A STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES AMONG SCHOOL LEADERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN REGION XI

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships among Trait emotional intelligence, organizational climate, leadership styles, and conflict management styles among school leaders in private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Region XI, Philippines. Using quantitative descriptive-correlational design, data from 317 school leaders were analyzed through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Results indicate high levels of emotional intelligence, organizational climate, and leadership styles, with democratic and transformational styles being most prominent. Accommodating and collaborating conflict management styles were frequently observed, fostering effective teamwork. The SEM demonstrated a best-fit model, highlighting significant direct influences of organizational climate and leadership styles on conflict management styles, while emotional intelligence showed indirect effects mediated by other factors. Key indicators such as sociability, collaboration, and transformational leadership emerged as critical contributors to effective conflict management. This study fills a gap in multivariate research in the Philippine context, particularly in the private HEI sector. Practical implications include enhancing leadership practices, fostering positive organizational climates, and refining conflict management strategies. By contextualizing findings within Region XI, the study offers a framework for targeted interventions, promoting institutional resilience and effective leadership.

Keyword: *Educational Leadership, management practices, organizational climate, Trait emotional intelligence, leadership style, conflict management style, school leaders, HEI, structural equation modeling, Philippines*

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict management is a pivotal aspect of organizational dynamics in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Ineffective strategies have been linked to reduced morale, unresolved issues, and diminished institutional performance [1], [2]. Studies from South Africa, the Netherlands, and Taiwan highlight how poor conflict resolution by school leaders contributes to productivity loss and dissatisfaction among staff and students [3]–[5]. In the Philippines, a similar trend persists, with over 70% of higher education leaders reportedly relying on outdated or overly controlling strategies [6]–[8].

In Region XI, research has shown both effective and problematic conflict management practices among HEI leaders. While some administrators demonstrate proactive approaches [9], others favor dominating styles with minimal

improvement in institutional climate [10], [11]. These mixed findings underscore the need for a deeper examination of the factors influencing conflict resolution in academic leadership.

Among these factors, trait emotional intelligence (EI) plays a critical role in how leaders handle conflicts. High EI enables administrators to navigate interpersonal tensions with empathy and composure, often leading to collaborative and integrative conflict management styles [12]–[14]. Similarly, organizational climate—whether perceived as open and supportive or defensive and rigid—significantly shapes conflict behaviors and outcomes [15]–[18].

Leadership style also strongly determines conflict resolution approaches. Transformational leaders promote dialogue and collective problem-solving, while transactional and autocratic leaders often rely on formalities or suppress dissent, potentially worsening disputes [19], [20]. Laissez-faire leaders, by contrast, may neglect conflict management altogether, leading to organizational dysfunction [21].

Although existing studies have explored these variables in isolation—such as organizational climate and conflict styles, or EI and leadership approaches—few have examined their interrelationship using multivariate analysis, particularly in Philippine HEIs [13], [15], [19], [20]. This study addresses that gap by employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to investigate the influence of organizational climate, trait emotional intelligence, and leadership styles on the conflict management styles of school leaders in private HEIs in Region XI, Philippines.

By localizing the analysis and integrating these critical factors, the study aims to generate actionable insights for improving leadership practices, institutional climate, and conflict resolution processes. The findings are expected to inform policy development, capacity-building programs, and future research in higher education leadership.

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1.1 Purpose of the Study

The study determined the best fit model that explains the conflict management styles of school leaders in private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Region XI utilizing Structural Equation Modeling. Also, the study examined the interrelationship of Trait emotional intelligence, organizational climate, and leadership styles with conflict management styles. The findings intended to offer empirical insights that may inform leadership development, enhance institutional policies, and promote more effective conflict resolution strategies tailored to the dynamic environment of higher education.

1.2 Literature Review

Trait Emotional Intelligence

Trait emotional intelligence (EI) refers to an individual's self-perceptions of emotional abilities, which influence how they perceive, process, and manage emotions in themselves and others. It is considered a lower-order personality trait that affects emotional functioning across various life domains [23]. Petrides defined trait EI as a constellation of emotional self-perceptions embedded within personality hierarchies [24], while Andrei et al. emphasized its predictive role in behavior and coping responses [25]. Trait EI includes key emotional and social skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, relationship management, and emotional expression [26], all of which are crucial for effective social functioning and leadership. Mikolajczak et al. and Di Fabio and Saklofske likewise highlighted the role of trait EI in navigating interpersonal interactions and achieving psychological well-being [27], [28].

Descriptive studies have explored the variability of trait EI, offering insights into developmental and individual differences. For example, Andrei et al. [25] and Mavroveli et al. [29] identified the range of emotional self-perceptions across age and contexts, while Frederickson et al. [30] provided evidence of its significance in shaping socio-emotional competence. Petrides et al. [31] operationalized trait EI through the Trait Emotional

Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue), which includes four core dimensions: emotionality, self-control, well-being, and sociability.

Organizational Climate

Organizational climate refers to the shared perceptions of policies, practices, and procedures that influence how individuals experience their work environment. It affects motivation, job satisfaction, and overall performance [32]. Schneider et al. [33] defined it as the collective understanding of both formal and informal organizational rules and processes. Key indicators of climate include collaboration, student relations, resource availability, participatory decision-making, and innovation [34]–[36]. These components collectively shape institutional culture and effectiveness, especially in educational settings.

Organizational climate plays a critical role in fostering a productive and psychologically safe environment. Fetzer [34] emphasized the role of collaboration, while Hoy [35] highlighted the importance of inclusive decision-making. Innovation, as discussed by Scott and Bruce [36], helps institutions remain adaptive and forward-looking. Positive student-faculty relationships [37] and sufficient school resources [38] further enhance educational outcomes.

Measurement tools such as the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ) and the Organizational Climate Index (OCI) are widely used to assess these dimensions [39]. Recent research shows that favorable climates are linked with job satisfaction, lower turnover intention, and improved performance [40]–[42]. Thapa et al. [43] underscored the importance of a supportive climate in boosting student achievement and satisfaction. Aboudahr [44] consolidated these indicators—collaboration, student relations, school resources, decision-making, and instructional innovation—as essential to understanding and improving organizational climate in HEIs.

Leadership Styles

Leadership style encompasses the behaviors, decision-making approaches, and relational strategies leaders use to guide their teams and achieve institutional goals. In higher education, leadership style is pivotal in shaping culture, engagement, and performance. Northouse [45] describes it as a behavioral pattern that influences how leaders interact with followers. Transformational leadership—focused on vision, inspiration, and empowerment—has been shown to foster innovation and commitment [46], while transactional leadership emphasizes structure and task performance through rewards and sanctions [47]. Other leadership approaches, such as servant leadership and distributed leadership, promote shared responsibility and team development [48], [49].

Descriptive studies have identified the prevalence of various leadership styles across academic settings. Alghamdi and Aslam [50] found transformational leadership to be the most perceived style in Saudi universities, followed by transactional leadership. In Pakistan, participative and democratic styles were preferred in HEIs with inclusive cultures [51], while in the Philippines, democratic and transformational leadership were associated with staff morale and institutional success [52].

In this study, leadership is operationalized through five key indicators: autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, transformational, and transactional styles. These dimensions represent different approaches to authority, engagement, and decision-making, providing a comprehensive view of leadership within HEIs.

Conflict Management Styles

Conflict management styles (CMS) refer to habitual strategies individuals use to handle disagreements in organizational settings. These styles are shaped by personality traits, emotional intelligence, and situational factors [53]. According to Caputo et al. [53], CMS are patterns of interpersonal behavior that vary in assertiveness and cooperativeness. Nelson and Campbell [54] categorized these into five main styles: accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, competing, and compromising.

In academic institutions, conflict is inevitable due to overlapping responsibilities and divergent perspectives. However, how conflict is managed directly influences institutional climate and collaboration. Gumiran [55] found that school administrators who adopted collaborative styles fostered stronger engagement and morale. Conversely, reliance on avoidance or competition often led to unresolved disputes and diminished trust. Phillips and Gully [56] and Verderber and Sellnow [57] emphasized the need for adaptive conflict responses rooted in effective communication and leadership.

Descriptive research supports these findings. Ojo and Abolade [58] reported that collaborative and compromising styles were linked to higher satisfaction in Nigerian universities, while dominant use of avoidance correlated with lower job commitment. In the Philippine context, collaborative styles were associated with faculty empowerment, while overuse of avoidance led to frustration and unresolved grievances [55].

In this study, CMS are measured through five indicators: accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, competing, and compromising. Understanding these styles and their situational effectiveness supports healthier workplace dynamics and more constructive leadership.

2. METHODS

The study employed a descriptive-correlational design to examine the interrelationships among organizational climate, trait emotional intelligence, leadership styles, and conflict management styles among 317 school leaders from private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Region XI. Respondents were selected using stratified random sampling [3][4], with the sample size determined through the Raosoft calculator.

Four validated and adapted Likert-type instruments were used: Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Short Form (TEIQue-SF) [31], Aboudahr's Organizational Climate Questionnaire [43], Business Education Administrators' Leadership Styles Questionnaire (BEALSQ) [5], and Gumiran's Conflict Management Styles Questionnaire [54]. These tools measured the key constructs based on their respective subdomains and demonstrated high internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.74$ to 0.938).

Data collection was conducted through face-to-face surveys with informed consent obtained from all participants. Ethical clearance was secured from the University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee.

Mean and standard deviation were used to describe variable levels. Pearson correlation was applied to assess interrelationships among variables. Multiple linear regression identified the predictors of conflict management styles, while Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to determine the best-fit model. Model fit was evaluated using CMIN/DF, TLI, CFI, RMSEA, and PCLOSE [6].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the results of the study and the interpretation of findings based on the research objectives. It includes descriptive statistics on the levels of organizational climate, trait emotional intelligence, leadership styles, and conflict management styles, as well as the results of correlation analysis, regression analysis, and structural equation modeling. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and their implications for leadership and conflict management in higher education institutions.

3.1 Descriptive Analysis

Table 1: Trait Emotional Intelligence of School Leaders

Indicators	Mean	Description
Emotionality	4.04	High
Self-Control	3.98	High
Well-Being	4.06	High
Sociability	3.98	High
Overall Mean	**4.03**	**High**

Presented in Table 1 is the level of trait emotional intelligence among school leaders. Well-being recorded the highest mean of 4.06, followed by emotionality at 4.04. Both self-control and sociability registered the same mean of 3.98. The overall mean of 4.03 is interpreted as high, indicating that trait emotional intelligence is oftentimes demonstrated by school leaders in Region XI. This implies that they are generally emotionally aware, optimistic, and able to manage their emotions and social interactions effectively. This finding supports the studies of Brackett et al. [58] and Ng et al. [59], who emphasized that emotionally intelligent leaders often maintain positive relationships and respond appropriately to others' emotions, contributing to effective leadership practices.

Table 2: Organizational Climate

Indicators	Mean	Description
Collaboration	4.12	High
Student Relations	3.88	High
School Resources	3.74	High
Decision-Making	3.73	High
Instructional Innovation	4.02	High
Overall Mean	**3.96**	**High**

Presented in Table 2 is the level of organizational climate as perceived by school leaders in private HEIs. Collaboration recorded the highest mean at 4.12, followed by instructional innovation at 4.02. Student relations, school resources, and decision-making followed with mean scores ranging from 3.73 to 3.88. The overall mean of 3.96 is interpreted as high, indicating that a positive organizational climate is oftentimes evident in higher education institutions in Region XI. This suggests that the work environment generally promotes teamwork, innovation, and professional support. These results are consistent with the findings of Schneider et al. [32] and Hoy et al. [39], who emphasized that a favorable organizational climate enhances staff engagement, communication, and institutional effectiveness.

Table 3: Leadership Styles

Indicators	Mean	Description
Autocratic	1.73	Very Low
Democratic	4.29	Very High
Laissez-Faire	3.34	Moderate
Transformational	4.09	High
Transactional	4.13	High
Overall Mean	**3.70**	**Moderate**

Meanwhile, presented in Table 3 is the level of leadership styles among school leaders. Democratic leadership recorded the highest mean at 4.29, interpreted as very high, followed by transactional (4.13) and transformational (4.09) leadership styles, both described as high. Laissez-faire leadership received a moderate rating (3.34), while autocratic leadership obtained the lowest mean of 1.73, interpreted as very low. The overall mean of 3.70 indicates a moderate level of leadership styles among school leaders in Region XI. The results suggest that participative and supportive leadership approaches are more frequently demonstrated than authoritarian or passive styles. This supports the findings of Northouse [44] and Manzanos et al. [51], who noted that democratic and transformational styles are commonly practiced in academic institutions and contribute positively to organizational outcomes.

Table 4: Conflict Management Styles

Indicators	Mean	Description
Accommodating	4.27	Very High
Avoiding	2.70	Moderate

Collaborating	4.13	High
Competing	4.06	High
Compromising	4.10	High
Overall Mean	**3.84**	**High**

Lastly, presented in Table 4 is the level of conflict management styles among school leaders. Accommodating recorded the highest mean at 4.27, interpreted as very high. Collaborating (4.13), compromising (4.10), and competing (4.06) were all rated high, while avoiding had the lowest mean of 2.70, described as moderate. The overall mean of 3.84 indicates a high level of conflict management styles practiced by school leaders in Region XI. This suggests that school leaders often apply cooperative and solution-oriented approaches in resolving conflicts, while avoidance is used less frequently. These findings align with Gumiran [54] and Caputo et al. [52], who highlighted that effective conflict resolution in educational institutions is often characterized by collaboration, compromise, and accommodation to maintain harmony and organizational stability.

3.2 Significant Relationships

Table 5: Significance of Relationship of Trait Emotional Intelligence, Organizational Climate, Leadership Styles to Conflict Management Styles

Variables Paired	r	p value	Decision
Trait Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management Styles	.124	.028	Significant
Organizational Climate and Conflict Management Styles	.221	.000	Significant
Leadership Styles and Conflict Management Styles	.405	.000	Significant

Presented in Table 5 is the correlation between trait emotional intelligence, organizational climate, leadership styles, and conflict management styles. All exogenous variables showed a statistically significant relationship with the endogenous variable.

Trait emotional intelligence is significantly related to conflict management styles ($r = .124$, $p = .028$). Although the correlation is weak, the result implies that school leaders with higher levels of emotional self-awareness and regulation tend to manage conflicts more effectively. This supports the findings of Brackett et al. [58] and Ng et al. [59], who highlighted the role of emotional intelligence in fostering collaborative conflict resolution.

Organizational climate also exhibited a significant positive relationship with conflict management styles ($r = .221$, $p = .000$). This suggests that when school leaders perceive a supportive, participative, and innovative work environment, they are more likely to adopt constructive conflict resolution approaches. The result is aligned with the study of Jiang and Probst [41], which emphasized the impact of organizational climate on cooperative behavior in managing conflicts.

Lastly, leadership styles demonstrated a moderate positive correlation with conflict management styles ($r = .405$, $p = .000$). This indicates that the type of leadership practiced—particularly democratic and transformational—strongly influences how school leaders address and resolve conflicts. The result supports previous findings by Northouse [44] and Manzanos et al. [51], who asserted that inclusive and motivational leadership fosters open communication and effective conflict resolution in academic institutions.

3.3 Best Fit Model of Conflict Management Styles

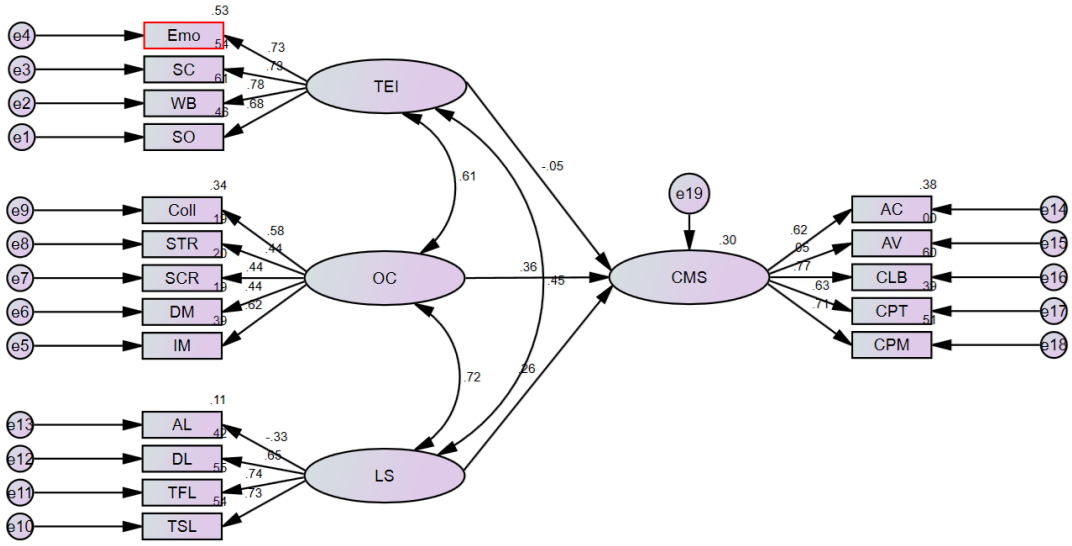

Fig 1: Hypothesized Model of Conflict Management Styles.

The hypothesized structural equation model was developed to examine the direct effects of Trait Emotional Intelligence (TEI), Organizational Climate (OC), and Leadership Styles (LS) on Conflict Management Styles (CMS) among school leaders. Latent constructs were represented by ovals, while their respective observed indicators were enclosed in rectangles. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was first conducted to validate the measurement model.

Trait Emotional Intelligence was measured using four indicators: emotionality (β = .783), self-control (β = .707), well-being (β = .833), and sociability (β = .648), all significant at $p < .001$. Organizational Climate was indicated by collaboration (β = .563), decision-making (β = .623), instructional innovation (β = .629), student relations (β = .417), and school resources (β = .383). Leadership Styles included autocratic (β = .694), democratic (β = .580), laissez-faire (β = .591), transformational (β = .681), and transactional leadership (β = .768). Conflict Management Styles, the dependent variable, was measured by accommodating (β = .713), avoiding (β = .543), collaborating (β = .725), competing (β = .423), and compromising (β = .654).

Squared multiple correlations (R^2) revealed strong internal consistency among indicators. Within Trait Emotional Intelligence, well-being (R^2 = .694) and emotionality (R^2 = .613) had the highest explained variances. Among the conflict management indicators, collaborating (R^2 = .526) and compromising (R^2 = .428) were the most strongly represented dimensions.

Despite the satisfactory measurement loadings, the hypothesized model did not meet the ideal thresholds for goodness-of-fit. The model yielded the following fit indices: CMIN/df = 3.082, NFI = .779, TLI = .807, CFI = .837, GFI = .872, RMSEA = .081, and PCLOSE = .000. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), acceptable fit values should include CMIN/df < 3.0, and values above .90 for NFI, TLI, CFI, and GFI, as well as RMSEA below .08 with PCLOSE > .05. The values obtained suggest marginal to poor fit, particularly in NFI, TLI, and PCLOSE, indicating that the model did not adequately capture the relationships among the variables.

As such, model re-specification is recommended to improve the structural model's overall fit. This may involve trimming weak indicators or examining modification indices to optimize theoretical coherence and statistical adequacy, consistent with the re-specification approach discussed by Chavez [67] and Kline [68]. Due to the insufficient model fit of the initial structural model, model re-specification was undertaken. This process followed established SEM practices [69, 70] and was guided by theoretical grounding and empirical modification indices. In the revised model, Organizational Climate and Leadership Styles were retained as direct predictors of Conflict Management Styles, while the path from Trait Emotional Intelligence was removed due to non-significance. However, Trait Emotional Intelligence was retained in the model because of its strong correlations with Organizational Climate (r = .558) and Leadership Styles (r = .445), suggesting potential indirect effects.

Table 6: Goodness of Fit Measures of the Best Fit Model

	Model Fit Value		
Indices	**Criteria**	**Initial Model**	**Best-Fit Model**
CMIN/DF	<3.0	3.082	2.149
NFI	>.90	.779	.903
TLI	>.90	.807	.925
CFI	>.90	.837	.945
GFI	>.90	.872	.939
RMSEA	<.08	.081	.060
PCLOSE	>.05	.000	.103

The re-specified model showed improved fit across all indices: CMIN/df = 2.149, NFI = .903, TLI = .925, CFI = .945, GFI = .939, RMSEA = .060, and PCLOSE = .103. All values fall within recommended thresholds for good model fit [71, 72], indicating that the restructured model better represents the observed data.

As shown in Figure 2, Organizational Climate had a direct effect of β = .254, while Leadership Styles had a stronger direct effect of β = .361 on Conflict Management Styles. These results imply that a supportive, resource-enriched, and collaborative organizational environment, alongside effective leadership—particularly transformational and democratic—contributes significantly to constructive conflict management in higher education institutions.

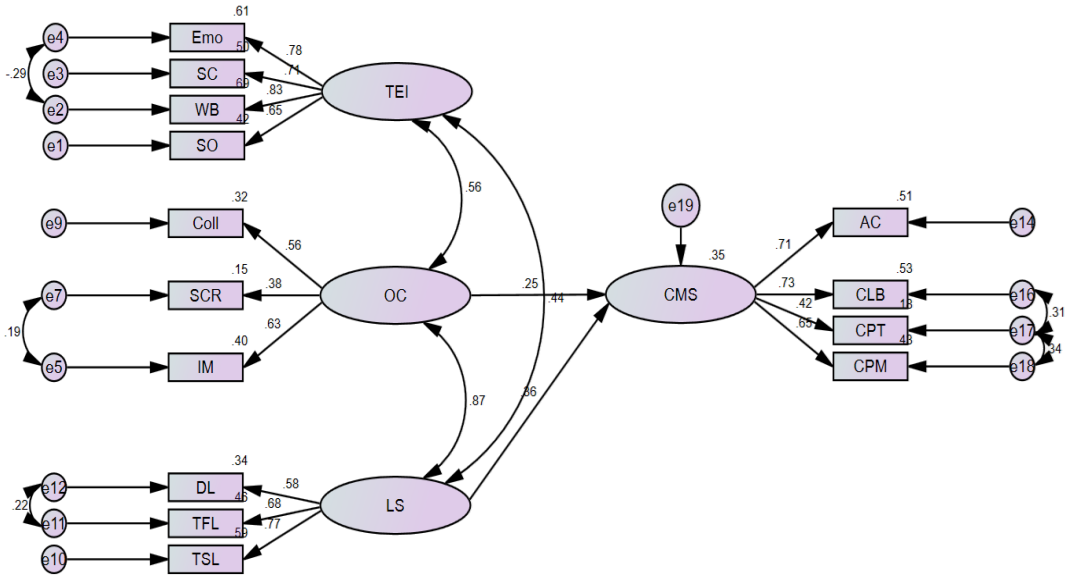

Fig 2: Best-Fit Model of Conflict Management Styles

Although Trait Emotional Intelligence was not a significant direct predictor, its strong positive correlations with Organizational Climate and Leadership Styles suggest an indirect influence. This supports the Emotional Intelligence Theory [31], which proposes that emotional regulation and awareness enhance social interactions and institutional functioning.

These results are consistent with prior findings. Jiang and Probst [41] highlighted how a positive organizational climate fosters cooperative conflict management through trust and open communication. Similarly, Schneider et al. [33] emphasized that supportive climates increase the use of accommodating and compromising styles. The strong influence of leadership styles is also supported by Avolio and Bass [43], who identified transformational leadership as promoting collaboration and effective resolution. Brown et al. [56] and Tsarouhas et al. [57] further affirmed that transformational and transactional leadership styles improve team dynamics and reduce conflict escalation.

Additionally, Social Exchange Theory [73], Path-Goal Theory [74], and Contingency Theory of Leadership [75] reinforce the theoretical foundation of this study, asserting that interpersonal exchanges and adaptive leadership behaviors shape organizational responses, including conflict resolution.

In summary, the best-fit model confirms that Organizational Climate and Leadership Styles are significant direct predictors of conflict management strategies, while Trait Emotional Intelligence contributes indirectly by influencing both. This underscores the need for higher education institutions to invest in cultivating positive organizational environments, adaptive leadership practices, and emotional intelligence development to strengthen conflict resilience among school leaders.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the interrelationships among Trait Emotional Intelligence, Organizational Climate, Leadership Styles, and Conflict Management Styles among school leaders in private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Region XI using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The findings revealed that while all three exogenous variables initially showed significant bivariate correlations with conflict management styles, only Organizational Climate and Leadership Styles emerged as significant direct predictors in the final best-fit model. Trait Emotional Intelligence, although not a direct predictor, exhibited strong correlations with both organizational climate and leadership, suggesting its indirect influence on conflict resolution behaviors in academic settings.

The results underscore the critical role of fostering a supportive, collaborative, and innovative organizational environment, as well as adopting adaptive and empowering leadership styles—particularly transformational and democratic—in promoting effective conflict management. The best-fit model accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in conflict management styles, affirming the importance of institutional and interpersonal factors in shaping how conflicts are addressed. These findings provide practical implications for HEI administrators and policymakers: leadership development programs, emotional intelligence training, and organizational reforms should be prioritized to cultivate a work environment conducive to professional harmony, collaboration, and effective dispute resolution.

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