Exploring the Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management Preference Styles in Public Universities in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the topic – exploring the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management Preference Styles in Public Universities in Nigeria. Specifically, it sought to determine the relationship between emotional intelligence (self- awareness, self- regulation, motivation, social skill, empathy) and conflict management preference styles among senior staff. The study adopted a descriptive survey design anchored on Rahim's Conflict Management Model and Mayer and Salovey's Ability-Based Model of Emotional Intelligence. Stratified sampling was used, and a sample of 1,509 respondents was selected, from which 1,410 questionnaires (93.4%) were returned and analysed. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Canonical Correlation, and t-test at a 0.05 significance level. Findings showed that there is a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management preference. Canonical correlation revealed a significant positive relationship, strongest for emotional awareness ($r = 0.350$, $p < 0.05$). The study concluded that emotional intelligence significantly determines conflict management preference styles among senior staff. It recommended that university authorities should establish formal mediation, counselling, and conflict resolution mechanisms through dedicated staff support units, counselling centres, grievance management committees, or mediation panels where employees can access professional guidance and assistance in resolving interpersonal and workplace conflicts in a constructive, confidential, and non-adversarial manner to influence conflict management outcomes in Nigerian universities.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Conflict Management Preference Styles, Emotional Awareness, Emotional Regulation, Management.

INTRODUCTION

Universities across the globe encounter one conflict or another in the day-to-day running of the ivory tower. Universities are prominent figures in the educational sector and remain a critical component of the Nigerian economy, contributing substantially to national growth, manpower development, and social transformation. Despite its importance, the sector continues to face numerous institutional and administrative challenges, one of which is conflict management. Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction, and universities are not exempt from its occurrence. The ability to manage conflict is therefore essential for sustaining harmonious relationships, improving productivity, and enhancing organisational performance within higher educational institutions. In the contemporary educational environment, the sector has increasingly become one of the most challenging areas for examining the role of emotional intelligence in workplace relationships and organisational effectiveness.

The ability of individuals to recognise, understand, and regulate their own emotions in ways that improve behaviour and performance. At the same time, it involves the capacity to understand the emotions of others and respond appropriately in interpersonal situations, particularly during conflict. In higher educational institutions, employees adopt different conflict management preference styles depending on the nature of the work they perform and the organisational environment within which they operate. According to Petrides, Mikolajczak, Furnham, and Perez-Gonzalez (2016), emotions are subjective experiences that permeate every aspect of

human endeavour. Consequently, the concept of emotional intelligence has evolved through different theoretical models and conceptual frameworks.

Akintayo (2012) posited that conflict is a process that begins when an individual or group perceives differences and opposition regarding interests, resources, beliefs, values, or practices that are considered important. Dana (2001) also views organisational conflict as a situation occurring among workers performing interdependent tasks who become angry, perceive others to be at fault, and engage in actions that create problems for the organisation. Similarly, Rahim (2002) conceptualises conflict as an interactive process manifested through disagreement, incompatibility, and discord within or between individuals, groups, and organisations.

The concept of industrial conflict is often narrowly interpreted as strike action. However, strike represents only one visible dimension of organisational conflict. Akintayo (2012) argues that industrial conflict should be understood more broadly as the totality of behaviours and attitudes expressing opposition and divergent orientations between employers and employees, as well as between workers and organisations. Employees engage in paid employment partly to maintain a balance between work and personal life, but this balance may be disrupted by conflicts of interest among co-workers. Such conflicts can negatively affect employees' productivity, commitment, and performance. Work-family conflict (WFC), for instance, creates an imbalance where work responsibilities interfere with family life or family obligations affect work performance, thereby influencing organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and employee turnover (Akintayo, 2010).

Several factors contribute to the emergence of conflict in organisations, including intellectual intelligence, emotional intelligence, personality traits, attitudes, communal trust, and value judgments. These determinants are often interconnected and may collectively induce or intensify conflict situations. Conflict frequently arises because of differences in beliefs, attitudes, values, and needs among individuals or groups (Akintayo, 2012). The choice of conflict management strategy therefore depends not only on the nature of the conflict itself but also on the structural and human variables involved. Daily organisational experiences reveal that emotional reactions and stress management patterns significantly influence both the occurrence of conflict and the strategies employed in managing it. Akintayo (2017) identifies five major conflict management strategies, namely avoiding, dominating, obliging, compromising, and integrating. Understanding the process of conflict formation can therefore assist organisations in preventing disputes and minimising escalation.

In the past recent years, emotional intelligence has emerged as a major area of academic and organisational interest. Scholars and practitioners have made extensive claims about its role in determining success or failure in workplace settings. Emotional intelligence is frequently regarded as a valuable organisational resource capable of improving employee relations and institutional effectiveness (Gnawali, 2016). Moeller and Kwantes (2015) define emotional intelligence as the ability to monitor one's own feelings and those of others and to use such information appropriately in guiding actions and behaviour. Similarly, Partido and Colon (2024) argue that employees' emotional intelligence serves as an effective measure for understanding their level of conflict management competence.

Research has consistently shown that employees with high emotional intelligence are more capable of responding appropriately to workplace challenges and managing conflict effectively. Vandervoort (2006) emphasised the importance of emotional intelligence within college curricula, arguing that Professors with strong emotional intelligence are likely to possess higher self-esteem and improved teaching methods. Emotional intelligence also contributes to better social adaptability, professional choices, and learning outcomes. Coco (2011) further recommended the strategic implementation of emotional intelligence in higher education, emphasising that the leadership of universities must manage complex institutional situations through effective planning, organising, leadership, and control. Arora, Adhikari, & Shetty (2012) similarly stressed the importance of emotional skill development alongside cognitive and academic growth in educational institutions.

Goleman (1998) identified five major components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These competencies enable employees and organisational leaders to function effectively even in stressful or emotionally demanding situations. Conversely, individuals with low

emotional intelligence often struggle with stress management, communication difficulties, impulsive reactions, poor interpersonal relationships, and an inability to resolve conflicts constructively (Stoewen, 2024). Such limitations may negatively affect both individual well-being and organisational harmony.

Conflict remains an inherent feature of industrial and organisational life, making effective conflict resolution necessary for institutional stability and productivity. Fajana (2000) observed that industrial relations are fundamentally associated with work and wage exchange within formal contractual systems. Consequently, unresolved workplace conflict can significantly affect productivity, organisational profitability, and employee well-being. Based on the review of previous studies, it is evident that much of the existing research on emotional intelligence and conflict management has been conducted in Western societies, with relatively limited attention devoted to the African context. This study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by examining the assessment of the influence of emotional intelligence on conflict management style preference in public universities in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management preference styles in public universities in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to determine the relationship between emotional intelligence (self- awareness, self- regulation, motivation, social skill, empathy) and conflict management preference styles among senior staff.

Research Questions

There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence (self- awareness, self- regulation, motivation, social skill, empathy) and conflict management preference styles;

Research Hypotheses

The below research hypothesis is generated for this study:

$H0_1$ There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence (self- awareness, self- regulation, motivation, social skill, empathy) and conflict management preference styles among senior staff in selected Universities in Nigeria;

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaning of Emotional Intelligence

The field of emotional intelligence (EI) is relatively young, or at least it seems young in comparison to the field that deals with understanding conflicts. Since the 1990s, scientists have been focusing more on this construct (Mayer, Roberts & Barsade 2008). One of the first researchers to address emotional intelligence were Mayer and Salovey (Jordan & Troth 2002). A few years later, other scientists like Goleman or Bar-On also presented their perspectives and findings on emotional intelligence (Goleman 2006; Bar-On 2006). This led to different definitions of emotional intelligence. Among the many theories of Emotional Intelligence, the three mentioned are the most widely known. This thesis focuses on Mayer & Salovey's model as it is the base for the Emotional Intelligence questionnaire used in this study. However, Goleman and Bar-On's models will be briefly presented to illustrate the differences and to provide an overview.

Mayer & Salovey define emotional intelligence as the "ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer 1990). Affected by this are especially situations in working life and in dealing with friends and family (Asendorpf 2019). Originally, Salovey & Mayer divided this concept into three categories (Salovey & Mayer 1990), but in 2008 this was expanded and divided into the following four, (a) "the emotional perception and identification" (b) "the use of emotional information in thinking", (c) "reasoning about emotions: emotional appraisal, labeling, and language", and (d) "the emotion management" (Mayer et al. 2008).

Models of Emotional Intelligence

Ability Based Model

Salovey and Mayer (1990) proposed a model based on an individual's cognitive abilities. According to this model, emotional perception, facilitation of emotion, emotional analysis and understanding, and management of emotion constitute the four main components of emotional intelligence. The model is divided into four parts, based on which an individual's EQ is assessed. These are as follows:

Emotional perception: This aspect involves the ability to identify and express feelings both verbally and non-verbally. Emotional perception enables the accurate identification of others' emotions and feelings. It relates to an individual's mental capacity to express thoughts and emotions to others, encompassing social management and empathy. It reflects how accurately our cognitive abilities give us an advantage in non-verbal communication.

Assimilating Emotion in Thought: This component involves the ability to enhance thinking in a productive way using emotions. It also provides the capacity to communicate feelings with others effectively. The positive aspect of integrating emotion into thought is that it can improve one's own and others' moods positively, helping to build a charismatic working style.

Emotional Analysis and Understanding: This section involves the ability to understand complex emotions, including the recognition of simultaneous feelings, and the understanding of connections associated with the movement of emotions.

Management of Emotions: This part involves the ability to manage emotions effectively and supports both intellectual and personal growth. It also enhances appropriate responses to others. Emotional management includes openness toward others.

These authors argue that individuals should remain open and encourage themselves when situations are not overly challenging but should disregard those that become overwhelming. Mayer & Salovey (1993) argued that if emotional intelligence is partly independent of general intelligence, it would be of greater theoretical importance, differing in both mechanism and manifestation. Mayer, Caruso & Salovey (1999) further noted that experience and age enhance intelligence, which develops from adolescence into early adulthood. They identified empathy, life experience, and retrospective parenting style as predictors of emotional intelligence. It has also been argued that emotional intelligence refers to actual abilities rather than mere behavioural tendencies.

According to research, social intelligence and emotional intelligence are distinct concepts. Emotional intelligence encompasses not only the value of interpersonal relationships but also internal feelings that support personal development. Mayer, Caruso & Salovey (2004) further described emotional intelligence as the ability to process and work with emotional information, including meaningful emotions, sequences, and emotional patterns, as well as the evaluations of the relationships they represent. Individuals with high emotional intelligence are better able to perceive, understand, and manage emotions accurately. Such individuals require less cognitive effort in problem-solving and are more likely to engage in professions such as teaching and counselling rather than clerical and administrative roles. In 2008, Mayer, Salovey & Caruso (2008) further suggested that emotional intelligence constitutes a distinct category of mental ability, representing the capacity to engage with complex information and serve as a guide for thinking and behaviour.

Mixed Models of Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman's EI model

In 1998, Daniel Goleman proposed a model known as the Mixed Emotional Intelligence Model. Goleman argued that cognitive ability alone is not sufficient for growth in life. Other important components include innovative thinking, teamwork, collaboration, and achievement motivation. This model consists of five

components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, and it has been widely accepted globally.

Self-awareness: Having a trustworthy sense of self-confidence and a realistic assessment of our abilities, as well as being aware of how we are feeling at any given moment and using such awareness to guide our decisions, is known as personal competence. These competencies determine how we manage ourselves.

Self-regulation: Managing one's inner states, urges, and resources; the capacity to manage our feelings so that they aid rather than interfere with the work at hand; taking accountability and putting aside joy to achieve goals; and dealing with emotional suffering effectively.

Motivation: Harnessing our deepest desires can help us take initiative, strive for improvement, and persevere through challenges and difficulties. These are referred to as emotional dispositions that guide or support the achievement of goals.

Empathy: Understanding how others feel, seeing things from their point of view, and developing relationships while being in tune with a wide range of individuals. Understanding others is the ability to perceive the thoughts and feelings of others.

Social skills: Managing relationships' emotions effectively and accurately, interpreting social situations and networks, conversing with ease, and using these talents to influence and lead, negotiate and resolve conflicts, and promote cooperation and teamwork. This is referred to as one's skill at eliciting the desired reactions in others. This is referred to as one's skill at eliciting the desired reactions in others. Managing relationships' emotions effectively and accurately, interpreting social situations and networks, conversing with ease, and using these talents to influence and lead, negotiate and resolve conflicts, and promote cooperation and teamwork.

Emotional intelligence is becoming ever more important due to another reality: Those who remain in organisations as they decline due to waves of downsizing are more responsible and visible. The above model was accepted worldwide. Competencies like regulating one's emotions, handling interactions, teamwork, and leadership, which in the past a midlevel employee could easily hide a hot temper or shyness, now show-and-count more than ever. Goleman (1998) “Emotional Intelligence skills are synergistic with cognitive ones; top performers have both. The more complex the job, the more emotional intelligence matters – if only because a deficiency in these abilities can hinder the use of whatever technical expertise or intellect a person may have”.

Goleman (1995) states that “IQ and Emotional Intelligence are not opposing competencies, but rather separate ones. We all blend intellect and emotional acuity; people with a high IQ but low emotional intelligence (or low IQ and high emotional intelligence) are relatively rare, despite stereotypes. There is a slight correlation between IQ and some aspects of emotional intelligence, small enough to show these are largely interdependent entities.” Emotional Intelligence is now widely used and determines success on personal and professional levels. It’s interesting to observe how individuals with high IQs often struggle, while those with lower IQs succeed in life. Examples abound in business, politics, academics, and administration. The most crucial factor for job success is emotional intelligence. High EQ employees tend to be better team players, more innovative, and can boost overall productivity. Addressing discrepancies between an organisation’s professed ideals and its actual practices requires an emotionally aware approach. An organisation benefits from understanding its values, mission, and spirit in decision-making. The emotional purpose of a mission statement is to express a shared sense of goodness that makes working together meaningful, especially when success is measured by more relevant metrics than just financial performance. Emotional intelligence components can be recognised, evaluated, and improved personally, and they help adjust interpersonal dynamics to make groups smarter collectively.

In organisations, emotional quotient is often used to measure job performance, but emotional intelligence holds equal importance in the workplace. According to Goleman (1998), “our level of emotional intelligence is not fixed genetically, nor does it develop only in early childhood. Unlike IQ, which changes little after our teen years, emotional intelligence is largely learned and continues to develop through life experiences.” A high level of EQ is essential for certain occupations, such as teaching and law enforcement. Skills like rapport,

harmony, and comfort in group settings are vital in teaching. High IQ teachers may not always possess high EQ. Similarly, fields requiring interaction with many individuals and understanding their needs, like leadership roles, often demand greater EQ.

Bar-On's Model of Emotional Intelligence

In further studies, Bar-On proposed the Model of Emotional and Social Intelligence, exploring Salovey and Mayer's framework. It states that "emotional-social intelligence is a cross-section of interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills, and facilitators that determine how effectively we understand and express ourselves, understand others and relate with them, and cope with daily demands" (Bar-On, 2006). Being aware and perceptive in social situations means handling change on personal, social, and environmental levels while remaining adaptable and realistic in problem-solving and decision-making.

Bar-On's conceptualisation of EI outlines abilities across five major composite scales, each containing several closely related skills, totalling 15 subscales, as detailed below. According to Ravi Bangar (2005), emotional intelligence is the capacity to achieve optimal outcomes in interactions with others and oneself. Positive relationships foster positive emotions, helping us connect with others effectively and efficiently.

Components	Sub-Components
Intrapersonal	Self-regard Emotional Self-awareness Assertiveness Independence Self-actualization
Interpersonal	Empathy Social responsibility Interpersonal relationship
Adaptability	Reality testing Flexibility Problem Solving
Stress Management	Stress tolerance impulse Control
General Mood Components	Optimism Happiness

Fig 1. Bar-On model on Emotional intelligence 1997

Trait Model of Emotional Intelligence

The Trait El proposed by Petrides and Furnham (2001) refers to how someone perceives their own emotional capabilities. Trait El is **"**a constellation of emotional self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality**".** El is defined above in terms of behaviour, nature, and perceived talents. Individuals with a high degree of El are typically forceful, controlled, disciplined, confident, empathetic, optimistic, energetic, organised, gregarious, and determined to achieve their goals, according to Furnham's (2001) theory.

The Three-Level Model of Emotional Intelligence

The Three-level unifying model of EI developed by Mikolajczak (2009) to reconcile two conceptions of emotional intelligence (EI), i.e. El as ability and EI as personality (trait). Emotion-related knowledge, abilities and disposition are the main part of this model.

Knowledge

The initial level that describes the depth and breadth of emotion that is linked with knowledge. The individual's understanding of emotions and coping mechanisms in emotionally charged situations is the key point of emphasis. It is the integration of semantic and episodic knowledge into a sophisticated

framework of what functions or does not in various circumstances. Semantic refers to what individuals advise doing in a specific emotional situation, while episodic refers to past experiences.

Abilities

It is the second level of the model, which deals with the capacity to carry out a certain strategy in a sensitive scenario. It emphasises what a person can accomplish.

Dispositions

The propensity to act in a particular way when confronted with strong emotions is discussed at the third level. This level encompasses all features connected to emotions, such as different facets of neuroticism. Instead of emphasising what people can accomplish, it focuses on what they do.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to know and work appropriately. It can help people manage and understand the way in which relationships can be created. Emotional intelligence can generate a leadership style among the group members. According to the study by Hur et al. (2011) studied the team performance and the role played by transformational leadership. According to the study, there is a lack of transformational leadership style among the organisations. A South Korean public sector organisation conducted the review on 859 personnel who were divided into 55 teams. The outcomes were examined at the group level. Results showed strong co-leadership. Thus, emotional intelligence and transformational leadership styles at the managerial level can be enhanced through training. In a study by Koman & Wolff (2007) is argued that the position of the team leader affects the performance of the team, and that emotional intelligence serves as a bridge between emotional competencies and team effectiveness relation between emotional intelligence and transformation. The focus of the study is on the development and sustainability of emotionally intelligent managers and team leaders. **"**Emotional intelligence is an ability of an individual to recognise the composite ideas, to adapt the environment effectively, to learn from experience, to engage in different forms of reasoning and to overcome obstruction by careful thought**"** (Neisser et al, 1996).

Zhoc et al. (2020) findings showed that Important learning outcomes were improved by EI, and all aspects of student participation were predicted favourably. According to research, emotionally intelligent people are better able to manage both positive and negative feelings in a relationship because they have a greater emotional carrying capacity. They have a higher ability to withstand tension and recover from setbacks and are adaptable in adjusting to changing conditions. They have a high degree of connectivity with other people with emotional intelligence who are often excellent communicators, problem solvers, and connection builders, which helps human relationships. These abilities help people deal with life's challenges with patience and understanding, which are crucial for successful relationships. Understanding your emotions and how to manage them makes it simple to communicate your feelings and comprehend those of others.

Meaning of conflict

Conflict can be defined as a struggle between one, two or more parties with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values and goals. Conflict can lead to productive and non-productive results; thus, wherever a conflict may fall on this continuum, it will always affect organisational life. According to Rahim (1986), conflict is defined as an "interactive state manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or difference within or between social entities".

From organizational perspective, conflict is a social phenomenon that arises due to disagreements between individuals or groups with personal or collective objectives that interact with each other within a common environment (Proksch, 2016; Maiti & Choi, 2021). Conflicts in organisations can be categorized into different types. Relationship conflict refers to interpersonal emotional aspects (e.g. conflict of beliefs), while cognitive conflict arises from disputes about objectives (e.g. conflict of interest) (Khan, et al., 2016; Whitfield, 2012). On the other hand, personal conflict indicates personality traits of workers (e.g. conflicting personalities), while organisational conflict results from characteristics and processes which is a reflection of the organisation (e.g. organisational structure and hierarchical conflict) (Spaho, 2013; Subramoniam, 2004).

Although the occurrence of conflicts is inevitable, individuals tend to develop skills to deal with such conflicts (Whitfield, 2012). Conflict management refers to the competence of building and using rational, emotional, and social abilities to achieve productive outcomes from conflict whilst reducing the probability of escalation or damage (Runde & Flanagan, 2010). Conflict management is considered as an interactive process for transforming destructive emotional states into constructive attitudes by providing a resolution to the conflict (Elgoibar, et al., 2016). The resolution method is commonly known as conflict management styles (CMS), which refers to the actions or strategies adopted to resolve a conflict (Moberg, 2001; Maiti & Choi, 2021).The common conflict management styles are avoidance, competition, compromise, accommodation, and collaboration (Rahim, 1983a). Avoidance is an unassertive and uncooperative conflict management style that is characterized by low concern with personal goals and relationships (Northouse, 2018; Tsai & Chi, 2009). Avoidance may be beneficial when a concern is of little significance or when the probable outcome from the conflict would be too damaging (Rhoden, 2016; Northouse, 2018).

Techniques to Conflict Management

Industrial conflict arises from varied sources and is inevitable in organisational settings. This necessitates application of appropriate techniques to manage it effectively. Several approaches have been suggested particularly in behavioural science and in management literature to resolve a conflict, these procedures or techniques include:

(1) Dominance – The easiest techniques to resolve a conflict is to eliminate the other party altogether. Thus, a manager may use dominance techniques to eliminate rival parties by dismissing them. However, this technique is useful only if the problem or people-oriented rather than organisation oriented.

(2) Avoiding it altogether can reduce conflict - This involves efforts on the part of conflicting parties either to withdraw or disguise the inconsistency. By withdrawing, one party enables the other to "win" that is, becoming the sole occupant of the goal. Conflict can also be managed by redefining the goals through mutual withdrawal and establishing other non-overlapping goals.

(3) Smoothing – In these techniques, differences between parties are disguised while similarities are highlighted. It enables the conflicting parties to realise that they are not very much apart from each other. These shared viewpoints enhance the possibility of working together towards a commonly held goal.

(4) Compromise – This technique forms a commonly used method to benefit all the parties in conflict in one way or the other. Either party or one party provides something else to the other in exchange for the other's desired outcome.

(5) Hierarchical decision making - In resolving a conflict, appeal conflict. Besides, a common superior manager can be requested to use his authority to resolve conflicts through the proper decision-making process.

(6) Appeal Procedure: This has evolved to overcome the shortcomings of hierarchical decisions. Thus, if the aggrieved individual feels that his problems have not been resolved adequately by the immediate superior, he may appeal to a higher manager or a special grievance committee or the independent arbitrator. (Oloyede, 2007).

Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management

While no direct link between emotional intelligence and intersectionality was presented from literature, Rodriguez et al. (2016) suggested clear reasoning for why an intersectional understanding can be theoretically used in connection with emotional intelligence. Further, there is a need for rigorous knowledge production in the field of organisational studies about intersectionality.

As suggested, leaders of marginalised groups like Black women who have intersectional identities are exposed to structures of power and inequality that can be exposed by intersectional research (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

Along with measuring emotional intelligence as a construct, the strength of the individual's Black identity will also be measured, giving some indication of how identity relates to emotional intelligence. Along with this is the need for non-comparative studies that offer insight into the nuanced experience of a specific minority group. Two studies supported the intersectional experiences of Black women leaders by pointing out their shared experiences of having to navigate discrimination because of their race, sex, or in some instances, age (Chance, 2021; Gates, 2003). In addition, research revealed that Black women leaders, because of their intersectional status, are not chosen as often in leadership positions (Nelson & Piatak, 2021).

Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management Styles

Luca & Tarricone's (2001) research found a connection between Emotional Intelligence and successful conflict management. The assumption that successful conflict management means that conflict resolution styles such as compromising and collaborating are primarily used in the case of a conflict is also confirmed by other studies (e.g. Jordan & Troth, 2002; Zhang, Chen & Sun, 2015). Where does this connection come from? Some authors argue that interest, both in others and in oneself, depends on the situation and the personality (e.g. Wood & Bell 2008; Van de Vliert 1997; Sandy, Boardman & Deutsch 2006). Based on the previous discussions, this appears to be a convincing argument. The interest in another person and in oneself reflects the axes of the TKI and a high correlation between emotional intelligence (or at least in trait Emotional Intelligence) and personality traits.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that not all conflict resolution styles show a high correlation with Emotional Intelligence. The study by Jordan & Troth (2002), one of the first studies investigating the correlation between Emotional Intelligence and conflict resolution styles, found that people who tend to use the conflict resolution styles avoiding or competing are more likely to have lower scores in emotional intelligence. This view is supported by Brackett, Warner & Bosco (2005), who found that couples in which both partners show low Emotional Intelligence scores are more likely to have conflicts than couples in which at least one person shows high Emotional Intelligence values. In the authors' opinion, the harmony of a partnership depends on how well a person can deal with conflicts. In addition, they question whether couples, where both partners have low values in Emotional Intelligence, would primarily tend to avoid conflict. Assuming that this poor conflict management is related to the conflict management styles of avoiding or competing, and based on the reviewed literature, the hypothesis derived shows that people who prefer the conflict resolution style of avoiding tend to score low in the emotional intelligence scale compared to people preferring the other conflict resolution styles.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This research study will adopt two models that are directly linked to the variables, which are Rahim's Conflict Management Model and the Ability-Based Model of Emotional Intelligence by Mayer and Salovey. The detailed explanations of the two theories are hereby presented for proper understanding of the models.

Rahim's Conflict Management Preference Styles Model

This model posited that conflict management preference styles can be understood along two dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. Based on the above dimensions, Rahim identified five conflict management preference styles and they are: (1) Integrating: High concern for self, high concern for others, seeking a win-win solution; (2) Obliging: Low concern for self, high concern for others, prioritizing the other party's needs; (3) Compromising: Moderate concern for both self and others, finding a mutually acceptable solution; (4) Avoiding: Low concern for both self and others, avoiding the conflict altogether; (5) Dominating: high concern for self, low concern for others, pursuing one's own goals at the expense of others. The above model suggests that individuals with higher Emotional Intelligence are more likely to utilise integrating and compromising styles, which are considered more constructive and collaborative approaches to conflict management.

Ability-Based Model of Emotional Intelligence (Mayer and Salovey)

The model views Emotional Intelligence as a set of abilities related to perceiving, understanding, managing, and using emotions. The ability-based model identifies four key dimensions of Emotional Intelligence: (1) Perceiving Emotions: Recognising and identifying one's own and others' emotions; (2) Using Emotions to Facilitate Thought: Utilising emotions to guide thinking and decision-making; (3) Understanding Emotions: Comprehending the complexity of emotions and their causes; and (4) Managing Emotions: Regulating and expressing emotions effectively. The model defines individuals with higher Emotional Intelligence as being better equipped to manage their own emotions and understand those of others, which can lead to more effective and constructive conflict management.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design because its primary objective was to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management preference styles among senior staff of public universities in Nigeria rather than to establish the cause-and-effect relationships. It is pertinent to note that the descriptive survey research is limited to establishing causality. The descriptive survey research design was appropriate because it allows for the description of the phenomenon as it is and not as it was. It also provides all the respondents with an equal chance of participation in the study. Besides, the adopted design creates room for data collection without manipulation of the variables of interest in the study.

Consequently, the findings are interpreted as indicating statistically significant associations rather than causal effects. The descriptive survey research guarantees interpretation of the influence of emotional intelligent on conflict management preference styles with the context of predictive or associative relationships rather than direct causation. The descriptive research design was adopted for this research work to help in generating valid data on independent (emotional intelligence) and dependent (conflict management) variables without manipulating any variables of interest. The Universities used in this study are Osun State University (Uniosun), Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (Lautech), and Ekiti State University (EKSU). Others are Adekunle Ajasin University (AAUA), Lagos State University (LASU) and Olabisi Onabanjo University (OOU) while the target population for the study was sourced from the Administrative Units of the selected Universities and consists of one thousand, four hundred and ten (1,410) senior academic and non-teaching staff, the study was restricted to only employees who had served in the selected Universities for at least six years as requirement for their participation in the study.

Population to the Study

With respect to the study population, the research deliberately focused on senior staff of public universities in Nigeria because this group occupies strategic administrative and academic positions where conflict management and emotional intelligence are particularly relevant to organizational effectiveness. The structured survey was used to collect primary data, and in compliance with the established sample size, a total of 1,509 copies of the questionnaire will be produced, distributed, and 1,410 were utilized from the selected sampled population with the use of structured questionnaire wish consist of three sections: A, B, and C to collect information on social demographic, emotional intelligence and conflict management preference styles. The researchers reported a Cronbach Alpha of 0.86 for the emotional intelligence scale and 0.81 for the conflict management preference styles scale. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to test the hypothesis, while the hypothesis was tested at 0.05 alpha level of 0.05.

Limitation to the Study

It is recognized that the findings may not be directly generalizable to junior staff, private universities and other organizational contexts. This limitation has been explicitly acknowledged in the study, and caution is advised when extending the findings beyond the target population. Regarding the use of self-reported questionnaires, the possibility of social desirability bias is acknowledged, particularly because emotional intelligence and

conflict management behaviours are socially valued attributes. To minimize this limitation, respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, participation was voluntary, and there were no right or wrong answers. These measures were intended to encourage honest responses and reduce response bias. However, the identified limitations did not have any negative effects on the findings of the study.

Suggestions for Further Study

Future studies may employ longitudinal, quasi-experimental, or experimental research designs to establish causal relationships more conclusively. Future research should replicate the study across different categories of employees, private universities, and other sectors to enhance external validity. Furthermore, the research instruments used were standardized, validated and demonstrated satisfactory reliability indices. Nevertheless, future studies may strengthen the robustness of findings by incorporating multiple sources of data, such as supervisor ratings, peer assessments, behavioural observations, interviews or mixed-method approaches to complement self-reported measures.

Test of Hypotheses

There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management preference styles.

Table 1: Canonical Correlations: Significant relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management preference styles

	Correlation	Eigenvalue	Wilks Statistic	F	Sig.
Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS)					
EIS1	.350	.139	.339	1.433	.000
EIS2	.326	.119	.387	1.345	.000
EIS3	.308	.105	.433	1.270	.000
EIS4	.303	.101	.478	1.201	.000
EIS5	.270	.079	.526	1.124	.014
EIS6	.260	.072	.568	1.070	.109
SRS1	.257	.071	.609	1.017	.383
SRS2	.234	.058	.652	.953	.775
SRS3	.230	.056	.689	.904	.937
SRS4	.218	.050	.728	.845	.992
SRS5	.203	.043	.764	.787	.999
SAS1	.183	.035	.797	.735	1.000
SAS2	.170	.030	.825	.695	1.000
SAS3	.167	.029	.849	.660	1.000
SAS4	.152	.024	.874	.615	1.000
SAS5	.139	.020	.894	.578	1.000
MS1	.133	.018	.912	.548	1.000
MS2	.126	.016	.928	.512	1.000
MS3	.114	.013	.943	.471	1.000
MS4	.109	.012	.956	.434	1.000
MS5	.095	.009	.967	.387	1.000
ES1	.091	.008	.976	.347	1.000
ES2	.085	.007	.984	.289	1.000
ES3	.062	.004	.992	.205	1.000
ES4	.050	.003	.995	.156	1.000
ES5	.032	.001	.998	.106	1.000
SSS1	.029	.001	.999	.094	1.000
SSS2	.095	.009	.967	.387	1.000

SSS3	.091	.008	.976	.347	1.000
SSS4	.015	.000	1.000	.043	1.000

Source: Author's Computation (2026)

Hypothesis One, which stated that there is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management preference styles among senior staff in selected State Universities in South-West, Nigeria. The table presents the multivariate correlation analysis conducted to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence dimensions and conflict management preference styles among senior staff in selected State Universities in South-West, Nigeria. The emotional intelligence constructs examined include Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS), Self-Regulation Scale (SRS), Self-Awareness Scale (SAS), Motivation Scale (MS), Empathy Scale (ES), and Social Skill Scale (SSS).

The results revealed varying degrees of relationship between emotional intelligence indicators and conflict management preference styles. The canonical correlation coefficients ranged from .015 to .350, indicating positive relationships between emotional intelligence variables and conflict management preference styles. This suggests that improvements in emotional intelligence dimensions are associated with better and more constructive conflict management preference styles among senior staff in the selected universities. The findings showed that the strongest relationships were observed among the Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS) items. Specifically, EIS1 recorded the highest correlation coefficient (r = .350), with an eigenvalue of .139, Wilks' statistic of .339, F-value of 1.433, and a significant p-value of .000. Similarly, EIS2 (r = .326, p = .000), EIS3 (r = .308, p = .000), EIS4 (r = .303, p = .000), and EIS5 (r = .270, p = .014) also demonstrated statistically significant relationships with conflict management preference styles. These results imply that emotional intelligence competencies significantly influence how senior staff manage conflicts within the university environment.

However, some dimensions such as EIS6 (p = .109), SRS1–SRS5, SAS1–SAS5, MS1–MS5, ES1–ES5, and some social skill indicators recorded p-values greater than the 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that although positive relationships existed between these variables and conflict management preference styles, their relationships were not statistically significant in this analysis. The Wilks' Lambda statistics further supported the findings. Lower Wilks' Lambda values observed among the early emotional intelligence indicators, particularly EIS1 to EIS5, indicate stronger explanatory power and stronger relationships with conflict management preference styles. As the Wilks' Lambda values approached 1.000 in later variables, the strength of the relationship reduced considerably.

In relation to the study topic, the findings imply that emotional intelligence plays an important role in determining the conflict management preference styles adopted by senior staff in selected State Universities in South-West, Nigeria. Senior staff with higher emotional intelligence competencies, especially in emotional awareness and emotional control, are more likely to utilise constructive and cooperative conflict management strategies in handling interpersonal and organisational conflicts within the university system. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which stated that there is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management preference styles among senior staff in selected State Universities in South-West, Nigeria, was partially rejected. The study concluded that significant relationships exist between certain emotional intelligence dimensions and conflict management preference styles among senior staff in the selected universities.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study explored the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management preference styles in public universities in Nigeria. Based on the analysis, the findings are hereby discussed as presented below.

The presence of some non-significant indicators suggests that not all emotional intelligence items equally contribute to conflict management styles. This may imply measurement variability or contextual differences in how certain emotional competencies are expressed in academic work environments. Similar inconsistencies have been reported in previous studies, where emotional intelligence components such as empathy or motivation may show weaker predictive power depending on organisational culture and leadership structures

(Cherniss, 2019; Schlaerth et al., 2021). The correlational analysis further reinforced the importance of emotional intelligence by revealing positive relationships between emotional intelligence dimensions and conflict management preference styles. The strongest associations were observed in the emotional intelligence scale items, particularly those related to emotional awareness and regulation. This suggests that senior staff who are more emotionally aware and capable of regulating their emotions are more likely to adopt constructive conflict management strategies such as collaboration and compromise. This finding is consistent with recent empirical studies which show that emotionally intelligent employees tend to prefer integrative conflict resolution styles that enhance teamwork and organisational harmony (Nair & Vohra, 2021; Salovey & Grewal, 2020).

Although a few isolated items showed significant differences in accommodating and avoiding behaviours, these were not consistent enough to indicate a systematic gender effect. This implies that while minor differences may exist in specific situations, gender does not fundamentally determine conflict management preference styles among senior staff in the studied institutions. Overall, the findings of this study highlight emotional intelligence as a significant psychological resource that enhances effective conflict management among senior university staff. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence are more likely to adopt collaborative and constructive approaches, thereby fostering healthier interpersonal relationships and reducing workplace tension. However, the study also demonstrates that emotional intelligence operates within a broader contextual framework influenced by demographic and organisational factors. Therefore, effective conflict management in higher education institutions is best understood as an interaction between emotional competencies, individual characteristics, and institutional environments.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that emotional intelligence is an important determinant of conflict management preference styles among senior staff in selected Universities in Nigeria. The study established that emotional intelligence dimensions, particularly self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, significantly related to the manner in which senior staff perceive, respond to, and manage workplace conflict situations. The study concludes that emotionally intelligent individuals are more likely to adopt constructive conflict management strategies characterised by collaboration, compromise, interpersonal understanding, and problem-solving approaches. Emotional intelligence enables senior staff to regulate emotions effectively, understand the emotional states of others, maintain productive interpersonal relationships, and reduce destructive reactions during organisational disagreements.

The study revealed that significant positive relationships existed between emotional intelligence and conflict management preference styles. Canonical correlation analysis showed positive associations between emotional intelligence dimensions and conflict management preference styles, particularly emotional awareness and emotional regulation variables. This suggests that emotionally intelligent senior staff were more likely to adopt collaborative, compromising, and constructive approaches in handling workplace conflict.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

The study reinforced the growing recognition of emotional intelligence as a critical behavioural factor in organisational conflict management. It also established emotional intelligence as a significant predictor of conflict management preference styles, revealing the moderating roles of gender and managerial experience, and extending the applicability of emotional intelligence theory to conflict management practices within Nigerian university systems. The study provided empirical support for theories linking emotional competence with positive workplace behaviour and effective interpersonal relations. It added to organizational behavioural literature that emotional competencies and professional experiences influenced conflict management preference than gender differences. Finally, the study provided practical knowledge for improving institutional harmony, employee relations, and organisational effectiveness in Nigerian Universities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study on the relationship between emotional intelligence and

conflict management preference styles among senior staff in selected universities in Nigeria, the following are recommended:

i. University authorities should establish formal mediation, counselling, and conflict resolution mechanisms through dedicated staff support units, counselling centres, grievance management committees, or mediation panels where employees can access professional guidance and assistance in resolving interpersonal and workplace conflicts in a constructive, confidential, and non-adversarial manner. Senior staff members should be encouraged to engage in continuous self-development aimed at strengthening emotional intelligence competencies through mentoring, reflective practice, coaching, peer learning, emotional self-assessment, interpersonal relationship development, and participation in professional training programmes. Continuous emotional growth among staff will improve their ability to manage workplace tensions and adopt more effective conflict management approaches.

ii. University management should encourage periodic assessment and monitoring of workplace conflict dynamics and emotional intelligence competencies among staff to identify emerging interpersonal issues early and implement timely interventions that enhance institutional peace, productivity, and organisational effectiveness.

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