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Factors influencing conflict management in higher education students: A systematic review

Factores que influyen en el manejo de conflictos en estudiantes de educación superior: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

The objective of this research was to identify the factors influencing conflict management among higher education students, based on the scientific literature of the last 10 years. A literature review approach was adopted, analyzing articles indexed in Scopus (288), SciELO (6), and Web of Science (338), totaling 632 publications. Of these, 30 were selected that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria, following the PRISMA scheme. Among the key findings, it is noteworthy that 100% of the studies employed quantitative methods, and 30% focused on higher education institutions in the United States. All analyzed exclusively students as the population. Sociodemographic, interpersonal, cultural, psychological, and academic factors emerged as key determinants in effective conflict management. Furthermore, the results reveal that conflict management in this group ranges from fair to poor, highlighting the urgent need to implement specific strategies to address it. In conclusion, these factors directly influence the behavior and overall performance of university students.

Keywords: perception, psychology, violence.

Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación fue identificar los factores que influyen en el manejo de conflictos entre estudiantes de educación superior, basados en la literatura científica de los últimos 10 años. Se adoptó un enfoque de revisión de literatura, analizando artículos indexados en Scopus (288), SciELO (6) y Web of Science (338), lo que sumó 632 publicaciones. De ellas, se seleccionaron 30 que cumplían los criterios de inclusión y exclusión, siguiendo el esquema PRISMA. Entre los hallazgos clave, destaca que el 100% de los estudios emplearon métodos cuantitativos, y el 30% se centraron en instituciones de educación superior de Estados Unidos. Todos analizaron exclusivamente a estudiantes como población. Los factores sociodemográficos, interpersonales, culturales, psicológicos y académicos emergen como determinantes clave en la gestión efectiva de conflictos. Además, los resultados revelan que el manejo de conflictos en este grupo oscila entre regular y deficiente, lo que resalta la

urgencia de implementar estrategias específicas para abordarlo. En conclusión, estos factores inciden directamente en el comportamiento y el desempeño integral de los estudiantes universitarios.

Palabras clave: percepción, psicología, violencia.

Introduction

Conflict management within university settings has gained growing attention in recent years, owing to its direct bearing on educational quality and the development of students' socioemotional competencies (Martínez-López et al., 2022). In higher education, conflicts may arise from a variety of sources, including divergent learning styles, competition for limited resources, underdeveloped communication skills, and the demands of adapting to the academic environment (Omodan & Skosana, 2023; Rudnák et al., 2024). Poorly managed conflict, in turn, can negatively affect academic performance, institutional climate, and the satisfaction of students, faculty, and administrative staff alike (Aina & Obi, 2022).

From an epistemological standpoint, this problem is situated within theoretical frameworks concerned with transforming social dynamics toward more equitable and just relations. Conflict, as a phenomenon inherent to human nature, is rooted in the interaction between individuals and their educational, familial, and social surroundings, where students construct their frames of reference through everyday experiences (Cañas & Mosquera, 2024). In this regard, conflict entails not merely a divergence between parties but also represents a complex scenario encompassing cognitive, communicative, sociopolitical, and ethical dimensions (La Rosa & Rivas, 2018).

This context underscores the importance of mediation as a core strategy for conflict resolution, given that it fosters dialogue, empathy, and respect (Pérez, 2015; Cabello-Tijerina & Vázquez-Gutiérrez, 2024). Such practices strengthen communication systems (Córdova, 2016) and contribute to constructing a positive view of conflict, not as a behavioral failure but as an opportunity for transformation in interpersonal relationships within the academic sphere.

Given the current state of affairs, there is a clear need for more in-depth inquiry into the factors that influence how conflict situations are managed in academic contexts. Accordingly, the overarching research question guiding this study was: What factors influence conflict management in higher education students, as reported in the scientific literature of the last 10 years? The general objective, therefore, was to identify these factors based on a systematic review of the available evidence.

Theoretical framework

From a theoretical perspective, Galtung's conflict theory posits that conflict is a natural component of human behavior that should not be suppressed but rather managed through transformative communication, which fosters creativity and empathy (Calderón, 2009). Conflicts are further understood to follow a cycle involving stages of emergence, escalation, de-escalation, and possible recurrence (Cañas & Mosquera, 2024).

Conflict is likewise conceptualized as an interaction in which one party's actions interfere with another's goals (Prasad, 2023). Within this framework, conflict management is defined as a dynamic process in which the involved parties seek solutions that avert interpersonal harm while promoting learning and development (Zainal et al., 2022). Effective conflict management thus not only resolves disagreements in specific circumstances (Muthoni & Stephen, 2021) but also cultivates essential competencies for navigating challenges in the academic environment (Guiab & Miguel, 2023).

In terms of empirical and theoretical advances, numerous national and international studies have identified factors influencing conflict management, including self-regulation, emotional intelligence, and organizational culture (Farooq, 2022). Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in the literature: on one hand, there is a scarcity of systematic studies that integrate these factors within specific educational contexts; on the other, few analyses consider differentiating variables such as gender, cultural background, or academic discipline. This review accordingly explores such variables to offer a comprehensive perspective that enables educational stakeholders to design evidence-based strategies for improving conflict management in higher education.

Turning to prior research, Macias and Alarcón (2021), in a mixed-methods study in Ecuador involving 311 students, found that 50% lacked knowledge of conflict management strategies, negatively affecting their academic performance and behavior, manifesting as disorganization, impulsivity, and mockery of others' mistakes. Martínez et al. (2021), in a descriptive study with 32 participants in Chile, reported that between 22.9% and 40.7% of students experienced psychological distress, generating negative behaviors in the educational setting and underscoring the

need for management strategies. Finally, Torres (2021), in a descriptive investigation in Colombia, identified a high propensity for both internal and external conflicts, recommending a regulatory framework with diverse management approaches.

Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in systematic reviews that integrate influential factors in conflict management among university students from a comparative perspective across contexts and subgroups. This study therefore contributes to a multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon, offering theoretical and practical tools for its handling in higher education institutions.

Methodology

This research adopted a literature review design, a process involving the collection, evaluation, and synthesis of prior publications on a given topic. This approach offers an overview of current knowledge, detects patterns, identifies research gaps, and highlights areas of consensus or disagreement through critical analysis (Kraus et al., 2022). As such, it reflects the comprehensive and reflective nature of a literature review, emphasizing its role as a critical tool for assessing the existing body of knowledge. Its thoroughness enables the contextualization of new research by providing a deep understanding of the discipline's current state.

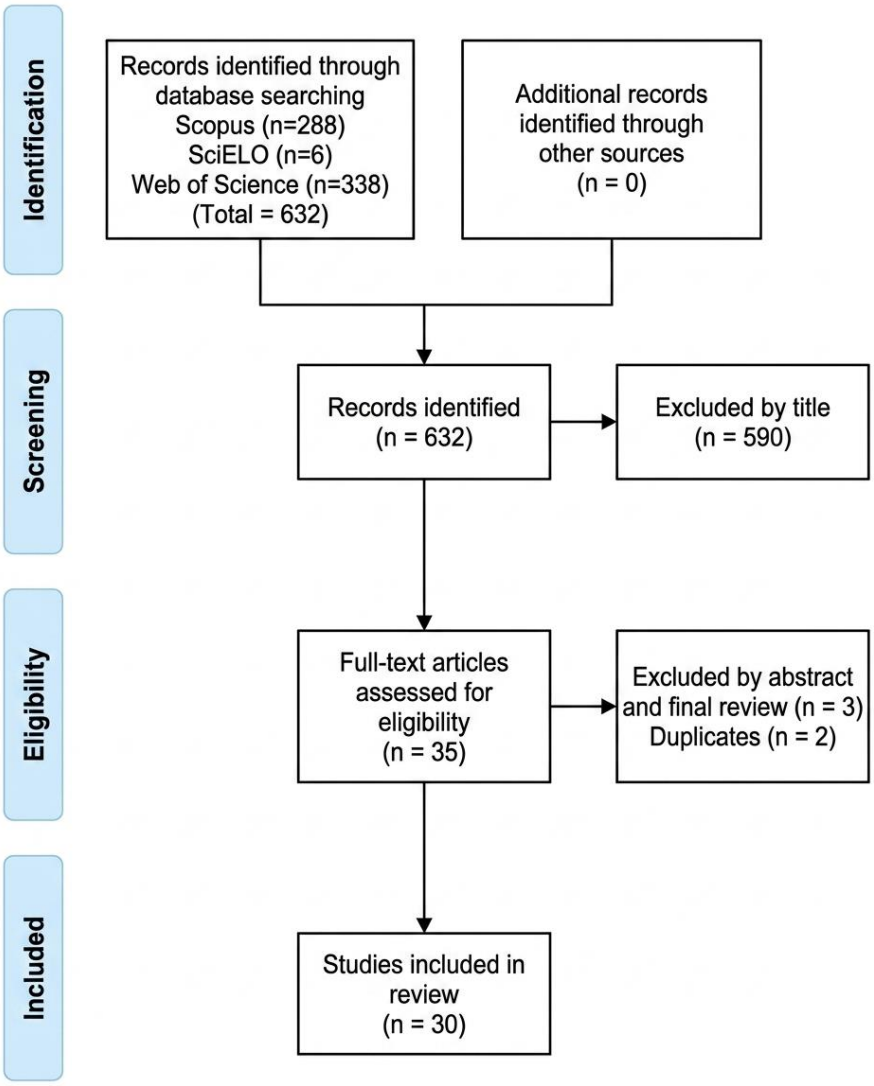
Data compilation began with the definition of terms and descriptors aligned with the study title. A bibliographic search was subsequently conducted in Scopus, SciELO, and Web of Science, covering the period from 2015 to November 2024. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were key to selecting relevant items for the results (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). Principal exclusion criteria included articles published outside the temporal range, in languages not considered, or that did not meet the required study type, so as to ensure the information addressed the proposed objectives.

Inclusion criteria encompassed studies with samples of higher education students to whom instruments with adequate psychometric properties had been administered. Additionally, articles were selected that at least minimally described data extraction processes, statistical analyses, and literature reviews supporting their results.

To identify relevant studies, a search strategy was developed combining keywords with Boolean operators *AND/OR* in titles, abstracts, and keywords across each database. For this purpose, eight descriptors in English were employed to ensure uniformity and coherence: "*personal factors*," "*factors*," "*conflict management*," "*conflict resolution*," "*academic conflict*," "*conflict resolution skills*," "*conflict intervention*," and "*student*."

The initial search yielded 632 articles: 288 from Scopus, 338 from Web of Science, and 6 from SciELO. After applying the temporal filter (2015–2024), the count was reduced to 399; limiting to scientific articles left 270. A preliminary title review then identified 187 relevant entries; abstract analysis selected 35 that met the criteria. Finally, duplicates and non-relevant contributions were excluded, resulting in 30 articles for systematization. The entire process followed PRISMA guidelines, documenting each stage with clarity and transparency (Barrios et al., 2021). Figure 1 presents the flow diagram, detailing selected and excluded studies at each phase.

Figure 1
PRISMA flowchart



For data analysis, a qualitative thematic analysis strategy was employed to identify, organize, and interpret relevant patterns in the selected studies. Article data were categorized according to factors influencing conflict management: personal, interpersonal, institutional, and contextual. Findings were further compared with prior literature to establish convergences and divergences, as well as to identify research gaps, generating a holistic and structured perspective on the topic.

Results

Table 1
Systematization of articles

No.	Author and Year	Country	Research Type	Objective	Participants

1	Gunasingha et al. (2023)	United States	Prospective	To ascertain medical students' conflict resolution styles	108 students (Mean = 27.5)
2	Vandergoot et al. (2018)	Australia	Retrospective	To evaluate conflict resolution among nursing and medical students	158 students (Mean = 21.25)
3	Spahi & Ceyhan (2022)	Kosovo	Explanatory	To identify conflict resolution styles among university students	585 students (Mean = 25.3)
4	Ponce-Valencia et al. (2024)	Spain	Cross-sectional	To examine factors associated with conflict management in nursing students	1190 students
5	Klinkosz et al. (2021)	Poland	Quantitative	To assess student competencies related to conflict management	173 students (Mean = 21.4)
6	Burgos-Cienfuegos et al. (2015)	United States	Basic	To explore conflict situations among students	14 students (Mean = 18.5)
7	Bruno et al. (2018)	Italy	Basic	To identify factors associated with conflict management	24 students
8	Li et al. (2021)	China	Cross-sectional	To identify factors related to conflict resolution management	269 students
9	Michinov et al. (2024)	France	Cross-sectional	To investigate student well-being and conflict management styles	2135 students (Mean = 24)
10	Ricchiardi & Emanuel (2018)	Italy	Quantitative	To evaluate the role of interpersonal factors in conflict resolution	1048 students (Mean = 20.5)
11	Amudha et al. (2017)	India	Basic	To assess emotional intelligence and conflict resolution among students	150 students
12	López et al. (2017)	Spain	Descriptive	To analyze conflicts arising in higher education settings	101 students
13	Rodríguez-Leal et al. (2024)	Spain	Observational	To study factors influencing conflict management	149 students (Mean = 23.36 ± 4.69)
14	Boyd & George (2019)	Canada	Explanatory	To evaluate individual conflict resolution among students	289 students
15	Hastings et al. (2019)	United States	Cross-sectional	To establish the influence of conflict management on attitudes toward empathy	250 students
16	Alnajjar & Abou (2022)	Saudi Arabia	Descriptive	To investigate leadership and conflict management among nursing students	264 students (Mean = 23.5)
17	Huang et al. (2016)	China	Cross-sectional	To evaluate factors influencing interpersonal conflict among students	537 students (Mean = 20.4)

18	Xie et al. (2022)	United States	Quantitative	To diagnose conflicts among university students	1105 students
19	Canales et al. (2020)	Spain	Basic	To evaluate group creation processes and their impact on conflict resolution	105 students (Mean = 19.99 ± 2.78)
20	Zazula & Appenzeller (2019)	Brazil	Quantitative	To determine how social skills influence conflict resolution	57 students (Mean = 21.28)
21	Gillani et al. (2024)	Pakistan	Exploratory	To examine conflicts and their resolution approaches	100 students (Mean = 28.97)
22	Fierke et al. (2023)	United States	Basic	To explore conflict situation management	83 students (Mean = 23)
23	Emert et al. (2017)	United States	Cross-sectional	To examine student emotional intelligence in the context of conflict resolution	553 students (Mean = 18.8)
24	Mohammed et al. (2023)	Malaysia	Cross-sectional	To establish the association between communication styles and conflict resolution	324 students
25	Bruce et al. (2022)	United States	Basic	To evaluate conflict resolution among students	1471 students (Mean = 33.94)
26	Wang et al. (2022)	United States	Basic	To examine conflict resolution strategies used by students for adaptation	10 students (Mean = 24.5)
27	Dong et al. (2022)	China	Quantitative	To analyze factors associated with conflict resolution management in students	234 students (Mean = 30)
28	Krajniak et al. (2018)	United States	Quantitative	To study the relationship among emotional intelligence, personality, adjustment, and conflict management	246 students (Mean = 18.7)
29	Parker et al. (2021)	Canada	Longitudinal	To evaluate the impact of emotional intelligence on conflict management	314 students (Mean = 19.54)
30	Taneja et al. (2020)	India	Cross-sectional	To examine the relationship among emotional intelligence, personality traits, and conflict resolution in medical students	210 students (Mean = 21.54 ± 1.98)

According to the data in the table, all reviewed articles adopted a quantitative approach. Basic and cross-sectional designs each accounted for 24.14% of the studies, applied research for 20.69%, and descriptive and explanatory designs for 6.90% each. Exploratory, observational, prospective, retrospective, and longitudinal designs each represented 3.45%. Regarding geographic origin, 30% of the studies examined the U.S. context, 13.33% focused on Spain, and 10% on China; 6.67% centered on Canada, India, and Italy, while 3.33% each addressed Saudi Arabia, Australia, Brazil, Kosovo, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Poland.

Furthermore, 26.67% of the articles sought to identify factors influencing conflict management, 23.33% aimed to analyze associated variables, and 20% examined related aspects. All studies (100%) included higher education students as participants, with sample sizes ranging from 10 to 2,135 and ages spanning 18 to 34 years.

Among the factors reported, sociodemographic variables stood out, particularly gender, as women demonstrated greater ease in developing social skills (Gunasingha et al., 2023). Interpersonal factors such as empathy, respect, and communication were also prominent in fostering favorable educational environments (Klinkosz et al., 2021; Ricchiardi & Emanuel, 2018; Alnajjar & Abou, 2022; Huang et al., 2016; Canales et al., 2020; Zazula & Appenzeller, 2019; Fierke et al., 2023; Bruce et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2021). Cultural factors were identified as essential predictors for resolving conflicts (Vandergoot et al., 2018; Spahi & Ceyhan, 2022; Burgos-Cienfuegos et al., 2015; Bruno et al., 2018; Gillani et al., 2024; Mohammed et al., 2023). Psychological factors, including emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and personality, also featured prominently (Xie et al., 2022; Emert et al., 2017; Dong et al., 2022; Krajniak et al., 2018; Taneja et al., 2020), as did academic factors such as motivation and attitudes toward learning (Canales et al., 2020).

Regarding the current state of conflict management among university students, most articles reported fair (Boyd & George, 2019; Hastings et al., 2019) or poor levels (Li et al., 2021; Zazula & Appenzeller, 2019; Gillani et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022), attributed to limited resolution skills and emotional difficulties. This negatively affected students' emotional state and learning, justifying interventions to enhance competencies.

The most prominent instruments included the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (subscales: accommodating, competing, compromising, avoiding, and collaborating; Gunasingha et al., 2023; Ponce-Valencia et al., 2024; Boyd & George, 2019; Hastings et al., 2019) and Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (Li et al., 2021; Michinov et al., 2024; Alnajjar & Abou, 2022). Additional instruments included scales for emotional intelligence (PKIE Questionnaire, MSCEIT) and interpersonal skills (SSI-Del-Prette Inventory, Bar-On EQ-i:S) among others (Klinkosz et al., 2021; Gillani et al., 2024; Zazula & Appenzeller, 2019; Parker et al., 2021).

In sum, these premises underscore the complexity of conflict management in higher education, shaped by personal, social, and cultural differences. Women, in particular, stand out for their greater facility in strengthening skills and emotional intelligence related to conflict resolution.

Discussion

This systematic review confirms that multiple factors significantly influence conflict management among higher education students (Safeena & Velnampy, 2018; Igbinoba et al., 2022). Understanding the aspects that shape this dynamic is therefore essential for designing strategies that strengthen the competencies and skills needed for effective resolution.

Based on the analysis, the factors were classified into five categories: *sociodemographic* (Szcześniak et al., 2020), *interpersonal* (Trifan et al., 2024; Szcześniak et al., 2020), *cultural* (Szcześniak et al., 2020; Gözde & Chipindu, 2019; Burgos-Calvillo et al., 2024), *psychological* (Trifan et al., 2024; Szcześniak et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2022), and *academic* (Szcześniak et al., 2020). Collectively, these elements determine how students approach conflicts in the educational setting.

Evidence of poor management underscores the urgency of intervention (Gözde & Chipindu, 2019). This entails corrective actions, training programs in socioemotional skills, and the creation of dialogic spaces that foster assertive communication, empathy, and mediation. Recommended strategies include personal development workshops, psychological support, faculty training, and peer support networks, actions that promote healthy academic environments and support students' personal and professional growth (Campbell et al., 2022).

With respect to the instruments used, they were appropriate for assessing the determining factors (Labrague & McEnroe-Petitte, 2017). Nevertheless, supplementing them with additional measures is suggested to enrich understanding of the problem and strengthen the theoretical robustness of future research (Trifan et al., 2024). When comparing these results with those of other reviews, there is agreement on the relevance of psychological and cultural factors; however, prior studies have emphasized structural or institutional factors, suggesting that future analyses integrate these elements for a more comprehensive perspective.

Finally, the diversity of educational contexts limits the generalizability of the findings, as the identified factors vary according to culture, institutional type, field of study, or teaching modality. Likewise, the predominance of quantitative and cross-sectional studies makes it difficult to establish causal relationships or explore subjective experiences in depth. Lastly, the scarcity of information on practical interventions implemented by institutions restricts the immediate applicability of some findings.

Conclusions

In line with the foregoing, future research should broaden its scope through comparative approaches that contrast different regions, academic programs, or age groups. It is necessary to move beyond the current tendency

toward isolated studies by promoting mixed methodologies that permit more comprehensive and nuanced characterization of the variables. Likewise, longitudinal and experimental studies aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of intervention programs and preventive strategies are urgently needed, ensuring that proposed solutions are applicable in real and diverse university contexts.

From a quantitative standpoint, the review reveals a significant concentration of scientific production in Scopus, which accounts for 50% of the analyzed articles. Geographically, a bias toward the U.S. context is evident, representing 30% of the total sample, and a complete hegemony of cross-sectional designs (100%) limits analysis of the phenomenon's temporal evolution.

In synthesis, this review demonstrates that conflict management among higher education students is determined by a confluence of sociodemographic, interpersonal, cultural, psychological, and academic factors. Within this framework, the gender variable stands out in particular: a considerable proportion of the literature agrees that women show a greater predisposition and facility for developing social competencies oriented toward effective conflict resolution, opening a key avenue for future research on the design of differentiated competency profiles according to students' specific needs.

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