

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN HEIS: FOCUS ON UNIT HEADS IN THE PHILIPPINES

ESTRATÉGIAS DE GESTÃO DE CONFLITOS EM INSTITUIÇÕES DE ENSINO SUPERIOR: FOCO NOS CHEFES DE UNIDADE NAS FILIPINAS

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Abstract

Conflict is inevitable in organizational life, particularly in higher education institutions (HEIs), where effective leadership is essential for maintaining productivity and harmony. This study investigates the conflict management styles employed by unit heads in HEIs in Negros Occidental, Philippines, during the academic year 2021-2022 to support the development of targeted intervention programs. A descriptive-comparative research design was applied, with 94 unit heads from three state universities participating. Conflict management styles were assessed using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) and categorized as competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. The study explored the influence of demographic variables—age, sex, length of service, and educational qualifications—on using these styles. The findings reveal that the avoiding style was most preferred while competing, collaborating, and accommodating were moderately utilized, and compromising was the least favored. No significant differences were found across age, sex, or length of service. However, educational qualifications had a notable impact, with respondents holding master's degrees showing significantly different preferences in the compromising style than those with bachelor's or doctorate degrees. A Friedman one-way repeated measures analysis highlighted significant differences among the conflict management styles, with avoiding being rated significantly higher than competing. These results suggest that educational qualifications play a more substantial role in conflict management than other demographic factors, underscoring the need for tailored conflict

Resumo

O conflito é inevitável na vida organizacional, particularmente em instituições de ensino superior (IES), onde a liderança eficaz é essencial para manter a produtividade e a harmonia. Este estudo investiga os estilos de gestão de conflitos empregados por chefes de unidade em IES em Negros Occidental, Filipinas, durante o ano letivo de 2021-2022, com o objetivo de apoiar o desenvolvimento de programas de intervenção direcionados. Foi aplicado um delineamento de pesquisa descritivo-comparativo, com a participação de 94 chefes de unidade de três universidades estaduais. Os estilos de gestão de conflitos foram avaliados utilizando o Instrumento de Modos de Conflito de Thomas-Kilmann (TKI) e categorizados como competitivo, colaborativo, conciliador, evitativo e acomodativo. O estudo explorou a influência de variáveis demográficas — idade, sexo, tempo de serviço e formação acadêmica — no uso desses estilos. Os resultados revelam que o estilo evitativo foi o mais utilizado, enquanto os estilos competitivo, colaborativo e acomodativo foram moderadamente utilizados, e o estilo conciliador foi o menos utilizado. Não foram encontradas diferenças significativas em relação à idade, sexo ou tempo de serviço. No entanto, a formação acadêmica teve um impacto notável, com os respondentes com mestrado demonstrando preferências significativamente diferentes no estilo de conciliação em comparação com aqueles com bacharelado ou doutorado. Uma análise de medidas repetidas de Friedman destacou diferenças significativas entre os estilos de gestão de conflitos, com a evitação sendo avaliada significativamente mais alta do que a competição. Esses resultados sugerem que a formação acadêmica



management training based on educational backgrounds in HEIs.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Educational Qualification, Higher Education, Leadership Dynamics, Organizational Behavior.

desempenha um papel mais substancial na gestão de conflitos do que outros fatores demográficos, ressaltando a necessidade de treinamento personalizado em gestão de conflitos com base na formação acadêmica nas IES.

Palavras-chave: Gestão de Conflitos. Formação Acadêmica. Ensino Superior. Dinâmica de Liderança. Comportamento Organizacional.

1 INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inherent aspect of organizational dynamics, especially within higher education institutions (HEIs) where diverse stakeholders—including administrators, faculty, staff, and students—interact with varying interests, expectations, and cultural backgrounds. Effective conflict management in HEIs is pivotal for maintaining organizational harmony and fostering an environment conducive to academic excellence and innovation (Ausat *et al.*, 2023; Hyatt & Gruenglas, 2023). Managing conflicts adeptly can serve as a catalyst for positive change, promoting creative problem-solving and enhancing collaborative efforts. Conversely, ineffective conflict resolution can lead to detrimental outcomes such as decreased organizational quality, reduced productivity, heightened employee turnover, and diminished job satisfaction (Jones, 2016; Brubaker *et al.*, 2014).

Furthermore, external factors such as regulatory frameworks can influence individual conflict management practices, as demonstrated by the impact of the ACAS Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures in British workplaces (Saundry *et al.*, 2016). Conflict management styles—competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating—are crucial in determining workplace harmony. These styles significantly shape how conflicts are resolved and how employees focus on their responsibilities without disruption (Jujena, 2020).

In HEIs, conflicts often stem from the diverse roles and expectations of faculty, administration, and students. Leaders such as unit heads play a critical role in navigating these conflicts. Studies have shown that conflict management styles significantly influence organizational dynamics within educational institutions. For instance, Khalid

and Fatima (2016) found that public health institution leaders predominantly employed competing strategies, while Akuffo (2015) linked competing, dominating, and obliging strategies with counterproductive work behaviors. In contrast, Garcia *et al.* (2019) identified collaboration as the most prevalent strategy among Filipino seafarers, highlighting the contextual nature of effective conflict management. These findings collectively emphasize that the effectiveness of conflict management styles is highly dependent on the specific organizational context and the unique challenges faced by leaders within different sectors.

Further research supports the significance of context in choosing conflict management strategies. While the competing style is often employed, integrating strategies have been found to foster a better understanding of problems (Stepanova, 2020). Additionally, Masood and Javed (2016) demonstrated that competing and obliging strategies significantly influence trust levels in an organization, while integrating and compromising strategies were preferred by most respondents. In the educational sector, studies indicate that school administrators often favor integrating and compromising strategies, with collaboration being more commonly employed than other methods (Kalagbor & Nnokam, 2015; Jack & Ukaigwu, 2018).

Demographic factors such as age, sex, length of service, and educational qualifications can influence an individual's preferred conflict management style. Yeung *et al.* (2015) found that older employees are more likely to use avoiding strategies when managing conflicts with supervisors. Similarly, Bordean *et al.* (2020) revealed that while biological sex does not directly correlate with conflict management choices, gender roles can predict strategy selection. Moreira (2021) discovered that higher educational qualifications tend to reduce avoidant behaviors, further highlighting the impact of education on conflict management preferences. While existing research provides valuable insights, there remains a gap in understanding how these dynamics operate specifically among unit heads in HEIs in Negros Occidental, Philippines. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the conflict management styles employed by unit heads in this specific context and exploring the influence of demographic variables on these styles.

This study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conflict management styles among unit heads in HEIs in Negros Occidental. By examining these styles in relation to demographic variables, the research aimed to inform the development

of effective conflict management training and intervention programs tailored to the needs of educational leaders. The findings may contribute to the broader understanding of how conflict management strategies can be optimized within educational settings to promote organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the level of conflict management styles of the respondents when taken as a whole and when grouped according to age, sex, length of service, and educational qualification and the following categories:
 - a. Competing;
 - b. Collaborating;
 - c. Compromising;
 - d. Avoiding; and,
 - e. Accommodating?
2. Is there a significant difference in the level of conflict management styles of the respondents when they are grouped according to age, sex, length of service, and educational qualification?
3. Is there a significant difference in the level of conflict management styles of the respondents when grouped and compared according to areas, namely, competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating?

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research design

This study employed a descriptive-comparative research design to examine the conflict management styles among unit heads of HEIs in Negros Occidental, Philippines, during the academic year 2021-2022. The descriptive-comparative design is particularly suited for this research because it allows for the detailed description of the conflict management styles prevalent among the respondents while also enabling the comparison of these styles across different demographic groups.

The descriptive component of the research design focuses on identifying and characterizing the conflict management styles used by the unit heads. By employing the

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), the study systematically describes the frequency and distribution of five conflict management styles among the respondents (Thomas & Kilmann, 1978). The comparative aspect of the research design examines the potential differences in conflict management styles across various demographic categories, including age, sex, length of service, and educational qualification. This approach allows the study to explore whether and how these demographic factors influence the choice and application of different conflict management styles (Dudovskiy, 2017).

2.2 Respondents of the study

This study involved 94 (out of 110) unit heads from three state universities and colleges (SUCs) in Negros Occidental, Philippines, representing a high response rate of 85%. Specifically, the distribution of respondents was as follows: 40 (out of 42) unit heads from SUC 1, 22 (out of 26) from SUC 2, and 32 (out of 42) from SUC 3. The unit heads in this study comprised middle- and top-level managers, each responsible for overseeing a minimum of five personnel. This criterion ensured that respondents held significant leadership roles with substantial responsibilities in managing workplace conflicts, providing a relevant context for examining conflict management styles.

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants based on their leadership positions and direct involvement in conflict management within their respective institutions (Glen, 2021). This approach was chosen to ensure that the sample consisted of individuals with the necessary experience and authority to effectively influence and implement conflict management strategies. While purposive sampling enhances the relevance and depth of the data collected, it also limits the generalizability of the findings to other HEIs beyond the selected SUCs.

2.3 Instrument

The TKI was used to determine the conflict management styles among unit heads of HEIs in Negros Occidental. A letter seeking permission to use the TKI was sent to the authors. The TKI measures five conflict management strategies: competing,

collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. These five modes can be described in two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness refers to the extent to which one tries to satisfy his or her concerns, while cooperativeness refers to the extent to which one tries to satisfy another person's concerns (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

The instrument consists of 30 pairs of statements. Individuals respond to the items, which are then scored. The maximum score on any scale is 12 (for very high use). The answers are tallied on the score sheets, and respondents learn which of the five conflict-handling modes they use relatively often and less frequently. The raw scores are ranked based on percentile, comparing how frequently respondents use each mode relative to a norm group. Table 1 outlines each conflict management style's assertiveness and cooperativeness levels.

Table 1. Level of conflict management styles of the unit heads.

Conflict Management Strategy	Assertive	Cooperative
Competing	High	Low
Collaborating	High	High
Compromising	Moderate	Moderate
Avoiding	Low	Low
Accommodating	Low	High

Note: Score that fits in the top 25% norm group's scores = 76 to 100 "High," Scores that fit in the middle 50% = 26 to 75 "Medium," Scores that fit in the bottom 25% = 0 to 25 "Low."

Source: Authors

2.4 Data collection

The data collection was meticulously designed to adhere to international ethical standards and ensure procedural rigor. Prior to initiating the study, the researcher obtained formal permission from the administrators of the participating SUCs in Negros Occidental. This approval was secured through official channels, ensuring the study complied with institutional policies and ethical guidelines governing research within these educational institutions.

To facilitate effective data collection, the researcher coordinated closely with the selected unit heads, arranging face-to-face interactions at their respective institutions. This approach enhanced the accuracy and completeness of the data and fostered a

personal connection that encouraged candid and thoughtful responses. The TKI was the primary tool used for measuring conflict management styles, which was distributed in a structured format, allowing respondents to complete the questionnaire within a concise timeframe of 10 to 15 minutes. This duration was deemed appropriate to minimize respondent fatigue while ensuring comprehensive responses.

Before administering the TKI, the researcher thoroughly briefed the respondents. This briefing encompassed the study's purpose, the significance of their participation, and a detailed explanation of how the collected data would be utilized. Emphasis was placed on establishing transparency and building trust, which are critical for obtaining honest and unbiased responses. Additionally, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were aware of their voluntary participation rights and the confidentiality of their responses. Respondents were given a small token of appreciation to acknowledge further their contribution, which served as a gesture of gratitude and helped maintain high response rates.

The completed questionnaires were promptly retrieved and subjected to a stringent data management protocol. Data were securely stored in password-protected files to maintain confidentiality and prevent unauthorized access. The researcher ensured that all data handling procedures complied with ethical standards, safeguarding the privacy and integrity of the respondents' information.

2.5 Data analysis

The study employed a robust set of statistical methods to analyze the collected data, chosen for their suitability in handling non-parametric data and their ability to provide comprehensive insights into the impact of demographic factors on conflict management styles. The following statistical techniques were utilized:

1. **Mann-Whitney U-test:** This non-parametric test was selected to compare differences between two independent groups: age (older vs. younger) and sex (male vs. female). The Mann-Whitney U-test is appropriate when the data do not assume a normal distribution, allowing for reliable comparisons without violating statistical assumptions (Field, 2013).

2. **Kruskal-Wallis H-test:** Employed to compare more than two groups, this non-parametric method was used to evaluate differences in conflict management styles across educational qualifications (bachelor's, master's, doctorate). The Kruskal-Wallis H-test is advantageous for its ability to handle multiple group comparisons simultaneously, ensuring comprehensive analysis without inflating Type I error rates (Pallant, 2020).
3. **Friedman's Related Samples Test:** This test was utilized to determine if there were significant differences in the respondents' conflict management styles across the five TKI categories (competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, accommodating). Friedman's test is particularly useful for analyzing repeated measures data, providing insights into unit heads' relative frequency and preference for each conflict management style (Field, 2013).

These statistical methods were chosen for their robustness in dealing with non-parametric data, often encountered in organizational research where data may not follow a normal distribution. Additionally, using non-parametric tests ensures that the findings are not skewed by outliers or non-linear relationships, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the results.

Before conducting the statistical analyses, the data underwent a thorough cleaning process. This involved checking for and addressing any missing values, outliers, or inconsistencies to ensure the integrity of the dataset. Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize the central tendencies and dispersions of the conflict management styles across different demographic groups. For the Mann-Whitney U-test and Kruskal-Wallis H-test, assumptions such as the observations' independence and the data's ordinal nature were verified. Additionally, for Friedman's test, the assumption of related samples was confirmed, ensuring that the repeated measures were appropriately accounted for in the analysis.

2.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were a priority throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Respondents were fully briefed on the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the

measures taken to ensure the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that the data collected would only be used for research purposes. The data was stored securely, with access limited to the researcher and statistician. To mitigate potential biases, the study employed a standardized data collection instrument and ensured that all respondents received consistent information and instructions during the survey process.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Conflict management strategies among unit heads

The analysis of conflict management styles among unit heads in HEIs in Negros Occidental revealed distinct preferences and tendencies that have significant implications for organizational dynamics and leadership effectiveness. According to Table 2, the *avoiding* style emerged as the most frequently employed conflict management strategy, with a mode (*Mo*) score of 8.00 and a percentile ranking of 78, categorizing it as "High." This predominant preference for *avoiding* conflict indicates that unit heads often sidestep or defer conflicts rather than address them directly. While avoiding can provide temporary relief and prevent immediate escalation, overreliance on this style can lead to unresolved issues festering over time, potentially undermining organizational cohesion and productivity (Ausat *et al.*, 2023; Lazier, 2017).

Table 2. Level of conflict management styles of the unit heads.

Conflict Management Styles	M _o	Percentile	Interpretation	Range
Competing	3.00	31	Moderate (26-75)	11.00
Collaborating	5.00	26	Moderate (26-75)	9.00
Compromising	5.00	15	Low (0-25)	7.00
Avoiding	8.00	78	High (76-100)	9.00
Accommodating	5.00	46	Moderate (26-75)	9.00

Note: Score that fits in the top 25% norm group's scores = 76 to 100 "High," Scores that fit in the middle 50% = 26 to 75 "Medium," Scores that fit in the bottom 25% = 0 to 25 "Low."

Source: Authors

Conversely, the *competing*, *collaborating*, and *accommodating* styles were utilized at moderate levels, with *Mo* scores of 3.00, 5.00, and 5.00, respectively, all falling within the "Moderate" interpretation range. The competing style, characterized by assertiveness and low cooperativeness, suggests that unit heads occasionally adopt aggressive behaviors to achieve their goals, which can be effective in situations requiring decisive action but can strain interpersonal relationships if overused (Akuffo, 2015). The collaborating style, marked by high assertiveness and cooperativeness, reflects a willingness to engage in cooperative problem-solving and seek mutually beneficial outcomes, enhancing team synergy and problem-solving capabilities (Brubaker *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, the accommodating style, emphasizing cooperativeness and low assertiveness, indicates a tendency to prioritize others' concerns over one's own, fostering a supportive and harmonious work environment but potentially leading to underrepresenting one's needs (Moreira, 2021).

Notably, the compromising style was the least favored, with a *Mo* score of 5.00 falling in the "Low" percentile range. This reluctance to seek middle-ground solutions limits achieving balanced and sustainable outcomes in conflict situations, especially where both parties have legitimate but competing interests (Garcia *et al.*, 2019). The low preference for compromising suggests a potential area for improvement in fostering more equitable and mutually satisfying conflict resolutions within HEIs.

These findings underscore the complex interplay between different conflict management styles and their impact on organizational effectiveness. The high preference for *avoiding* conflict reflects cultural tendencies toward maintaining harmony and face-saving, which are significant in the Philippine context (Kalagbor & Nnokam, 2015). However, excessive avoidance can lead to unresolved tensions and diminished trust among team members, ultimately affecting the institution's overall performance and employee satisfaction (Yeung *et al.*, 2015).

Moreover, the moderate use of competing, collaborating, and accommodating styles indicates a balanced approach to conflict management, albeit inconsistently applied across different situations. This balance suggests that unit heads possess a repertoire of conflict management strategies but can benefit from targeted training to enhance their proficiency in more proactive and collaborative approaches (Jack & Ukaigwu, 2018). By encouraging greater collaboration and compromising styles, HEIs can foster a more

cooperative organizational culture, enhancing institutional resilience (Masood & Javed, 2016).

3.2 Conflict management style of unit heads according to demographic factors

Table 3 presents a detailed analysis of the conflict management styles employed by unit heads in HEIs in Negros Occidental, Philippines, categorized by various demographic profiles: age, sex, length of service, and educational qualification. The table assesses five conflict management styles across these demographic variables, providing mode (*Mo*) scores, percentile rankings, interpretations, and score ranges.

Table 3. Level of conflict management styles of the unit heads by profiles.

	Competing		Collaborating		Compromising		Avoiding		Accommodating							
	<i>M_o</i>	%		<i>M_o</i>	%	<i>M_o</i>	%	<i>M_o</i>	%	<i>M_o</i>	%					
Age																
Older	3	31	M	5	26	M	5	15	L	8	78	H	5	46	M	
Younger	2	20	M	5	26	M	7	41	M	10	95	H	5	46	M	
Sex																
Female	3	31	M	6	41	M	5	15	L	8	78	H	5	46	M	
Male	3	31	M	5	26	M	5	15	L	7	65	M	5	46	M	
Length of Service																
Longer	3	31	M	5	26	M	5	15	L	8	78	H	4	30	M	
Shorter	2	20	M	5	26	M	7	41	M	8	78	H	5	46	M	
Education																
Bachelor	2	20	M	5	26	M	7	41	M	3	12	L	2	7	L	
Master	2	20	M	5	26	M	5	15	L	8	78	H	7	76	H	
Doctorate	3	31	M	5	26	M	7	41	M	8	78	H	5	46	M	

Note: Score that fits in the top 25% percentile (per) norm group's scores = 76 to 100 "High (H)," Scores that fit in the middle 50% = 26 to 75 "Medium (M)," Scores that fit in the bottom 25% = 0 to 25 "Low (L)."

Source: Authors

The conflict management styles of the unit heads in the competing area were on the medium level regardless of age, sex, length of service, and educational qualification, as supported by the obtained mode values of 2.00 to 3.00. With this conflict-handling mode, the respondents tend to use aggressive behaviors to solve existing conflicts. They tend to force their subordinates and others to achieve their goals. They use their authority, threats, and intimidating styles to force the parties to agree. The very benefit of this style is the possibility of having an enhanced organizational decision if the former is correct; otherwise, aggression and anger occur between and among conflicting parties.

The conflict management styles of the unit heads in the area of *collaborating* were at the medium level regardless of age, sex, length of service, and educational qualification, as shown by the obtained mode values of 5.00 to 6.00. Collaborating has been commonly observed in most organizations. Kalagbor and Nnokam's (2015) study found that most school administrators employed integrating strategies more frequently. Similarly, Jack and Ukaigwu's (2018) study revealed that school administrators used the collaborating or integrating strategies more than the other strategies in managing conflicts in their schools or institutions.

Regarding age, the older respondents' level of conflict management in *compromising* was on the low level ($Mo = 5.00$) while the medium level for the younger group of respondents ($Mo = 7.00$). When considered by sex, male and female respondents' conflict management level in *compromising* was low (male = $Mo = 5.00$; female = $Mo = 5.00$). Regarding length of service, the level of conflict management in the area of *compromising* for unit heads with longer length of service was low ($Mo = 5.00$), while on the medium level ($Mo = 7.00$) for unit heads with shorter length of service. When categorized by educational qualification, the level of conflict management in the area of *compromising* for unit heads with Bachelor ($Mo = 7.00$) and Doctorate ($Mo = 7.00$) degrees was at the medium level while low ($Mo = 5.00$) for respondents with Master's degrees.

Regardless of age, the respondents' conflict management level in *avoiding* was high, having obtained the following numerical values: older ($Mo = 8.00$) and younger ($Mo = 10.00$). Segregated by sex, the respondents' conflict management level in the area of *avoiding* was high for females ($Mo = 8.00$) while medium for males ($Mo = 7.00$). Notwithstanding the duration of service, the respondents' conflict management level in avoiding was high, as supported by the following numerical values: longer ($Mo = 8.00$) and shorter ($Mo = 8.00$). When considered by educational qualification, the level of conflict management of the respondents in the area of *avoiding* was high for those with a doctorate ($Mo = 8.00$) and master's degree ($Mo = 8.00$) while low for those with a bachelor's degree ($Mo = 3.00$).

Dichotomized by age, sex, and length of service, the conflict management styles of the respondents in the area of *accommodating* were at the medium level as reflected by the following obtained values: age (older $Mo = 5.00$; younger $Mo = 5.00$); sex (female

$Mo = 5.00$; male $Mo = 5.00$); and length of service (longer $Mo = 4.00$; shorter $Mo = 5.00$). Classified by educational qualification, the level of conflict management of the respondents in the area of *accommodating* varied, as follows: low for respondents with bachelor's degree ($Mo = 2.00$); medium for those respondents with doctorate; and high for those who have master's degree ($Mo = 7.00$).

3.3 Difference in the conflict management style of unit heads according to age

Table 4 presents the comparative statistics of conflict management styles among unit heads, grouped and compared according to age using the Mann-Whitney U-test. The results indicate that there are no significant differences in the level of conflict management styles across all five categories—competing [$U=873.50$, $p=0.093$], collaborating [$U=955.50$, $p=0.291$], compromising [$U=1079.00$, $p=0.920$], avoiding [$U=904.50$, $p=0.149$], and accommodating [$U=898.00$, $p=0.134$]—when categorized by age.

Table 4. Differences in the level of conflict management styles of the unit heads according to age.

Conflict Management Styles	U	z	p
Competing	873.5	-1.681	0.093
Collaborating	955.5	-1.056	0.291
Compromising	1079.0	-0.101	0.920
Avoiding	904.5	-1.441	0.149
Accommodating	898.0	-1.500	0.134

Source: Authors

The absence of significant differences in conflict management styles across different age groups aligns with the findings of Akuffo (2015) and Yeung *et al.* (2015), who reported that conflict management styles tend to remain consistent across various organizational contexts. This consistency suggests that age, in isolation, is not a key determinant in how conflict is managed within HEIs. Instead, other factors such as organizational culture, individual leadership styles, and personal dispositions likely play more substantial roles in shaping conflict management behaviors (Brubaker *et al.*, 2014; Masood & Javed, 2016). This insight encourages HEIs to shift their focus from demographic characteristics like age to more relevant variables when designing conflict management interventions. For instance, fostering a supportive organizational culture that

emphasizes open communication and collaboration can enhance the effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies across all age groups (Hyatt & Gruenglas, 2023). Additionally, developing individual leadership styles that prioritize adaptive conflict management can further mitigate the potential limitations of demographic factors (Jones, 2016).

By understanding that age does not significantly influence conflict resolution approaches, HEIs can allocate resources more efficiently toward fostering universally applicable skills and strategies. This approach promotes a cohesive leadership team capable of handling conflicts effectively, regardless of age differences. Implementing comprehensive training programs that enhance collaborative and compromising conflict management styles can lead to more sustainable and equitable conflict resolutions, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious organizational environment (Kalagbor & Nnokam, 2015; Garcia *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the findings suggest that HEIs should prioritize the development of conflict management training that addresses the unique challenges rather than tailoring programs based on age demographics. This strategic focus can ensure that all unit heads, regardless of age, are equipped with the necessary tools to manage conflicts constructively and foster a positive organizational culture (Jack & Ukaigwu, 2018).

3.4 Differences in the conflict management style of unit heads according to sex

Table 5 shows the comparative statistics in the unit heads' conflict management styles when grouped and compared according to sex utilizing the Mann-Whitney U-test. There was no significant difference existed in the level of conflict management in the areas of competing [U=1067.50, p=0.883], collaborating [U=1032.00, p=0.673], compromising [U=1042.00, p=0.730], avoiding [U=936.00, p=0.246], accommodating [U=1069.00, p=0.892] when grouped by sex.

Table 5. Differences in the unit heads' level of conflict management styles according to sex.

Conflict Management Styles	U	z	p
Competing	1067.5	-0.147	0.883
Collaborating	1032.0	-0.423	0.673
Compromising	1042.0	-0.346	0.730
Avoiding	936.0	-1.160	0.246
Accommodating	1069.0	-0.136	0.892

Source: Authors

The lack of significant differences suggests that male and female unit heads employ similar levels of the five conflict management styles in resolving workplace conflicts. This finding aligns with the research of Bordean *et al.* (2020), who found that biological sex does not significantly influence conflict management styles, although gender roles shape leadership approaches. Similarly, Akuffo (2015) demonstrated that supervisors' conflict management styles do not inherently differ by sex but can impact employee behaviors regardless of gender. This consistency indicates that conflict management preferences are more likely influenced by individual leadership characteristics and organizational culture rather than biological distinctions.

Moreover, the findings imply that conflict management training programs in HEIs need not be differentiated based on sex. Instead, these programs should promote a range of effective conflict-resolution techniques that apply to all leaders, regardless of gender. Brubaker *et al.* (2014) advocate for universal conflict resolution training that enhances skills such as collaboration, assertiveness, and compromise, which are beneficial across the board. By adopting gender-neutral training strategies, HEIs can foster a more inclusive and cohesive leadership team capable of handling conflicts efficiently without concerns about sex-based disparities in conflict management styles.

Furthermore, the absence of sex-based differences in conflict management approaches suggests that HEIs can leverage the collective strengths of their leadership teams by emphasizing universal conflict resolution skills. This approach enhances organizational dynamics and promotes leadership cohesion and inclusivity, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious and productive educational environment (Hyatt & Gruenglas, 2023).

3.5 Differences in the conflict management style of unit heads by the length of service

Table 5 shows the comparative statistics in the unit heads' conflict management level compared to the length of service employing the Mann-Whitney U-test. There no significant difference existed in the level of conflict management in the areas of competing [U=1044.0, p=0.712], collaborating [U=1013.0, p=0.541], compromising [U=1077.0, p=0.907], avoiding [U=963.5, p=0.323], accommodating [U=920.5, p=0.185] when grouped according to length of service.

Table 6. Difference in the unit heads' level of conflict management styles by service length.

Variable	U	z	p
Competing	1067.5	-0.147	0.883
Collaborating	1032.0	-0.423	0.673
Compromising	1042.0	-0.346	0.730
Avoiding	936.0	-1.160	0.246
Accommodating	1069.0	-0.136	0.892

Source: Authors

The lack of significant differences in conflict management styles based on length of service suggests that tenure does not play a pivotal role in determining how unit heads approach conflict resolution within HEIs in Negros Occidental. This finding aligns with previous research, such as Jack and Ukaigwu (2018), who emphasized that individual leadership characteristics and organizational culture more influence conflict management preferences than the duration of service. Similarly, Brubaker *et al.* (2014) highlight the importance of adaptive conflict resolution strategies that transcend demographic variables like tenure.

This uniformity in conflict management approaches across different service lengths underscores that experience alone does not dictate conflict resolution methods. Instead, personal leadership styles, institutional expectations, and cultural norms will substantially impact managing conflicts (Hyatt & Gruenglas, 2023). For instance, leaders with diverse educational backgrounds exhibit distinct conflict management preferences irrespective of their length of service (Moreira, 2021).

Furthermore, the absence of tenure-related differences in conflict management styles suggests that HEIs can implement standardized training programs that cater to all unit heads, regardless of their years of service. Such training should emphasize

adaptability and versatility in conflict resolution techniques, enabling leaders to effectively handle a variety of conflict scenarios (Masood & Javed, 2016). By enhancing universally applicable skills like collaboration and compromise, HEIs can foster a more inclusive leadership team capable of navigating complex interpersonal dynamics (Dudovskiy, 2017).

Additionally, this finding encourages HEIs to prioritize organizational culture and leadership development over demographic factors when designing conflict management interventions. Creating an environment that promotes open communication, mutual respect, and collaborative problem-solving can mitigate the potential limitations of relying solely on tenure as a predictor of conflict management styles (Stepanova *et al.*, 2020). Emphasizing these elements can lead to more effective and sustainable conflict resolution practices that benefit the institution.

3.6 Differences in the conflict management style of unit heads by educational qualification

Table 7 shows the comparative statistics in the unit heads' conflict management styles when grouped and compared according to educational qualification utilizing the Kruskal-Wallis H-test. There was no significant difference in the level of conflict management in the areas of competing [$\chi^2(2)=0.518$, $p=0.772$], collaborating [$\chi^2(2)=1.477$, $p=0.478$], avoiding [$\chi^2(2)=2.602$, $p=0.272$], and accommodating [$\chi^2(2)=4.297$, $p=0.117$] when grouped according to educational qualification. However, there was a significant difference in the level of conflict management in the area of compromising [$\chi^2(2)=7.321$, $p=0.026$].

Table 7. Difference in the level of conflict management styles of the unit heads by qualification.

Conflict Management Styles	χ^2	df	p
Competing	0.518	2	0.772
Collaborating	1.477	2	0.478
Compromising	7.321*	2	0.026
Avoiding	2.602	2	0.272
Accommodating	4.297	2	0.117

Source: Authors

The lack of significant differences in competing, collaborating, avoiding, and accommodating conflict management styles across educational qualifications suggests that unit heads consistently utilize these styles regardless of their academic backgrounds. This uniformity implies that factors other than educational qualification, such as organizational culture, personal leadership styles, and institutional expectations, play more crucial roles in shaping conflict management behaviors (Jack & Ukaigwu, 2018; Hyatt & Gruenglas, 2023).

Conversely, the significant difference observed in the compromising style highlights that educational qualification does impact how unit heads approach conflict resolution in this area. Specifically, post hoc analysis using Dunn's test revealed that unit heads with master's degrees exhibited a lower tendency to engage in compromising strategies than those with bachelor's and doctorate degrees, who showed a medium level of compromising. This finding aligns with Moreira (2021), who demonstrated that higher educational qualifications are often associated with more nuanced and strategic approaches to conflict management. Leaders with advanced degrees may have a deeper understanding of negotiation complexities and prefer more assertive or strategic conflict-resolution techniques over compromising (Garcia *et al.*, 2019).

This discrepancy suggests that unit heads with master's degrees might benefit from additional support and training to enhance their compromising skills. Since compromising is essential for achieving balanced outcomes that satisfy multiple stakeholders, educational institutions could implement workshops or training programs emphasizing compromise's strategic importance in conflict resolution. By doing so, HEIs can equip their leaders with the necessary skills to effectively mediate conflicts, fostering a more collaborative and equitable organizational environment (Brubaker *et al.*, 2014).

Moreover, the lower tendency among master's degree holders to engage in compromising strategies may indicate that their education emphasizes assertiveness and strategic problem-solving, potentially at the expense of seeking mutually beneficial solutions. This insight underscores the need for leadership training programs to balance the development of assertive conflict resolution skills with the ability to compromise, ensuring that leaders can navigate complex conflicts without resorting solely to competitive or avoidance strategies (Masood & Javed, 2016).

3.7 Differences in the conflict management style of unit heads according to areas

Table 8 shows the significant difference in the level of conflict management styles of the unit heads according to areas utilizing Friedman's related samples. There was a significant difference in the level of conflict management styles of the unit heads according to areas [$\chi^2(4)=108.059$, $p=0.000$]. A post hoc test using Bonferroni correction for multiple tests revealed that respondents rated significantly less in competing than other areas and rated significantly more in avoiding than other areas.

Table 8. Difference in the level of conflict management styles of the unit heads by qualification.

	χ^2	df	p
Conflict Management Style	108.059	2	0.000

Source: Authors

These findings have several important implications for leadership and conflict resolution in higher education institutions (HEIs). The high preference for avoiding indicates that unit heads tend to sidestep conflict or delay confrontation, which could prevent immediate conflict escalation and result in unresolved tensions. This is particularly concerning in environments where decision-making and problem-solving are critical, as avoiding conflict can lead to stagnation or reduced productivity in the long term. The lower preference for competing suggests that unit heads are less inclined to assertively push their agendas in conflicts, which can foster a more harmonious work environment but could also limit assertive decision-making when necessary.

Furthermore, these results indicate that training programs for unit heads need to emphasize the development of more proactive conflict resolution strategies, such as collaborating and compromising, to balance the tendency to avoid conflicts. By encouraging more engagement in conflict resolution, HEIs could foster better communication, improve team dynamics, and enhance decision-making processes.

The significant variation in the use of conflict management styles across different areas also suggests that conflict resolution in HEIs is context-dependent. Unit heads should adopt different strategies based on the nature of the conflict, the stakeholders involved, and the potential outcomes. This indicates the need for a more flexible approach to conflict management training, which equips leaders with various strategies to adapt to

different situations. Understanding the contexts in which avoiding or competing is most effective can help unit heads apply these strategies more appropriately. These findings align with Stepanova *et al.* (2020), who emphasized integrating various knowledge types and practices in conflict resolution. By adopting a flexible and context-sensitive approach, HEIs can better enhance their conflict management systems to address the educational environment's unique challenges.

4 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the conflict management styles employed by unit heads in HEIs in Negros Occidental, Philippines, during the academic year 2021-2022. Applying the TKI, five conflict management styles were analyzed in relation to demographic variables such as age, sex, length of service, and educational qualifications. The findings revealed that the avoiding style was the most frequently used among unit heads, while the compromising style was least favored. Educational qualifications, particularly among those holding master's degrees, significantly influenced the preference for compromising strategies. However, no significant differences were observed across other demographic factors like age, sex, and length of service.

The high preference for avoiding conflict management strategies suggests unit heads tend to defer or sidestep conflicts, potentially to maintain harmony or due to strategic considerations. However, this preference can lead to unresolved tensions that could negatively impact organizational effectiveness over time. The moderate use of competing, collaborating, and accommodating strategies indicates a balanced approach to conflict resolution, with unit heads capable of both assertive and cooperative strategies as needed. The low preference for compromising highlights a potential area for improvement, particularly among unit heads with master's degrees, who can benefit from training that emphasizes the strategic importance of compromise in achieving balanced outcomes.

A key limitation of this study is its focus on a sample limited to three state universities in Negros Occidental, Philippines, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other regions or types of higher education institutions. Additionally, using self-reported data while providing valuable insights may be subject to biases such as

social desirability or respondent misinterpretation. Another limitation is the reliance on a single instrument without triangulating the findings through qualitative methods such as interviews or focus group discussions, which offer deeper insights into the rationale behind certain conflict management choices.

Future research should aim to expand the sample size and geographical scope to include more diverse institutions, both in the public and private sectors, to enhance the generalizability of the results. Additionally, incorporating qualitative approaches could provide richer data and a more nuanced understanding of how individual and organizational factors influence conflict management styles. Studies should also examine the role of cultural influences and organizational structure on conflict resolution strategies, as these factors can significantly shape the effectiveness of conflict management in higher education.

Future studies could explore the impact of organizational culture on conflict management styles, investigate the role of emotional intelligence and leadership styles in shaping conflict management preferences, and assess the efficacy of tailored conflict management training programs in improving conflict resolution outcomes within HEIs. Cross-cultural comparisons could also provide valuable insights into how cultural differences within or between the Philippines or between the Philippines and other countries affect conflict management styles in educational leadership.

The study underscores the importance of considering educational background in developing conflict management training and interventions within HEIs. Tailored training programs that account for the differing conflict management preferences based on educational qualifications can enhance the effectiveness of these programs. Specifically, emphasizing the value of compromising strategies among unit heads with master's degrees could lead to more balanced and effective conflict resolution.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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