

Conflict Management Styles in the Construction Industry: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. Conflict represents an inherent and pervasive organisational phenomenon within the construction industry, which is distinguished by its complex multi-stakeholder environments, demanding project timelines, and significant resource constraints. Despite growing scholarly interest in conflict management, no systematic review has previously synthesised the empirical evidence on the dominant conflict management styles adopted within this sector. This study addresses that gap by conducting the first systematic literature review on conflict management styles in the construction industry, following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A structured search of the Web of Science database yielded 530 papers in total, of which 16 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2026 met the inclusion criteria and were subsequently analysed using narrative synthesis. Three principal themes emerged from the review. First, cultural dimensions — particularly individualism, collectivism, and power distance — were identified as significant determinants of conflict management style preferences. Second, a methodological concern was identified regarding the pervasive reliance on the Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II), a Western-developed instrument, across predominantly collectivistic construction settings, raising questions about its cultural sensitivity and contextual suitability. Third, integrating and compromising styles emerged as the most preferred and effective approaches within the construction industry, consistently associated with positive relational, project, and organisational performance outcomes. The findings underscore the need for culturally contextualised conflict management training within professional development programmes and highlight a significant geographic imbalance in the existing literature, with individualistic Western construction contexts remaining largely underexplored.

Keywords: Conflict Management Styles · Construction Industry · Culture · Performance ·

1 Introduction

The construction sector continues to undergo significant transformation in its approach to project governance, with growing complexities surrounding workforce management, occupational health and safety compliance, and the delivery of project objectives within established parameters of schedule, budget, and quality standards. The industry, characterised by its complex multi-stakeholder environments, tight deadlines, and resource constraints, is particularly susceptible to workplace conflict, making effective conflict management a critical determinant of project success [1]. Conflict is broadly understood as a divergence of perspectives among individuals or groups, typically manifesting as animosity, opposition, or adversarial behaviour, commonly arising from competing objectives and differing values and belief systems. As a complex and

pervasive organisational phenomenon, insufficient competency in conflict resolution can significantly impede the attainment of organisational goals, undermining workforce dependability, productivity, and overall organisational performance. Despite notable advancements in conflict management strategies, many organisations continue to struggle with their effective implementation [2].

Conflict management styles denote relatively consistent behavioural tendencies that individuals exhibit when confronted with conflict situations. Thomas and Kilmann [3] conceptualised five distinct based on the dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. Understanding the dominant conflict management style that employees use has emerged as a significant area of inquiry across the construction industry. For example, Wu et al. [4] study found that the collaborating style has been the most constructive approach in the industry, whilst the competing style has been identified as a destructive approach in relation to project outcomes. Similarly, Ma and Lu [5] study demonstrates that collaborating styles adopted by project managers positively influence team resilience, whereas competing and avoiding styles exert a negative effect.

Correspondingly, identifying the factors that shape individual preferences for specific conflict management styles has thus gained considerable scholarly attention within the construction industry. A significant factor confronting organisations in sustaining effective work performance is the management of interpersonal conflicts stemming from cultural differences [6]. Cross-cultural research suggests that cultural values, notably individualism-collectivism and power distance, exert considerable influence over conflict style preferences, with individuals tending to adopt strategies that conform to culturally approved norms and expectations [7]. Recent empirical evidence suggests that style selection is not arbitrary but is shaped by a range of individual, cultural and contextual factors.

Despite a growing body of systematic reviews addressing conflict management styles across various disciplines, including nursing, management, and cross-cultural settings, no comprehensive synthesis exists within the construction industry specifically. Existing construction-focused studies remain fragmented across geographical, project, and stakeholder contexts, limiting the generalisability and consolidation of findings. Consequently, a clear, evidence-based understanding of the conflict management styles prevalent across construction contexts remains lacking. This fragmentation represents a notable gap in the literature, warranting a dedicated systematic review that consolidates empirical evidence on the prevailing conflict management styles adopted within construction contexts. The present study, therefore, seeks to systematically identify, classify, and synthesise these styles as reported across the empirical construction literature, providing a substantive foundation for advancing theory development, informing project management interventions, and directing future research endeavours.

2 Methodology

2.1. Search Strategy

This study adopts a systematic review design to identify, evaluate, and synthesise empirical evidence on the dominant conflict management styles employed by professionals within the construction industry. The PRISMA 2020 guidelines were followed

for this review [8]. The Web of Science was used as it is a database comprising internationally recognised and influential academic journals [9]. The keywords were developed in alignment with the research question, and were identified through the use of an online thesaurus and keywords employed in previous studies. The authors developed a thorough search string using the Web of Science and incorporated Boolean operators, phrase searching, truncation, wildcard symbols, and proximity operators to improve the comprehensiveness and precision of the literature search as presented in the search string below:

Search string: ("conflict management style*" OR "conflict handling style*" OR "conflict management approach*" OR ("conflict management" NEAR/3 (style* OR strateg* OR behavior*r* OR approach*)) AND ("construction industry" OR "construction project*" OR "construction management"))

2.2 Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

In line with the aim of the present study, the following inclusion criteria were established: the review included articles from 2015 to 2026 to ensure the findings are comprehensive and reflect recent, relevant developments. The review was limited to journal articles and early access articles, with a focus on Business Economics, Construction Building Technology, and Psychology. It also included English-language journal articles only with full-text availability, and employees in the construction industry. Reviews, conference papers, books, dissertations, non-English studies, and student samples were excluded.

2.3. Study Selection Process

The study selection process is detailed in the PRISMA flowchart presented in Figure 1, resulting in a final sample of 16 studies included in the review, as presented in Table 1.

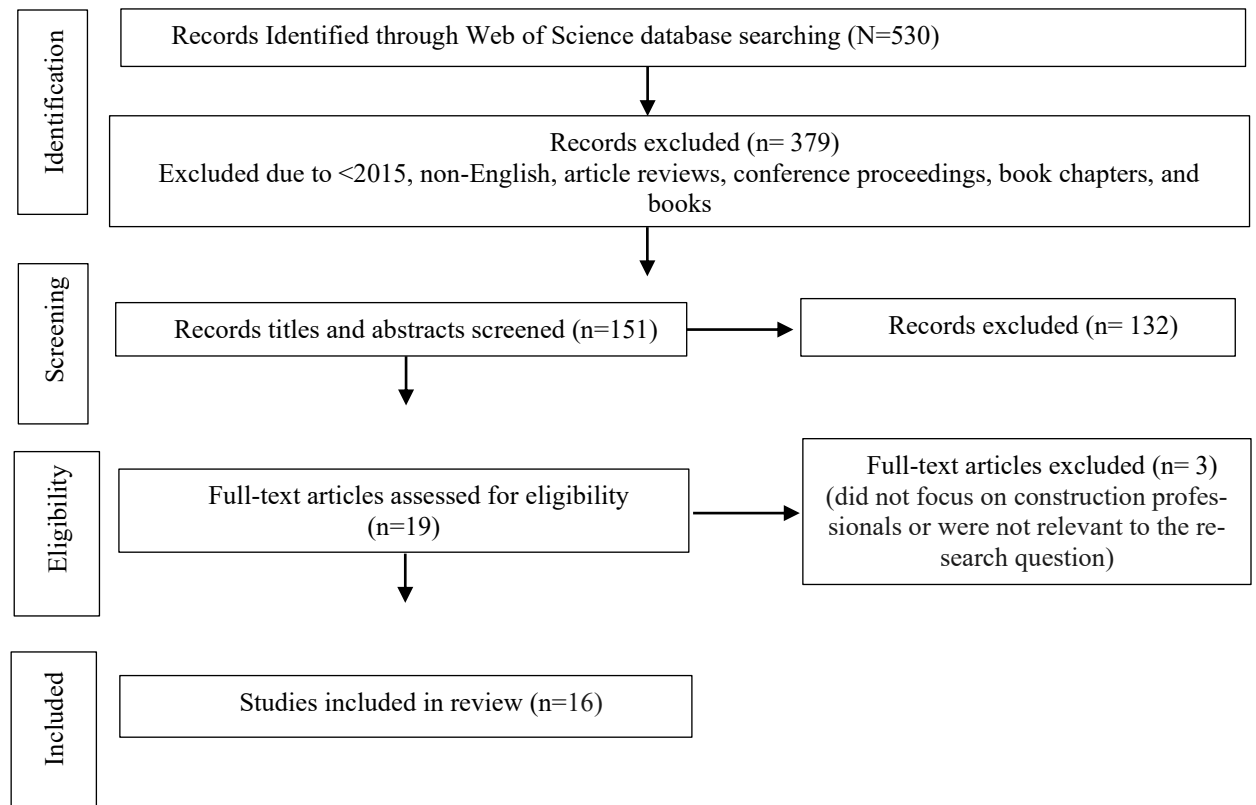


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

3 Results

3.1. Geographical Distribution

Most of the studies were carried out in emerging countries characterised by collectivistic societies, including China (62.5%), Sri Lanka (12.5%), Ghana (6.25%), India (6.25%), and Malaysia (6.25%) [4, 5, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23]. Only one study originated from a developed country characterised by an individualistic society, namely the United States (5.88%) [24], as presented in Figure 2.

Table 1. Highlights of reviewed papers on conflict management styles in the construction industry.

No	Author(s) and Year	Instrument used	Area of Focus	Methodology	Design	Country
1	Guo et al., (2025)	Self-designed Questionnaire	Inter-organisational trust & conflict styles	Survey	Cross-sectional	China
2	Gan et al., (2025)	Rahim Organizational Conflict	Relationship conflict & contract	Survey	Cross-sectional	China
3	Ma and Lu (2024)	Rahim Organizational Conflict	Conflict styles & team resilience	Survey	Cross-sectional	China
4	Kwofie et al., (2024)	Self-designed Questionnaire	Relationship typologies & conflict	Survey	Cross-sectional	Ghana
5	Thilakarathne et al., (2023)	Self-designed Questionnaire	Conflict strategies in joint venture	Mixed method	Cross-sectional	Sri Lanka
6	Wang and Liu (2021)	Rahim Organizational Conflict	Political skill & relationship	Survey	Cross-sectional	China
7	Maiti and Choi (2021)	Self-designed Questionnaire	Conflict styles in construction	Triangulation	Cross-sectional	India
8	Lu et al., (2020)	Rahim Organizational Conflict	Bargaining power & power distance	Survey	Cross-sectional	China

9	Liu (2020)	Tjosvold et al. (2003)	Cultural differences & joint venture performance	Survey	Cross-sectional	China
10	Tabassi et al., (2019)	Northouse (2011)	Conflict styles & team performance	Survey	Cross-sectional	Malaysia
11	Wong et al., (2018)	Alper et al., (2000)	Collectivist values & joint venture performance	Survey	Cross-sectional	China
12	Gunaratna (2018)	-	Conflict styles in commercial building	Case Study	Cross-sectional	Sri Lanka
13	Wu et al., (2017)	Self-designed Questionnaire	Conflict types & project added value	Mixed Method	Cross-sectional	China
14	Lu and Wang (2017)	Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory	Conflict styles & relationship quality	Survey	Cross-sectional	China
15	Redmond (2016)	The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory	Conflict styles & upward dissent	Survey	Cross-sectional	South-eastern U.S.A. and North Carolina
16	Zhang et al., (2015)	The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory	Conflict styles & emotional intelligence	Survey	Cross-sectional	China

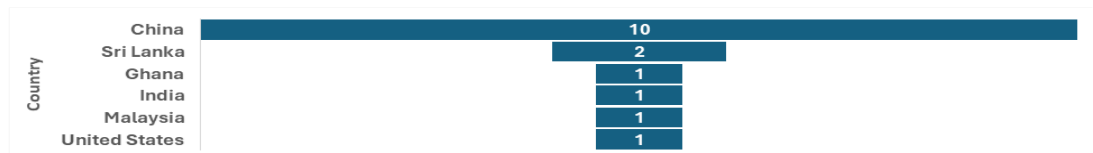


Figure 2. Geographical Distribution (Country) of Conflict Management Styles in the Construction Industry

3.2. Instruments and Methods Used in Conflict Management Styles

Within the reviewed papers ten studies employed four different instruments to measure the conflict management styles of employees working in the construction industry, including the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) developed by Rahim [25] (43.75%), the conflict management scale developed by Tjosvold et al. [21] (6.25%), the instrument established by Northouse [19] (6.25%), and the scale developed by Alper et al. [11] (6.25%). Further, five studies used a self-designated instrument (31.25%), while one study adopted a case study approach (6.25%). Table 2 illustrates the instruments used.

Table 2. Instrument Used in the 16 Research Studies on Conflict Management Styles in the Construction Industry

CMS measurement	Nos.
Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory-II	7
Tjosvold et al.	1
Northouse	1
Alper et al.	1
Self-designated instrument	5

Various methodological approaches have been utilised to assess conflict management styles, with the majority of the studies adopting quantitative methods (75%). This was followed by mixed-methods approaches (12.5%), qualitative methods (6.25%), and triangulation approaches (6.25%). Notably, all the reviewed papers used a cross-sectional design. The findings indicate that limited research in the construction industry has utilised mixed-methods approaches and a longitudinal design to investigate conflict management styles.

3.3. Themes of the Review

3.3.1. Cultural Differences in Conflict Management Styles

The results of the narrative synthesis [10] demonstrate that cultural differences are a determinant that impacts conflict management styles in the construction industry. Cultural dimensions such as individualism, collectivism, and power distance were found to influence preferences for conflict management styles. Most of the reviewed studies were conducted in collectivistic societies, including China, Sri Lanka, Ghana, India and Malaysia. In these societies, group harmony, loyalty, collaboration and interpersonal relationships are highly valued [26]. Across these contexts, cooperative and integrative conflict management styles were consistently used, as they aligned with the cultural norms of harmony preservation and collective interest [5, 22, 27]. For instance, Wong et al. [27] found that the collectivist values of Chinese employees influenced cooperative conflict-management styles, thereby enhancing joint venture performance. Similarly, Zhang et al. [23] reported that Chinese employees preferred to use the integrating and compromising styles to handle interpersonal task conflict at work.

In contrast, studies conducted in more individualistic contexts demonstrated greater adoption of competitive or dominating behaviours. For example, Wong et al. [27] study, which also comprised foreign partners, found that employees working in individualistic societies tend to use the competing conflict management style, which negatively affected project performance. Notably, one additional reviewed study originated from an

individualistic society, namely the United States [24]. This indicates that the reviewed articles remain heavily concentrated within collectivistic cultural settings.

3.3.2. Dominance of Western Individualistic Conflict Management Instruments in Collectivistic Construction Contexts

The Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II [25]) was the most widely used measurement instrument in the reviewed studies. The tool originated in a Western context and included participants from the United States, a society characterised as individualistic. Nonetheless, these studies were predominantly conducted in collectivistic societies, including China, Sri Lanka, Ghana, India, and Malaysia. The widespread application of this Western-developed instrument across collectivistic construction environments indicates that researchers continue to rely heavily on established Western theoretical and measurement frameworks when examining conflict management behaviours in non-Western contexts.

The instrument has received good reliability, validity, and adaptability across cultural settings. Nonetheless, the extensive adoption raises concerns about the cultural sensitivity and contextual suitability of Western-developed instruments when applied in collectivistic contexts characterised by different interpersonal norms, hierarchical relationships, and perception of power distance. Wong et al. [27], Wang and Liu [22], and Ma and Lu [5] demonstrated that collectivist values and power distance significantly influence conflict management preferences, suggesting that culturally embedded behaviours may not always be fully captured through instruments developed in Western individualistic societies. This highlights a broader methodological gap in the literature regarding the establishment of a tailored conflict management instrument that reflects local cultural values and relational norms.

3.3.3. Dominant Conflict Management Styles and Their Influence on Performance

The reviewed literature demonstrates that integrating (collaborative/ cooperative) and compromising conflict management styles are the most preferred approaches within the construction industry due to their positive influence on relational, project, and organisational performance. Construction projects tend to be interdependent and require continuous collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Therefore, cooperative conflict management approaches are consistently viewed as more effective for maintaining long-term working relationships, achieving successful project outcomes, and improving performance [4, 18, 23, 27, 28].

Compromising styles also emerged as a widely preferred strategy within construction settings. Gunarathna [14] identified compromising as the most commonly used conflict management style in the commercial building sector. Likewise, Thilakarathne et al. [20] found that collaborating and compromising approaches were considered the most suitable informal strategies for managing conflicts in international construction joint ventures. Gan et al. [12] also demonstrated that compromising behaviours mitigated the negative impact of relationship conflict on project performance through flexible contract enforcement approaches. Furthermore, the avoiding style produced mixed findings. While avoiding behaviours tend to be viewed less favourably, Tabassi et al. [28] found that avoiding conflict management styles positively influenced team

coordination and the performance of multicultural project teams, suggesting that their effectiveness may depend on contextual and cultural factors.

4 Discussion of Review Findings

The findings suggest that conflict management in the construction industry cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural environments in which it occurs, nor adequately measured through instruments that may not fully reflect non-Western relational norms and hierarchical structures. The predominance of cooperative and integrative styles across collectivistic construction contexts aligns with cross-cultural literature, which consistently demonstrates that collectivist values predispose individuals toward harmony-preserving behaviours [7]. What distinguishes the construction industry, however, is that cooperative styles are not merely culturally preferred but functionally necessary given its multi-stakeholder, interdependent project environments. Further, the pervasive reliance on the ROCI-II [25] across predominantly collectivistic construction settings raises important methodological concerns. Given that collectivistic societies prioritise group harmony and interpersonal relationships, whilst high power distance cultures exhibit strong deference to hierarchical authority [26], conflict behaviours in these contexts may not be fully captured through an instrument developed within a Western individualistic framework, where such relational and hierarchical norms differ considerably.

This review is subject to two principal limitations. First, the predominance of reviewed studies originating from collectivistic societies restricts the generalisability of findings across diverse cultural and geographic construction contexts. Thus, future research should focus on studies examining conflict management styles within individualistic Western construction contexts to enable more balanced cross-cultural comparisons. Second, the reliance on the ROCI-II developed in the West may lead to a heightened risk of measurement misalignment, suggesting an urgent need for developing culturally sensitive measurement tools capable of capturing the unique dynamics of conflict management within collectivistic construction environments.

5 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this systematic review have several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the review reinforces the importance of incorporating cultural and contextual dimensions into conflict management theory within the construction industry. Practically, the findings suggest that construction organisations should adopt conflict management approaches that recognise cultural differences among project stakeholders and promote collaboration and cooperation. Accordingly, organisations can use these insights to develop conflict management training, improve team and stakeholder relationships, and support project and organisational performance.

This systematic review concludes that conflict management in the construction industry is strongly shaped by cultural and contextual factors, with integrating and compromising styles generally associated with more positive project and organisational outcomes. The findings also highlight the need for greater cultural sensitivity in the use of

conflict management instruments and practices, particularly in collectivistic construction contexts. Accordingly, it is recommended that construction organisations equip project managers with appropriate conflict-resolution styles and adopt context-sensitive strategies for managing diverse project teams and stakeholders.

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