellie, and Tess go through a museum that is full of infected people called Clickers. These creatures are humans who have been completely taken over by the Cordyceps fungus, and they act in dangerous and unpredictable ways. This scene shows an external conflict between **Man vs. Nature**, where Joel has to deal with a part of nature that has changed into something deadly and hard to control. The Cordyceps fungus has grown into a serious threat that uses human bodies to spread and destroy life. Joel is not facing normal people, but dangerous creatures that cannot be talked to or reasoned with. This kind of conflict comes from the environment itself, where staying alive depends on staying quiet, moving carefully, and understanding the strange behavior of the infected.

In this situation, Joel uses a **competing** conflict management strategy, based on the theory of Thomas and Kilmann (1974). This means he makes fast and firm decisions that focus on survival, without discussing or asking others. In the museum scene, Joel quickly shoots the Clickers and tells Tess and Ellie what to do to keep everyone safe. His actions show that he knows what to do in a dangerous situation and takes the lead to protect the group. Joel becomes the one in charge because of his experience and confidence in handling the infected. This conflict is not solved through discussion, but through quick thinking and strong action, showing that sometimes, when nature becomes the enemy, the only choice is to fight for survival.

Data 4 Man Vs Man

(Joel first time meet with Henry in Kansas city. Eps 5, 33:00-35:00)

The fourth conflict happens when Joel meets Henry and Sam in an empty building. This is an example of **Man vs. Man** conflict because it involves a tense situation between two individuals who do not know or trust each other. Joel, who has lived in a dangerous world full of betrayal, naturally becomes suspicious and defensive. When he first sees Henry and Sam, he quickly becomes alert and even points his gun at them, thinking they might hurt him and Ellie. On the other side, Henry also acts carefully. He does not try to attack Joel because he wants to protect his younger brother, Sam, who is still a child and cannot protect himself. Both Joel and Henry are trying to protect the people they care about, and this causes tension between them.

In this scene, both characters seem to use the **avoiding** conflict management strategy, based on the theory by Thomas and Kilmann (1974). This strategy happens when people decide not to continue the conflict and try to stay calm to avoid making the situation worse. Joel does not shoot because he realizes that Henry and Sam are not a real threat, while Henry also avoids starting a fight to keep Sam safe. The conflict is solved not by fighting, but by both sides choosing to stay quiet and careful. Even though they don't talk much or solve the problem directly, they manage to avoid violence. This shows that in stressful situations, avoiding conflict can be a smart way to protect others and survive.

Data 5 (Man VS Nature)
(Fighting the cold. Eps 6, 14:00-25:00)

The fifth conflict occurs when Joel is forced to endure the unforgiving winter environment while struggling with physical weakness and emotional weight. This conflict is categorized as **Man vs. Nature**, as it centers on Joel's battle against external natural forces freezing temperatures, rough terrain, and bodily fatigue as well as the internal strain of declining health and trauma. Unlike previous episodes where he confronts human enemies or infected creatures, here Joel is up against the silent cruelty of the environment, which offers no opportunity for negotiation or retreat. The snow-covered landscapes and the isolation of the wilderness serve not only as the setting but also as relentless opponents testing Joel's limits.

Throughout the journey, Joel suffers from mounting physical pain, slower reflexes, and an overwhelming sense of panic. He experiences moments of weakness where his breathing shortens and his body begins to shut down, yet he refuses to stop or show vulnerability. In the face of this conflict, Joel applies a **competing** conflict management strategy, as described by Thomas and Kilmann. He acts assertively and independently, relying solely on his willpower to push through adversity. There is no room for compromise or hesitation, as survival in this harsh landscape depends entirely on dominance over the environment and his own weakening body.

Joel's competing approach reflects the brutal truth of the world he lives in: nature does not accommodate weakness. The biting cold, the quiet desolation, and the long stretches of isolation are not symbolic threats they are real, unrelenting dangers. His battle is not just against snow and ice, but against the fear that he may no longer be strong enough to protect Ellie. This conflict marks a turning point in Joel's journey, revealing that even the most hardened survivors can be undone not by violence, but by the quiet pressure of nature and age. In this scene, the environment becomes his greatest obstacle, and overcoming it is not just about survival it is about proving that he still has something left to fight for.

Data 6 (Man VS Man)
(When Survival Meets Idealism: Joel & Tommy's Confrontation. Eps 6, 35:00-45:00)

The sixth conflict happens occurs between Joel and his younger brother, Tommy, over how to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. This conflict falls under

the category of **Man vs. Man**, as it involves two central characters with opposing worldviews and deeply contrasting values.

Joel, having suffered immense personal losses, has become hardened and distrustful. He sees the world through a lens of caution, survival, and control. For Joel, survival means making hard decisions and sacrifices, often at the cost of trust in others or faith in any structured system. In contrast, Tommy still holds onto hope. He chooses to join a community and strives to rebuild a more humane and orderly life. To him, hope is not a weakness, but a necessity for sanity and purpose.

During their heated exchange, Joel adopts a **competing** conflict management strategy assertive, dominant, and unwilling to compromise. He forcefully defends his own beliefs, not just out of conviction, but because past traumas have eroded his ability to trust and be vulnerable. Joel imposes his perspective on Tommy, believing that his way is the only way to ensure survival.

This *competing* approach is evident in Joel's confrontational tone, raised voice, and his lack of empathy toward Tommy's decisions. His insistence on being right stems from a deep sense of responsibility particularly for Ellie's safety. He believes that allowing any openness or deviation from his path could result in catastrophe.

This conflict illustrates how differing values and approaches to survival can create emotional rifts, even between family members. Joel and Tommy's disagreement is not just about tactics it is a clash of philosophies: one rooted in fear and control, the other in trust and renewal. Their confrontation represents the broader tension between survivalism and idealism in a broken world.

Data 7 (Man VS Society) (When Survival Means Silence. Eps 1, 37:00)

The sixth conflict occurs when Joel is confronted with the oppressive control of FEDRA, the authoritarian institution governing the Boston Quarantine Zone. This conflict is categorized as **Man vs. Society**, as it depicts Joel's silent resistance against a system that restricts freedom, enforces curfews, and publicly executes those who break the rules. Rather than engaging in open rebellion, Joel adopts an avoiding conflict management strategy, navigating the harsh environment through underground dealings. He collaborates secretly with military personnel to trade contraband items like drugs and batteries. This reveals Joel's calculated effort to survive within a system that offers no space for opposition or vulnerability.

By choosing avoidance, Joel protects himself from direct confrontation with the regime, recognizing that open defiance would likely lead to severe punishment or death. His silent resistance illustrates the difficult moral choices faced by individuals in authoritarian systems. Joel's actions are not driven by cowardice, but by survival and pragmatism. As described by Thomas and Kilmann (1974), the **avoiding** strategy is employed when the stakes of direct conflict are too high or when one lacks the power to change the system. In this case, Joel's quiet defiance

shows the inner conflict between moral values and survival instincts, portraying the emotional and psychological cost of living under oppressive rule. The society becomes an invisible enemy one that controls through fear rather than physical confrontation and Joel's path through it reflects a survivalist philosophy shaped by trauma and necessity.

Conflict Patterns and Strategic Behavior of Joel

Based on the analysis, the most dominant types of conflict in *The Last of Us* Season 1 are Man vs. Man and Man vs. Nature, each occurring 6 times (35%). This reveals that most of Joel's struggles are direct, involving either other people or natural threats like the Cordyceps outbreak. Although Man vs. Society appears slightly less frequently (5 times or 30%), it still plays a significant role by showing Joel's resistance against oppressive systems like FEDRA. Joel does not rely on a single conflict strategy. He frequently shifts between competing (53%) and avoiding (47%), depending on the situation. In moments of immediate danger or moral urgency, he competes head-on, while in other cases he avoids conflict, either to reduce harm or protect his emotions. From a psychological perspective, the competing strategy reflects trauma-driven survival instincts possibly linked to the deep losses in his past whereas avoiding may be a way to cope with emotional exhaustion or fear of further pain.

The conflict patterns in the series highlight the complex psychology of survival. In a post-apocalyptic world full of chaos and danger, Joel's responses are shaped by the harsh environment around him. His use of competing is often effective for survival, especially when decisive action is necessary, but it can also worsen relationships or create new threats. Meanwhile, his use of avoidance helps him escape unnecessary conflict but may distance him from forming meaningful connections. Over time, the accumulation of external conflicts drives significant character development transforming Joel from a cold, emotionally withdrawn man into someone who gradually shows care and vulnerability, especially toward Ellie. These conflicts are not merely obstacles but act as catalysts for Joel's emotional growth and moral evolution across the season.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of *The Last of Us* series, it can be concluded that external conflicts significantly shape the emotional journey and survival decisions of the main character, Joel. The types of conflicts identified include man vs. man, man vs. society, and man vs. nature, with the most frequent being man vs. society and man vs. nature. These conflicts highlight Joel's struggle not only against individuals but also larger systems and environmental threats. In terms of conflict management, Joel primarily uses competing and avoiding strategies, reflecting his assertiveness in protecting others and his restraint in helpless situations. However, this research is limited to one character and focuses solely on external conflicts

without considering internal struggles or other characters' perspectives.

For future research, it is recommended to examine a wider range of characters or episodes, explore internal conflicts, or compare conflict resolution across different genres to gain a more holistic understanding of character development in narrative media.

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