

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONALITY TRAITS, RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES AMONG EMPLOYEES DURING PANDEMIC: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

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**Abstract:** *This research will investigate the relationship between personality traits, relationship quality, and conflict management style among employees during the pandemic. Based on the conflict management style, the researcher specifically expected that integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating, and avoiding styles would be related to extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism, which are the five-factor model of personality traits as well as the relationship quality. Thus, the present conceptual paper discussed how relationship quality mediated the relationship between personality traits and conflict management style. Ultimately, a conceptual framework is developed based on the reviewed literature.*

**Keywords:** *conflict management styles, personality traits, relationship quality*

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## Introduction

There is evidence that when the situation such as action taken by the government are related to levels of psychological wellness (Qiu et al., 2020), and the novelty of this situation invites an understanding of individual differences in how people cope with the pandemic. For example, nowadays, the world has turned into remote working wherever possible due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) an infectious disease caused by a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Elengoe, 2020). When the pandemic outbreak happened back in the year 2020, the government and the policymakers took preventive steps and directive measures to sustain social movement and infection among the citizens (Alifuddin, 2020). Common action that has been taken globally was the implementation of lockdown. Since the

World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, the cases of coronavirus have surpassed millions, which has spread fast to more than 200 countries and territories worldwide. Countries in the Southeast Asia region are not inevitable from this pandemic. As of today, all ASEAN member countries have been affected by the expanding confirmed case (of & Energy, 2021). It not only poses issues to public health but also affects the government sector.

The COVID-19 epidemic has caused a crisis on a grand scale, with far-reaching social, and environmental consequences (Bapuji et al., 2020). For most organizations in government sector, the effects of this pandemic in the most impacted countries are numerous and of unprecedented intensity. Furthermore, the pandemic in Malaysia has created an endemic situation of uncertainty and confusion about the risks to employees and the possibility of new waves of contamination and the government shutdown (Bryce et al., 2020)–(Isabella & Carnevale, 2020). As a result of the government's movement restriction order requiring all employees to work from home, this became the first experience for all employees in dealing with the pandemic. Conflict situations in the work environment among employees during pandemic situations can have different consequences. When conflict arises, it will ruin the relationship between employees. According to (Türk & Ceylan, 2020), (Gulec & Alkis, 2004), in this situation, the employees need to well-versed in human behaviors to manage their colleague's behaviors. Besides, it should be accepted that the conflicts that arise in work environment by means of the employees are the part of the organizations. Thus, instead of ignoring the conflict situations, it will be useful to understand the nature of the conflicts and to determine the solution to improve the quality in relationship and job stress.

Since of the COVID-19 pandemic, individual personality will influence everyday behavior (Cooper et al., 2019), (Sherman et al., 2015) and health behaviors (Jones et al., 2017). Individual differences reflect differences in behaviors to cope with the pandemic. How individuals behave is depends on his or her personality. As people age, they tend to become less extroverted, less neurotic, and less open to the experience (Weisberg et al., 2011)(Donnellan & Lucas, 2008). Agreeableness and conscientiousness, on the other hand, tend to increase as people grow older. Other than age difference, the gender also will give the impact on the five-personality dimension. Men and women have obviously difference biological roles. Gender differences in personality traits are often characterized in terms of which gender has higher scores on that trait (Schmitt et al., 2017). For example, women more often found to be more agreeable than men. Agreeableness comprises traits relating to altruism, such as empathy and kindness. Agreeableness involve the tendency toward cooperation, maintenance of social harmony, and consideration of the concerns of others. This means that women, on average, are more nurturing and altruistic more often and to a greater than men. However, such a finding does not preclude the fact that men may also experience nurturing and altruistic states, and that some men may even score higher in these traits than some women (Schmitt et al., 2017)(Costa et al., 2001). Therefore, we can see that these differences will have an impact on how employees manage their personality traits and the quality of their relationships.

Stress spillover such as job stress often undermine relationship quality. According to (Neff et al., 2021), (Falconier et al., 2015), employees unexpectedly facing a multitude of new stressful life circumstances such as working remotely, handling homeschooling responsibilities and safeguarding the health. The employees who experience greater stress outside the relationship, they are more likely to express criticism and impatience toward their colleagues as well as to appraise their relationship in a more negative day compared to days when they experience less

stress. Other research has shown that not all conflict or job stress is bad, however, stress does not always lead to negative outcomes (Hon, 2012). To be able to cope with this situation or to reduce the negative effects of conflict on employees, and to turn it into a positive outcome, the employee who has a conflict with other employees or team members or manager, should utilize the right conflict management style to tackle the difficulties stated. However, it is considered that one of the reasons behind these decisions is the personality traits of the employees themselves. The way an employee chooses to use conflict management style and personality traits determine whether they wish to sustain or damage the relationship. Based on researcher knowledge, there is limited research on conflict management in organizations during the pandemic because it rarely occurs in Malaysia.

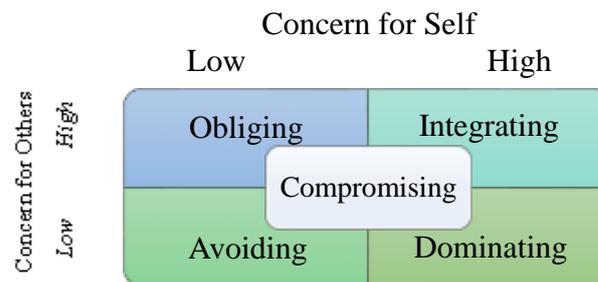
## Theory and Literature Review

### Conflict Management Styles

According to (Ren & Kim, 2017), (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977), conflict management styles can be defined as individual patterns of behavioral predisposition that evolve individual behaviors and reactions. (Raykova et al., 2020) proposed that conflict is a common feature of group activities and inherent to a wide range of interactions of team members (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). Stress and anxiety to reach an agreement (Baron, 1988), power differences (Zartman & Touval, 1985), complexity of the task (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), culture and leadership models employed by team leaders (Kozan, 1989) all affect how conflict ought to handle. Conflict management refers to the strategies followed by both the parties to cope with a conflicting situation. According to (Rahim, 2002), conflict management refers to the process of eliminating the negative aspects of conflict, while escalating the positive aspects of conflict. The aim is to improve learning and group outcomes, including effectiveness or performance in an organizational setting. Kenneth W. Thomas and Schmidt (Thomas & Schmidt, 2014) suggested the five modes there are avoiding, accommodating, competing, collaborating, and compromising. Avoiding style neglects the conflict or denies the availability of conflict rather than finding a solution to the problem one seeks for neither own concerns nor others. Accommodating style neglects personal concerns to persuade the concerns of the opposite parties. It is a form of self-sacrificing kindness that is followed by the fulfillment of others' wishes when one would prefer not to do. The people look for their own concerns at the cost of other's concerns by applying all suitable authority to succeed the location and protect something that is believed to be correct in competing style. In collaborating style, detection of all concerns of both parties through a solution that gratify both parties totally because of attempts to find alternatives to satisfy needs of all of them. Compromising style search for a mutually suitable clarification that persuade both the parties moderately via taking into consideration some concerns of both parties and neglecting others by exchanging concessions and finding a middle ground position (Rani, 2018).

### Theory of Rahim of Conflict Management (1983)

Conflict is an interactive state manifested in compatibility, disagreement, or difference within or between social entities, for example: individual, group or organization (Rahim, 1983). Rahim's two-dimensional model has dimensions labeled as concern for self and concern for others. These dimensions portray the motivational orientations of a given individual during conflict. In situations such as disagreement, chaos, disputes and incompatibility between individuals, individuals exhibit five different behaviors that shown in Figure 1 which constitute "Conflict Management Approaches".



**Figure 1: Conflict management approaches Rahim (1983). A measure of styles of handling interpersonal conflict**

These two dimensions can be crossed to these five styles of conflict management which are integrating is a high concern for self and for others. Obliging is a low concern for self and high concern for others. Meanwhile, Compromising is an intermediate concern for self and others. Dominating is a high concern for self and low concern for others. Lastly, Avoiding is a low concern for self and for others.

### Personality Traits

The big five personality trait model is the frequently used term for the model of personality which demonstrates five fundamental factors of personality (Dunlop et al., 2020). It combines the emotions, attitudes, and behavior of the people. Based on (Simha et al., 2020), the Big Five model of personality traits is the most widely accepted model of normal range variation in personality, positing five broad dimensions to account for individual differences in human behavior, cognition, and emotion. According to (Rothermich et al., 2021), (Antonioni, 1998), each of the factors is bipolar and the binaries align as follows: extraversion - introversion, agreeableness - antagonism, conscientiousness - undisciplined, openness - closeness, and emotional stability - neuroticism. Personality traits are systemized from narrow and particular to broad and general traits and the researcher indicate the existence of five primary traits or factors of personality from (McCrae & Costa, 1989) that often referred as the Five-Factor Model of Personality. The psychological and behavioral responses to the pandemic can be influenced by several factors, including a person's characteristics and resources (Gori et al., 2021), (Di et al., 2020), as evidenced by previous research that has highlighted the significant influence of personality traits on reactions to stress (Oshio et al., 2018), (Bibbey et al., 2013). In this field, the Five-factor Model of Personality by Costa and McCrae (McCrae & Costa, 1990) is one of the most frequently used, in which five dimensions (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness) represent a coherent and basically stable set of aspects that influence the affects, thoughts, and behaviors of individuals in their different life experiences. The personality traits of individuals are evident in individuals having different perspectives, showing different attitudes and different behaviors, accepting a situation or event as a conflict and deciding the strategy for managing a conflict (Turhan et al., 2012), (Erdenk & AltuntaÅŸ, 2017).

### Theory of Five-Factor Model of Personality by McCrae & Costa (1987)

The Five-Factor Model of Personality by (McCrae & Costa, 1987) represents the dominant conceptualization of personality structure. This model posits that the five personality factors of Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism reside at the highest level of the personality hierarchy, as well as encompassing the entire domain of more narrow personality traits that fall at lower levels of the hierarchy. The Five-Factor model of Personality attempts to predict the possible ways that individuals will act, and

which ways will be distinctive to them (McCrae & Costa, 1997). This model is presumed to be a complete framework for organizing personality traits. Each of the five dimensions represents a broad domain comprising a variety of more discrete traits, or facets.

### **Relationship Quality**

Relationship quality has consistently been conceptualized as a multi-faceted, second-order construct consisting of trust and at least one more, distinct relational construct (Rusdi et al., 2016), (Beatson, 2008). For example, (Crosby et al., 1990) consider trust and satisfaction together as the primary indicator of relationship quality, while (Dwyer et al., 1987) argue that commitment is an appropriate third facet of relationship quality. There is no clear explanation of what relationship quality is. According to (Purnasari & Yulianto, 2015), (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) have a general agreement that satisfaction, trust, and commitment are key aspects of relationship quality. Employees must possess these aspects of relationship quality to form strong bonds with one another.

### **Relationship between Personality Traits and Conflict Management Styles**

Employees enter and affect their workplace with unique personality characteristics. Personality characteristics may be more of a reason one has been employed, compared to credentials. Personality research has endeavored to explain and predict behavior of persons according to their personalities. The five-factor of personality has contributed to a new way of looking at personality (McCrae & Costa, 1987), (Peabody & Goldberg, 1989). The five factors of personality are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and neuroticism which measure dispositional categories under which a variety of specific traits are subsumed. (Digman, 1990) concluded that the five factors of personality are a fundamental model for describing personality. Many factors, both interpersonal and intrapersonal are believed to affect how employee will choose to manage conflict (Antonioni, 2008). It has even been observed that although employee have preferred styles, employee will typically vary their conflict style depending on the context of the conflict. For example, it is not unusual for employee to use one conflict style at home with their family members, and another at work with their colleagues. Use of varying conflict styles during a single conflict episode has even been observed. For example, a person may begin a conflict by avoiding, then transition to dominating, and end the conflict with an integrating style. One area that has been of interest to scholars is the role of intrapersonal attributes, one of which is personality in the choice of preferred conflict style. This discussion will explore the literature concerning personality traits and conflict management style. Further the particular interest in this discussion is the role played by personality traits in preferred conflict management style (Patel, 2016). Next, the focus of the study is to see how the relationship between personality traits and the types of conflict management styles.

### **Relationship between Personality Traits and Relationship Quality**

According to (Rainey & Petkari, 2019), (Thibaut et al., 2017), within every relationship, everyone tries to maximize the rewards such as happiness, social status, pleasure and minimize the costs such as anxiety, negative emotions, and conflict. Hence, in the employee's relationship, the individuals expect their relationship to benefit them through social support (Shapiro & Martin, 2010), increased technical skills, individual and team success (Casper et al., 2007) although due to the competitive nature of the relationship on some occasion such interaction may be negative (Eime et al., 2013). Importantly, such relationships are the ones that can help the individual to manage stress, improve social relationships, and help the employees to reach their full mental and potential to enhance performance success (Jowett &

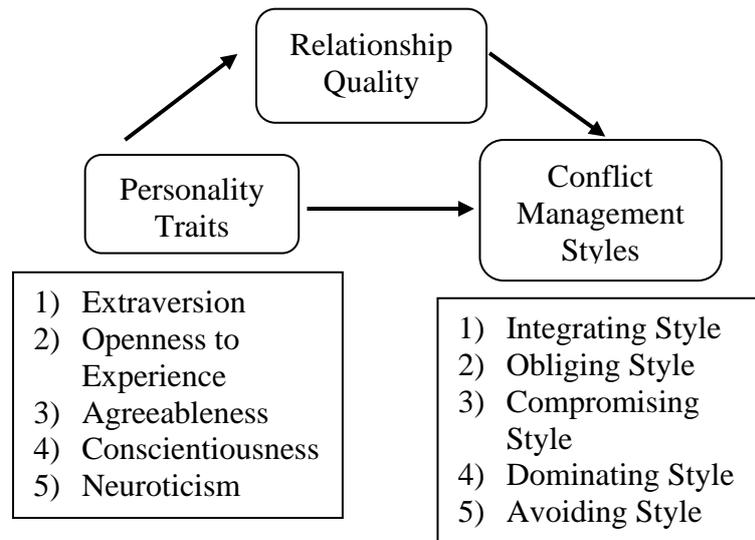
Nezlek, 2012), (Allen et al., 2011). The role and significance of close relationships in people's growth and development have been extensively discussed in social psychology literature (Harvey, 1987). There has been extensive evidence demonstrating the effect that personality traits have on an individual's interpersonal and relational outcomes (Yang et al., 2015), (Jackson et al., 2010). Moreover, the links between people's personality and close relationships have been thought as a platform from which interpersonal behaviors and interactions occur and unfold (Cooper & Sheldon, 2002). Subsequently, personality and relationships together seem to form parts of a system that can help generate knowledge and understanding of the works of human behavior. The significance of considering personality and relationships as part of an integrated system is reflected in its long research tradition. Each of these five factors influences on employee thought processes, behaviors, and social relationships (Allen & Laborde, 2014).

### **Relationship between Relationship Quality and Conflict Management Styles**

Resolving conflict properly is an effective way of improving the relationship quality between employees (Xu & Ren, 2010). Conflict management styles are important antecedents of relationship quality between employees. Failure to manage and control conflict between the two sides will cause the deterioration of the relationship quality and lead to further escalation of the conflict. Thus, conflict and relationship quality form a vicious cycle due to mismanagement of the conflict (Jelodar et al., 2015). Bearing this in mind, it is necessary to study the influence of different conflict management styles on relationship quality (Jelodar & Yiu, 2014). This study considers relationship quality between employees, which is the overall evaluation or perception of the state of the relationship between two sides (Lu & Wang, 2017). According to (Jelodar & Yiu, 2014), conflict management styles affect relationship quality between the two sides. This study adopts two-dimension model of Rahim (Rahim et al., 2017), in accordance with concern for self and concern for others. It includes five style of conflict management which are integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating, and avoiding. The top-management must know the effective way of dealing with conflict in different situations. Also, different conflict management styles may be appropriate in different situations. If the style can enhance the effectiveness of individuals, groups, or organizations, it can be viewed as a win-win style (Rahim et al., 2017). Existing studies show that the effectiveness of each conflict management style varies depending on the level of conflict (Xie et al., 1998). Research on interpersonal conflict shows that the most effective conflict management style for the interpersonal relationship is integrating style, which is more effective particularly at a high level of conflict. The compromising and avoiding styles have a negative effect on the interpersonal relationship at a low level of conflict but have a positive effect on the interpersonal relationship at a high level of conflict (Andrews & Tjosvold, 1983).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework in figure 2 has shown the mediated relationship between personality traits and conflict management style through relationship quality. There are three types of variables that have been applied in this study which are independent variable, mediating variable, and dependent variable. The researcher chooses five styles under conflict management which are integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising that can be related to five types of personality traits which are extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism and relationship quality. The framework of this study will present the relationship between personality traits, relationship quality, and conflict management style.



**Figure 2: The conceptual framework of the mediated relationship between personality traits and conflict management style through relationship quality**

### Discussion and Implication

Individual differences reflect differences in behavior to cope with the pandemic. How individuals behave is depends on his or her personality. Therefore, the researcher expected that conflict management style will play a role in employees' personality traits and the quality of the relationship between the employees engaged in such conflict issues during a pandemic. There is no single conflict management style considered as the most appropriate across every negotiation. It will be influenced by top management's point of view on conflict and employee personality type. One consistent style across all persons and situations may reflect personality rather than the appropriate choice of style. According to (McKibben, 2017), differing conflict management styles among employees and situations may represent a suitable style selection. Other than that, the choice of conflict management style is also impacted by many factors (Dziwinski, 2020). Miller and Poston (Miller & Poston, 2020) mentioned that satisfying one's needs or interests is an important outcome in the conflict management process. This becomes a challenge when parties in the conflict want opposing needs or interests satisfied. However, personality does seem to play an important role in determining conflict behaviors. Employees' personalities will first have an impact on their relationship satisfaction (Zhou et al., 2017). A good relationship is typically associated with higher levels of relationship expectation and satisfaction, as well as a longer relationship duration. Therefore, relationship quality involves a range of positive feelings, and emotions that may consequently have a significant impact on the relationship.

### Conclusion

Based on the conflict management styles definitions, the current conceptual paper demonstrated that the integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating, and avoiding style would be related to extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism, which are the five-factor model of personality traits, as well as relationship quality. The literature reviewed indicated a mediated relationship between personality traits and conflict management styles through relationship quality. However, it is questionable how the pandemic's conflict concerns affect personality traits and relationship quality. How the first, personality traits, and second, relationship quality, will affect conflict management styles, such

as the disagreement taking longer and being more difficult to resolve owing to the pandemic's impact. The condition is expected to spread from work to life and vice versa.

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