

Between “walls” and “bridges”: management styles for intercultural conflict

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Abstract

Objective: To validate the Thomas–Kilmann instrument in Brazilian Portuguese for assessing conflict management styles in accounting and business contexts.

Method: A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining documentary analysis and empirical validation (Creswell & Inoue, 2025). Documentary analysis was conducted using Bardin’s (2016) content analysis framework. The cross-cultural adaptation process (Beaton *et al.*, 2000), carried out by an expert panel, formed the basis for the English-Portuguese cross-translation and content validation. The final instrument, administered via Qualtrics (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), was applied to accountants from different regions of Brazil. A total of 369 valid responses were collected between June 22 and December 4, 2024, through a link and QR code distributed via institutional WhatsApp groups and at accounting events.

Results: Heterogeneity was observed across the five conflict management styles – collaborating, competing, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising. The findings indicate minimally acceptable internal consistency ($CR > 0.60$) across styles, despite slightly limited convergent validity. Brazilian cultural characteristics and specific features of the accounting profession may have influenced response patterns.

Contributions: The construct proposed by Thomas–Kilmann was validated, demonstrating how conflict management styles influence the intensity, scope, and resolution of conflicts, as well as the development of mediating strategies that promote cooperation and dialogue. The findings support the implementation of policies and programs aimed at fostering balanced conflict management practices in intercultural contexts, thereby enhancing administrative effectiveness in training, selection, and daily professional performance. The frequency of conflicts and elevated levels of stress and dissatisfaction further underscore the study’s social relevance.

Keywords: Conflict management styles; Diagnostic instrument; Intercultural context.

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1 Introduction

The organizational environment gives rise to multifaceted relationships that may generate conflict. Such tensions stem from factors including divergent managerial interests, communication noise, and a toxic organizational climate. Divergent managerial interests may arise from differences in roles and individual perspectives. Communication noise, in turn, results from interpretive biases in verbal, written, or visual messages. A toxic organizational climate may also reflect ethical orientations shaped by the personalities and temperaments of organizational members.

Although conflict is often avoided, Beaton et al. (2000) and Rachmad (2022) argue that it is inherent in social interactions, given the nature of human existence. Organizations, therefore, are natural arenas for conflict. Bernstein (2025) contends that, because conflict is inevitable, it requires structured and deliberate management to mitigate its negative effects on workplace relationships.

Whatever the root causes of conflict, it should be acknowledged that managing conflict demands emotional intelligence, creativity, and technical expertise from managers – attributes that enable them to understand, navigate, and resolve such situations. From this perspective, the development of strategic actions is expected to promote changes in organizational structures and individual behavior, thereby transforming conflict into opportunities for improvement.

According to research by the Society for Human Resource Management, workplace conflict costs approximately US\$2 billion per day in lost productivity and absenteeism (Bernstein, 2025). The same study reports that 76% of employees witness acts of incivility, and 13% experience them daily. In a related study, Proffitt (2024) estimates that conflict consumes an average of 2.8 hours per week per employee in the United States, representing approximately US\$359 billion in paid hours, or 385 million lost workdays annually. Although these reports do not provide detailed information about the organizational context, sample composition, or respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, the findings underscore the importance of managing interpersonal tensions in the workplace and highlight their often invisible costs.

A study by Development Dimensions International (DDI) (2024), which analyzed more than 70,000 candidates for managerial positions across multiple countries, found that only 12% demonstrated high proficiency in conflict management, while 49% of emerging leaders exhibited significant deficiencies in this skill. These limitations become particularly evident in the inability to provide adequate support, clarify issues, and empower subordinates, thereby compromising team morale and organizational productivity. In 2023, DDI conducted an evaluative simulation in which only 30% of leaders reported confidence in managing conflict. Furthermore, substantial gaps were identified in the ability to clarify core issues (61%), provide support and resources (65%), and foster autonomy and accountability (60%), indicating weaknesses in relational competencies.

These findings indicate that fundamental conflict management skills remain underdeveloped, even among candidates for leadership positions. The discrepancy between advancement to managerial roles and adequate preparation for handling complex interpersonal interactions is reflected in low proficiency levels and widespread difficulty in managing tense situations. The observed limitations – the inability to support, clarify, and empower teams – reinforce the view that conflict constitutes not merely an operational obstacle but a relational and communicative challenge. In 2023, low confidence in mediating conflict appears to be associated with gaps in the socioemotional competencies of frontline managers.

Brazilian studies mirror international trends in showing that organizational conflicts are recurring and structural features of labor relations. According to research by the Associação Brasileira de Recursos Humanos de São Paulo (ABRH-SP; Brazilian Association of Human Resources of São Paulo), reported by Valor Econômico (2024), 92% of professionals report experiencing conflict in their daily work lives, and 65% encounter it frequently, while only 8% perceive it as occasional. These findings reinforce the importance of effective conflict management in reducing tensions and fostering collaboration within teams.

Consistent with this perspective, Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2024 report identified an increase in workplace conflict in Brazilian organizations, associated with high levels of stress and job dissatisfaction (Gallup, 2025). According to Correio Braziliense (2024), among 128,000 workers across 160 countries, 46% of Brazilians reported experiencing daily stress, 25% sadness, and 18% anger, ranking the country fourth in Latin America in the prevalence of negative emotions. In turn, Great Place to Work Brazil (GPTW, 2024) reported that 42.6% of organizations recognize leadership as a crucial factor in fostering a healthy psychosocial environment. Taken together, these findings suggest that leadership shortcomings and persistent emotional strain contribute to conflict in the Brazilian organizational context, underscoring the need for policies aimed at preventing mental health deterioration and promoting emotionally sustainable work environments.

Against this backdrop, the recurrence of organizational conflict and leaders' limited ability to manage it reinforce the importance of adopting tools designed to identify behavioral styles in conflict situations. As Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and Rahim (2023) argue, the conflict-handling approaches adopted by individuals influence both the intensity of tensions and the effectiveness of conflict resolution. Recognizing these patterns enables the development of more constructive and collaborative mediation strategies to promote dialogue and cooperation between parties.

Therefore, this study aims to validate a Brazilian Portuguese version of an instrument based on the Thomas-Kilmann model, which distinguishes five conflict management styles – collaborating, competing, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. These styles derive from varying degrees of assertiveness and cooperativeness (see Section 2.2). Understanding these styles may enhance self-awareness and support strategic responses in conflict situations.

In the Brazilian context, this knowledge is particularly relevant given the high incidence of conflict, elevated levels of stress and dissatisfaction (Gallup, 2025; Correio Braziliense, 2024), and leadership deficiencies identified in organizational assessments (GPTW, 2024). Accordingly, mapping and validating conflict management styles constitute not only a diagnostic instrument but also a foundation for designing policies and programs aligned with organizational culture, capable of strengthening organizational resilience, mitigating tensions, and fostering healthier and more productive work relationships.

To achieve this objective, the Conflict Management Styles Quiz, based on the Thomas and Kilmann (1974) framework and informed by the managerial grid of Blake et al. (1964), was employed. This instrument represents a compact version that remains faithful to the logic of the original model and is suitable for intercultural organizational contexts. The questionnaire was translated into Portuguese and cross-culturally adapted (Beaton et al., 2000; Herdman et al., 1997), including forward and back-translation and content validation by an expert panel. It was subsequently administered using Qualtrics (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) and applied between June 22 and December 4, 2024. Data analysis employed Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR), whose values indicated acceptable reliability and convergent validity for exploratory research, in line with Hair et al. (2010) and Nunnally (1975).

The article is structured as follows: Section 1 presents the introduction; Section 2 discusses interpersonal conflict in organizations and its management in intercultural contexts, including the presentation of the diagnostic instrument; Section 3 details the methodology; Section 4 presents the assessment of validity and reliability of the Conflict Management Styles Quiz; and Section 5 concludes with the study's findings.

2 Interpersonal Conflict in Organizations: For Better or for Worse?

It is difficult to identify the precise moment when the study of conflict emerged, since, as Rahim (2023) observes, human history is intertwined with individual thought. Interest in the topic extends across diverse fields of knowledge, each offering distinct approaches, including accounting. Within philosophy, Rahim highlights Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who agreed on the need to control social conflict but differed regarding the appropriate model of government, as well as Plato and Aristotle, who regarded social conflict as a pathological condition capable of disrupting social order.

From a sociological perspective, Dewey (1922) argues that conflict is a *sine qua non* for stimulating thought, replacing brute force with systematic planning and positioning individuals as active agents in devising solutions. Simmel (1955) likewise maintains that a certain level of conflict is essential for the stability and effective functioning of groups. By contrast, Mayo (2004) and Parsons (1949) view conflict as an abnormality: for Mayo, it undermines cooperation and organizational effectiveness; for Parsons, it results from social dysfunctions, as normative systems are expected to promote balance and integration.

Different conceptions of conflict have given rise to schools of thought that have preserved, expanded, or reinterpret these perspectives. This diversity, shaped by contextual variations and the polarization of analytical lenses – social, economic, philosophical – highlights the complexity of the subject. Classical and neoclassical conceptions are generally grouped into two broad perspectives: a positive, functional approach and a negative, dysfunctional approach, the latter seeking to eliminate conflict through structural improvements within organizations.

The modern perspective, particularly in the post-World War II period, moved beyond a purely dysfunctional view, recognizing conflict as potentially functional in cultural, social, and organizational processes (Coser, 1998; Likert, 1961; Katz & Kahn, 2015; Argyris & Schön, 1997). Coser (1998) argued that conflict is inevitable in work relationships and should be managed constructively to promote internal cohesion and catalyze change. Likert (1961) linked the emergence and management of conflict to leadership styles, demonstrating that open communication, participation, and trust facilitate proactive management. Katz and Kahn (2015) emphasized that conflict arises from interdependence, competition for resources, and functional pressures, and that its management is essential for organizational functioning. Argyris and Schön (1997) conceptualized conflict as a learning mechanism capable of breaking defensive routines and fostering cultural and cognitive transformation.

Although the dysfunctional perspective remains influential, conflict at moderate levels is considered to contribute to organizational effectiveness and success, as well as to innovation and change (Mayo, 2004). Conflict arises from divergent interests and objectives (Deutsch, 1969), and its constructive resolution requires socioemotional skills that enhance cooperation and reduce costs, which directly impact performance outcomes (Deutsch et al., 2006; Turesky et al., 2020).

These contributions suggest that the traditional dichotomy between the functionality and dysfunctionality of conflict has become less prominent in contemporary perspectives. The positive and negative impacts of conflict now depend on leaders' proficiency, organizational culture, adopted management strategies, and participants' communication skills. Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2018) emphasize that, in intercultural organizational contexts, conflict can be viewed as an opportunity for organizational transformation rather than merely as a problem to be overcome. Accordingly, valuing cultural diversity emerges as a deliberate strategy to promote inclusive environments and reduce the symbolic costs associated with ineffective conflict management.

2.1 Conflict management in intercultural contexts

Contemporary organizations operate in complex multicultural environments and require an integrated approach to conflict management that considers individual traits, communication strategies, and culturally sensitive organizational structures. Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2018) emphasize that intercultural dynamics in globalized organizational contexts multiply potential sources of conflict, as communication styles, perceptions of authority and time, and social norms vary significantly across cultures.

When innovative mediation techniques are applied, conflicts cease to be merely negative and instead become opportunities for organizational development. Recent studies, such as those by Fisher (2021), Farinha et al. (2024), and Sharma and Makhija (2024), indicate that leaders who demonstrate cultural curiosity and adopt a collaborative style can transform intercultural tensions into opportunities for learning and cohesion. Deutsch (1969) and Fisher (2000) previously emphasized that sustainable solutions stem from cooperation and mutual respect, while De Hei et al. (2020) emphasize the need for managers with intercultural competence to promote inclusive practices even amid disagreements.

Eko and Putranto (2021) argue that the effectiveness of conflict resolution depends on the use of active mediation, reflective communication, and cultural negotiation. Pataranutaporn et al. (2021) further suggest that preserving social image shapes emotional responses and facilitates the adoption of tailored strategies. Heavey et al. (2020) similarly contend that intercultural mediators should consider not only the explicit content of disputes but also the underlying cultural dimensions that shape expectations and responses. Taken together, this body of work suggests that culturally adaptable managers enhance organizational adaptability and resilience.

The evidence presented by Trujillo et al. (2022) underscores that conflict management in intercultural contexts cannot be reduced to standardized techniques, as management styles are deeply embedded in cultural norms and the socially constructed character of values. The tendency of individualistic cultures to adopt competitive stances and of collectivist cultures to favor conciliatory strategies suggests that the effectiveness of mediation depends on the alignment between the manager's approach and the team's cultural expectations. This perspective further indicates that the mere transfer of conflict resolution practices, without regard for cultural context, is likely to prove ineffective or even counterproductive. Zaripour (2024) similarly emphasizes that communication skills – such as active listening, verbal clarity, and nonverbal sensitivity – are essential for preventing conflict and sustaining long-term relationships.

These communication skills assume strategic importance. In low-context cultures, objective assertiveness facilitates resolution, whereas in high-context cultures, the same assertiveness may be perceived as aggressive or offensive. Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2018) therefore argue that intercultural conflict management requires not only technical mastery of mediation tools but above all interpretive sensitivity that enables the adaptation of communication and negotiation strategies to the cultural and contextual patterns of the individuals involved. Accordingly, intercultural knowledge and communicative adaptability move from peripheral considerations to core managerial competencies, transforming potential sources of tension into opportunities for cooperation, learning, and organizational innovation.

It is apparent that the literature on intercultural conflict management is organized into three levels: individual, relational-symbolic, and organizational. At the individual level, cultural curiosity, empathy, and cognitive plasticity stand out; at the relational-symbolic level, communication style and the preservation of social image guide mediation; at the organizational level, cultural diagnoses, immediate feedback, and evidence-based intercultural simulations promote adaptive learning. When applied strategically, these resources allow organizations to consolidate and innovate in contexts where traditional control and prevention approaches become ineffective.

2.2 Diagnostic tools in conflict management: theoretical perspectives and intercultural limitations

According to Kilmann (2023) and Etele and Akunne (2023), the competing style is characterized by high assertiveness and low cooperation and reflects an individual's strong defense of personal interests, making it particularly relevant in situations involving the protection of rights or urgent decision-making. This style is evident when the imposition of solutions prevails over negotiation. Although effective in contexts requiring rapid decisions or the defense of non-negotiable principles, its recurrent use may intensify tensions and undermine organizational cohesion, especially in multicultural environments (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). The unrestrained reliance on competition requires strategic calibration in cultural settings where harmony and hierarchy are highly valued, as it may generate relational tensions that escalate into symbolic conflicts – disputes rooted in divergent ideas, beliefs, values, and representations (Dias et al., 2023; Machado et al., 2022).

In contrast, the collaborating style is characterized by high assertiveness and high cooperation and is therefore particularly valuable in complex situations, as it seeks solutions that fully satisfy the needs of all parties. Individuals who adopt this style tend to be creative and demonstrate significant negotiation skills (Kilmann, 2023). This conflict management approach presupposes dialogue, in-depth exploration of each party's needs, and the development of creative alternatives that generate mutual benefits. As such, it strengthens trust-based relationships and fosters innovation, and is particularly effective in contexts where cultural diversity requires the recognition and integration of multiple perspectives (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Dias et al. (2023) emphasize that educational and corporate environments that prioritize consensus and cooperation in developing solutions tend to value this conflict management style. According to Xu et al. (2025), in intercultural interactions, this style proves crucial for overcoming perceptual barriers, aligning divergent values, and strengthening inclusive practices.

The accommodating style is characterized by low assertiveness and high cooperation. It prioritizes the interests of others over one's own in order to preserve interpersonal relationships, placing relational harmony above self-interest. This style proves particularly effective in situations where the objective is to mitigate tensions, maintain social harmony, or address power imbalances (Kilmann, 2023; Etele & Akunne, 2023). In collectivist or high-context cultures, the accommodating style is often valued, as it serves as a mechanism for maintaining harmony rather than signaling passive submission (Dias et al., 2023). However, Thomas and Kilmann (1974) caution that excessive reliance on this style may generate hidden resentment or perceptions of injustice if the sacrificed interests are not acknowledged.

The compromising style is characterized by moderate levels of assertiveness and cooperation and seeks to balance outcomes with the maintenance of relationships (Kilmann, 2023). In multicultural contexts, this style mitigates friction and is valued for preserving individual face and social hierarchy (Etele & Akunne, 2023). According to Thomas and Kilmann (1974), leaders who adopt the compromising style seek a middle ground, whereby each party makes partial concessions in order to reach a mutually acceptable solution. As such, it functions as a pragmatic resolution mechanism when time is limited or when the interests at stake do not warrant a more in-depth collaborative effort. Sestan (2024) notes that this conflict management style promotes a workable level of cooperation that supports organizational functioning.

According to Sestan (2024), in culturally diverse projects, the flexibility of leaders who adopt a compromising style is particularly important given the complexity and multiplicity of perspectives within large international teams. In this context, the compromising style functions as a strategic mechanism for navigating divergent interests. When group members adopt a flexible stance, they are able to preserve core objectives – even if only partially – while mitigating interpersonal friction (Wang et al., 2024). This ability is especially relevant in uncertain environments, as it facilitates the integration of diverse viewpoints and enhances project effectiveness, thereby reinforcing the role of cultural intelligence in conflict management within contemporary organizations.

Finally, the avoiding style is characterized by low assertiveness and low cooperation. It tends to withdraw from conflict or postpone decisions. This style is generally appropriate in situations where additional time is needed for analysis or when the issue at stake is trivial. Dias et al. (2023) note that in high-context cultures, avoidance may represent a strategic choice, signaling caution, respect for social norms, and the preservation of harmony rather than indifference (Kilmann, 2023). Furthermore, this style reduces immediate friction, particularly when interpersonal relationships are prioritized over the substantive issue (Etele & Akunne, 2023). Machado et al. (2022) suggest that it may function as a form of prudence, especially in cultures averse to direct confrontation. However, when used repeatedly, it may perpetuate structural problems and erode organizational trust. Thomas and Kilmann (1974) argue that although the avoiding posture may reduce short-term strain, it often deprives the organization of opportunities to learn from conflict and leverage it for development.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) facilitates data collection due to its self-report format. Its application requires careful interpretation of the cultural context in which it is administered though (Etele & Akunne, 2023). Research conducted in multicultural environments by Baca et al. (2024) and Sestan (2024) indicates that the same conflict management style may assume different meanings depending on prevailing social and communicative norms. According to Dias et al. (2023), this diagnostic instrument is widely used in leadership and self-management development processes, including executive coaching, team development, and conflict mediation. Studies by Rachmad (2022) and Machado et al. (2022) suggest that the instrument provides in-depth insight into coping preferences, thereby supporting targeted interventions that respect participants' autonomy and individual motivations. Despite its popularity and practical relevance, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of the TKI in culturally diverse settings and to view them as opportunities for refinement and contextual adaptation.

Table 1 summarizes the core characteristics of each style, along with their advantages, potential risks, and specific implications in intercultural environments.

Table 1

Conflict management styles, according to Thomas and Kilmann (1974), from an intercultural perspective

Style	Main Characteristics	Focus	Potential Advantages	Risks/limitations	Intercultural Perspective
Collaborating	Seeks creative solutions that fully satisfy all parties through open dialogue and appreciation of diverse perspectives.	High assertiveness and high cooperation.	Strengthens trust, fosters innovation, and promotes integration in multicultural contexts.	Requires time, resources, and openness from all parties for in-depth dialogue.	In intercultural environments, it fosters mutual trust and innovation (Dias et al., 2023; Xu et al. (2025).
Competing	Emphasizes the strong defense of one's own interests, even at the expense of others,	High assertiveness and low cooperation.	Useful for rapid decision-making, defending principles, and managing urgent situations.	May generate tensions, weaken relationships, and reduce intercultural cooperation.	Individualistic cultures tend to value this style as a sign of leadership and firmness (Ting-Toomey & Dorj, 2018).
Avoiding	Characterized by withdrawal, postponement, or minimization of conflict.	Low assertiveness and low cooperation	Reduces immediate friction and avoids confrontations in delicate situations.	May deprives the organization of learning and perpetuate latent problems.	In cultures with a strong aversion to confrontation, it may be interpreted as prudence (Etele & Akunne, 2023; Machado et al, 2022).
Accommodating	Prioritizes relationships by relinquishing one's own interests in favor of others.	Low assertiveness and high cooperation	Preserves harmony, particularly in collectivist cultures or hierarchical relationships.	May generate hidden resentment and reinforce power imbalances.	Highly valued in collectivist societies, as it reinforces cohesion and hierarchical respect (Kilmann, 2023; Rahim, 2023).
Compromising	Seeks intermediate solutions in which each party makes partial concessions.	Moderate assertiveness and moderate cooperation.	A pragmatic, rapid, and efficient solution when interests are moderate.	May lead to superficial solutions that do not fully address the root causes of conflict.	Frequently adopted in multicultural negotiations due to its balancing nature (Fisher & Ury, 2011; Rahim, 2002)

Source: developed by the authors.

One of the limitations of applying the Thomas-Kilmann diagnostic instrument lies in the assumption of the universality of conflict management styles, particularly in high-context environments where cultural norms may shape or distort interpretations. According to Etele and Akunne (2023) and Machado et al. (2022), the avoiding style – traditionally viewed as passive – may, for example, reflect an effort to preserve harmony in collectivist cultures rather than a lack of willingness to resolve conflict, as often interpreted in Western contexts. Baca et al. (2024) further argue that the structure of this model tends to categorize symbolic behaviors as problems to be corrected when, in fact, they may represent relational dynamics that require cultural understanding. Moreover, tools based solely on individual perception may compromise diagnostic reliability, as self-reports are significantly influenced by cultural assumptions and the tendency toward socially desirable responses (Baca et al., 2024; Popiuc & García, 2025).

The scarcity of instruments designed to support intercultural validation contributes to terms such as “cooperate” or “lead the conflict” assuming different meanings across cultures, thereby reinforcing the need for tools that are more adaptive and sensitive to cultural codes (Al-Bazi & Pattewar, 2024). Kilmann (2023) acknowledges that the model is grounded in game theory and individual strategic rationality – a paradigm rooted in a Western (liberal-individualist) perspective that may conflict with collectivist values emphasizing social harmony and interdependence. Popiuc & García (2025) and Ozturk (2022) demonstrate that the avoiding style, traditionally regarded as dysfunctional, may represent a means of preserving individual face or reputation, preventing public embarrassment, and functioning as a form of symbolic conflict management in Asian and African cultures.

In this sense, cross-cultural research indicates that the internal consistency of the instrument declines in non-Western populations due to semantic difficulties and divergent cultural interpretations – assertiveness, for example, may be interpreted as aggressiveness or disrespect in non-Western societies (Guo et al., 2025). Akhter et al. (2022) further note that personality traits directly influence how conflicts are managed, and standardized models fail to capture this influence, revealing an additional limitation. Therefore, hybrid models have been suggested.

Popiuc and García (2025) propose an iterative mediation approach that integrates self-report measures, digital simulations, and semantic analysis to capture subtle discursive differences and communicative styles related to context. Sestan (2024), in turn, developed an intercultural model that combines the Thomas-Kilmann framework with observations derived from interactive narratives, revealing stylistic inflections that traditional instruments fail to detect, such as hesitation or linguistic variation, which are fundamental for understanding and analysis in multicultural contexts. Qian (2024) reinforces the epistemological critique of the universality attributed to the Conflict Management Styles Quiz, arguing that symbolic context and nonverbal communication are fundamental elements not captured by self-report instruments of this nature.

Rachmad (2022) identified variation in conflict styles depending on the behavioral dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the relational environment, which calls into question the rigidity of fixed categories. Rahim (2023) similarly criticized this rigidity and advocated approaches that allow for simultaneity and overlap among styles. Popiuc and García (2025) acknowledged the model's limitations in capturing the complexity of behaviors in culturally diverse and relational contexts but maintained that its simplicity constitutes an advantage for practical application. Accordingly, the Conflict Management Styles Quiz remains appropriate for preliminary assessment and formative processes. However, its use in intercultural environments requires combining it with interrelational observation and discourse analysis – a hybrid approach – to ensure adequate interpretation of the symbolic and relational dimension of conflict within culturally sensitive measurement frameworks, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of interventions.

Thus, the Thomas-Kilmann model demonstrates that there is no single, universally effective style, but rather a repertoire of alternatives whose suitability depends on the nature of the conflict, organizational objectives, and the intercultural sensitivity of managers.

3 Method

This study combined documentary analysis and empirical validation and is characterized as a mixed-methods study (Creswell & Inoue, 2025; Fàbregues & Guetterman, 2025), as it integrates qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Documentary analysis was conducted using Bardin's (2016) content analysis technique, applied to secondary materials – seminal books, scientific articles, dissertations, and theses. A systematic approach to inference was developed in three main stages: pre-analysis, material exploration, and results processing. During the pre-analysis, materials were selected through a floating reading. The terms “conflict management,” “intercultural conflicts,” “organizational conflicts,” “conflict management styles,” and “Thomas and Kilmann's instrument” were used to identify articles in Google Scholar, considering citation frequency and authorship in the case of seminal texts, and thematic relevance and publication recency for journal articles. This methodological structure enabled the development of the theoretical framework, which served as the discursive basis for validating the research instrument on conflict management styles in intercultural contexts and supported the interpretations presented in the subsequent sections of this study. This dialogical movement between tradition and contemporaneity, as described by Snyder (2024), thereby linking breadth and depth, is aligned with the principles of a systematic literature review in applied social sciences.

Within the first stage, the aim was also to identify – based on titles and abstracts – documents that could contribute to the discussion on intercultural organizational conflict management, classifying them as central or peripheral. This selection facilitated the emergence of key concepts, such as assertiveness, cooperation, high- and low-context cultures, functional and dysfunctional perspectives of conflict, and corresponding management styles.

The second stage, material exploration, involved thematic coding, distinguishing among contemporary empirical and statistical studies, foundational theoretical texts, case studies, and conceptual essays. Subsequently, the information was categorized according to three perspectives: convergent ideas, divergent ideas, and complementary contributions. This categorization facilitated understanding of concepts and behavioral indicators linked both to classical theories and to contemporary empirical findings on conflict management.

The third stage, results processing, consisted of correlating the coded material with the identified categories, identifying points of consensus and tension in the academic debate, as well as elements that highlight the historical evolution of conflict management styles. The integration of recent empirical literature with established theoretical foundations strengthened the study's analytical rigor and coherence.

Empirical validation was based on the Conflict Management Styles Quiz, also known as the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). It represents a more concise version that preserves the rationale of the original instrument and is applicable to different intercultural organizational contexts. The TKI was inspired by Blake et al.'s (1964) Managerial Grid, which introduced the principle that ways of dealing with organizational tensions and exercising leadership develop from two dimensions: concern for people and concern for results. This distinction between individual and collective interests underpins the necessary balance in the decision-making process.

The TKI is widely regarded as a primary diagnostic tool for individual conflict management styles, based on the Thomas and Kilmann matrix (1974), which focuses on assertiveness (attention to one's own interests) and cooperation (attention to the interests of others). From these dimensions, five styles are identified: collaborating, competing, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising, as detailed in Section 2.2 of the theoretical framework. Thomas and Kilmann (1974) argue that each style expresses a distinct way of balancing or prioritizing assertiveness and cooperation in tense situations, which justifies its wide application in multicultural organizations, leadership training, and educational environments. According to Rahim (2023) and Thomas and Kilmann (1974), in addition to supporting individual diagnoses, the TKI promotes critical reflection on the influence of cultural factors in the choice of conflict resolution strategies.

The instrument was translated and cross-culturally adapted (Beaton et al., 2000; Herdman et al., 1997) using a forward-backward translation procedure, combined with content validation by an expert panel. This approach ensures idiomatic, conceptual, semantic, and cultural equivalence between the translated and original versions, reduces individual biases, and enhances content validity (Beaton et al., 2000). This protocol is widely recommended for cross-cultural adaptation studies.

Initially, the TKI was translated from English into Brazilian Portuguese by two independent bilingual researchers, generating preliminary forward translations. A third researcher reconciled the two versions, selecting the most appropriate wording. The reconciled version was then returned to the translators to verify agreement and assess semantic and cultural equivalence and was subsequently reviewed by a third judge. The final translated version was established once consensus was reached among the researchers and confirmed by the judge (Appendix A).

The final instrument was administered using Qualtrics (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) and distributed between June 22 and December 4, 2024, to a convenience sample of accountants from different regions of Brazil. A link and QR code were generated for the questionnaire and disseminated to potential respondents via WhatsApp, through institutional faculty groups, and through direct contact at accounting events, including the 2024 Brazilian Accounting Congress and events organized by the Regional Accounting Council of Paraíba (CRCPB). Of the 444 responses received, 10 respondents declined to provide informed consent and 65 submitted incomplete questionnaires, resulting in 369 valid responses.

The questionnaire was structured into three sections: an informed consent form, a sociodemographic questionnaire, and items assessing conflict management styles – collaborating (items 1, 5, and 7); competing (4, 9, and 12); avoiding (6, 10, and 15); accommodating (3, 11, and 14); and compromising (2, 8, and 13). The instrument comprises 15 items distributed across five styles rated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = Rarely; 2 = Sometimes; 3 = Frequently; 4 = Always). No style is inherently superior to the others, as its effectiveness depends on the context. The instrument was evaluated using Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), as detailed in Section 4.

These considerations corroborate Dias et al. (2023), who argue that the Conflict Management Styles Quiz represents not only a methodological adaptation but also a bridge between established theoretical traditions and the contemporary demands of intercultural management, thereby supporting the development of more collaborative and inclusive organizational environments.

4 Validity and Reliability Assessment

The study sample consisted of 369 valid respondents. The gender distribution was balanced, with 52.6% men and 46.9% women, and 0.5% non-response. Participants had a mean age of 44.6 years (SD = 13.1), ranging from 21 to 79 years, indicating substantial age diversity. Regarding geographic distribution, most respondents were from the Northeast (48.2%), followed by the Southeast (22.2%) and South (20.9%), whereas participation in the North (6.0%) and Midwest (2.7%) was comparatively lower. In terms of education, the sample exhibited high academic attainment: 30.4% held a doctoral degree, 16.0% held a Master's degree, and 14.6% held a specialization certificate. A smaller proportion reported incomplete doctoral or Master's studies or held a habilitation (*livre-docência*). The category "Other," also related to education, was selected by 6.5% of the participants. Regarding occupation, professionals working in both academia and the private sector represented the largest group (32.2%), followed by those working exclusively in academia (26.6%) or exclusively in the private sector (26.3%), while students accounted for 14.9% of the sample. Overall, these results indicate a sample composed predominantly of experienced professionals with high educational attainment and strong engagement in the Brazilian accounting context. Detailed information is provided in Appendix B.

The characterization of the sample revealed particularities relevant to the interpretation of the results. A strong concentration of respondents from the Northeast (48.2%) was observed, suggesting that cultural and regional aspects may have influenced the preferences for certain conflict management styles, as different regions of Brazil exhibit distinct sociocultural values. Furthermore, the sample was characterized by a high level of educational attainment, with 42.9% of participants holding a doctoral degree or still pursuing a doctoral program, while 14.6% held a specialization certificate. This academic profile may be associated with greater familiarity with reflective and collaborative practices in conflict resolution compared to less educated groups (Rahim, 2023). Another important finding was the predominance of professionals working simultaneously in academia and the private sector (32.2%), indicating engagement in multiple organizational contexts. This characteristic may contribute to a broader repertoire of conflict management strategies, combining theoretical approaches typically valued in academia with pragmatic approaches more common in corporate environments (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). Thus, the results of this study reflect not only Brazilian cultural patterns but also specific professional characteristics of the highly qualified accountants who comprised the sample.

Internal consistency and convergent validity were assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR). AVE represents the proportion of the total variance of the indicators explained by the latent factor relative to measurement error, with values ≥ 0.50 considered adequate (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). CR measures the internal consistency of items associated with a given construct, with values ≥ 0.70 recommended for confirmatory studies and between 0.60 and 0.70 considered acceptable in exploratory studies (Hair et al., 2010). This assessment of the psychometric properties of the Conflict Management Styles Quiz using AVE and CR yielded heterogeneous results across the five conflict management styles: collaborating, competing, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising.

The calculation of AVE and CR followed four steps: (1) factor analysis to obtain the loadings (λ); (2) calculation of λ^2 ; (3) calculation of the residuals ($1 - \lambda^2$); and (4) application of the standard formulas for AVE and CR, as shown in Table 2 of Appendix B.

The collaborating style presented satisfactory AVE (0.560) and CR (0.789), meeting the thresholds proposed by Fornell & Larcker (1981) and indicating conceptual robustness in the studied sample. This evidence reinforces the view that collaboration constitutes a stable foundation for conflict mediation, including in culturally diverse environments (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Consistent with these findings, recent studies have shown that the adoption of the collaborating style promotes positive emotional climates and increases team enthusiasm, particularly in teams with high levels of emotional skills (Rachwal-Mueller, 2023; Guo et al., 2025).

The compromising style also demonstrated good internal consistency ($CR = 0.721$), although its convergent validity was marginal ($AVE = 0.467$). This result suggests that, although the construct is well-structured, it may reflect a moderate conflict management strategy, which may not be equally valued or interpreted across cultures. According to Etele and Akunne (2023), in the context of international projects this style mitigates friction, while Wang et al. (2024) highlight that flexibility in commitment can be crucial for maintaining relationships. Thus, although its psychometric stability is lower than that of the collaborating style, the inclusion of additional items or cultural refinements may improve its measurement.

The competing, avoiding, and accommodating styles presented CR values between 0.663 and 0.689, slightly below the 0.70 threshold but acceptable in exploratory contexts (Hair et al., 2010; Nunnally, 1975). Convergent validity was limited in four of the five styles, as AVE did not reach the ≥ 0.50 threshold. Kilmann (2023) and Etele and Akunne (2023) noted that cultural variation in tolerance for assertiveness and in the meaning attributed to dominance behaviors significantly affects how these styles are interpreted. Avoidance may be conceived as prudence or preservation of harmony (Akhter et al., 2022; Dias et al., 2023); however, Baca et al. (2024) suggest that it may also be interpreted as omission or disengagement. The accommodating style may carry positive connotations of empathy or deference, although in low-context cultures it may be perceived as a form of disguised submission.

In intercultural contexts, these indicators play a critical role, as they reflect the extent to which the items function effectively across different cultural settings. Consistent with the literature reviewed in this study, including Akhter et al. (2022), Sestan (2024), Dias et al. (2023), and Popiuc and García (2025), these results should be interpreted in light of the cultural context and with attention to contextual and interpretive considerations in high-context environments. The literature indicates that preferences for conflict management styles vary according to cultural dimensions, such as individualism–collectivism and power distance (Hofstede, 2001; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). Individualistic cultures, generally characterized as low-context cultures, tend to favor more assertive styles (competing and collaborating), while collectivist cultures, typically high-context, favor avoiding, accommodating, and compromising styles, as they prioritize the maintenance of social harmony (Rahim, 2023).

Beyond cultural aspects, the results warrant careful consideration of semantic adaptation due to linguistic variation in different cultural contexts. This variation does not reflect methodological flaws, but rather indicates that perceptions and expressions of conflict are culturally mediated. It is also important to acknowledge the specificity of the sample, which consisted exclusively of Brazilian accountants. The accounting profession is widely recognized for requiring precision, caution, regulatory compliance, and risk aversion (Ishaque, 2021; Zhang, 2024), which may predispose these professionals toward more conciliatory styles, such as compromising or avoiding, to the detriment of more assertive styles.

These findings also underscore the importance of combining standardized instruments with techniques that enable methodological triangulation (e.g., interviews, observations, or simulations). Such an approach may help capture culturally influential factors and ensure that conflict management styles are not merely regarded as behavioral responses but as situated symbolic manifestations, thereby enhancing both empirical validity and practical relevance for leaders seeking to mediate conflicts in intercultural contexts.

In summary, the results indicate that the questionnaire demonstrates minimally acceptable internal consistency ($CR > 0.60$) across styles, although convergent validity remains limited. The findings suggest that both Brazilian cultural factors and the characteristics of professional accountants influenced response patterns. Future research should extend the sample to other professional groups and cultural contexts to determine whether the observed patterns are maintained or specific to this group.

5 Conclusion

This study aimed to validate the instrument developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974), designed to identify conflict management styles in organizational contexts. The sample of 369 accounting professionals from different regions of Brazil enabled an empirical analysis of the internal consistency and convergent validity of the five styles proposed in the Thomas and Kilmann (1974) model – collaborating, competing, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising.

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) results indicated satisfactory levels of reliability and convergent validity for most styles, supporting the adequacy of the instrument and aligning with findings from recent international studies. The collaborating style exhibited the strongest consistency indices, suggesting a tendency among Brazilian accountants toward integrative solutions and cooperative work relationships. These characteristics reflect sociocultural values that emphasize interpersonal interactions and the maintenance of relational harmony.

The analysis also revealed that the accommodating and avoiding styles exhibited slightly lower scores, possibly indicating persistent challenges in directly addressing conflict situations, particularly within hierarchical settings and contexts characterized by indirect communication – traits often associated with Brazilian culture. This evidence suggests that, although the instrument retains its original factor structure, cultural dimensions should be taken into account in future interpretations, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive approaches to conflict management, complemented by the use of interviews, observations, and/or simulations.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the construct validity of the model proposed by Thomas and Kilmann, one of the most widely used and well-established instruments in research on conflict management styles. In practical terms, the validated version of the questionnaire provides a methodologically rigorous and empirically supported tool that is reliable for organizational diagnostics and the development of leadership competencies, and can be applied in management training programs and organizational behavior research in Brazil. The methodological procedures – including documentary analysis, cross-translation, and empirical validation – highlight the importance of semantic and conceptual adaptation to achieve equivalence of meaning across cultures.

The restriction of the sample to Brazilian accounting professionals limits the generalizability of the findings to other professions and cultural contexts. Future research should therefore compare different professional groups and cross-cultural organizational settings to examine the stability of the model and the influence of cultural variables on the expression of conflict management styles. In addition, longitudinal studies could assess whether formative interventions based on the use of the instrument lead to changes in conflict resolution strategies and cooperative dynamics within multicultural teams. The study also provides a foundation for research examining ethnic diversity, intercultural communication, organizational values, and conflict management styles.

Thus, the validation of Thomas and Kilmann's instrument in the Brazilian context has the potential to contribute significantly to research on conflict management and to the literature on cultural diversity in organizations. The study reaffirms the importance of understanding conflict management styles as expressions of broader cultural and institutional systems that shape interpersonal dynamics in the workplace.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire: final version.

1. I explore issues with others so as to find solutions that meet everyone's needs.
2. I try to negotiate and adopt a give-and-take approach to problem situations.
3. I try to meet the expectations of others.
4. I would argue my case and insist on the merits of my point of view.
5. When there is a disagreement, I gather as much information as I can and keep the lines of communication open.
6. When I find myself in an argument, I usually say very little and try to leave as soon as possible.
7. I try to see conflicts from both sides. What do I need? What does the other person Need? What are the issues involved?
8. I prefer to compromise when solving problems and just move on.
9. I find conflicts challenging and exhilarating; I enjoy the battle of wits that usually follows.
10. Being at odds with other people makes me feel uncomfortable and anxious.
11. I try to accommodate the wishes of my friends and family.
12. I can figure out what needs to be done and I am usually right.
13. To break deadlocks, I would meet people halfway.
14. I may not get what I want but it's a small price to pay for keeping the peace.
15. I avoid hard feelings by keeping my disagreements with others to myself.

APPENDIX B

Table 2

AVE and CR for the five conflict management styles

Style	AVE	CR
Collaborating	0.560	0.789
Competing	0.416	0.689
Avoiding	0.403	0.666
Accommodating	0.389	0.663
Compromising	0.467	0.721

Table 3

Distribution of respondents by gender

Gender	n	%
Male	194	52.6%
Female	173	46.9%
Non-response	2	0.5%
Total	369	100%

Table 4

Descriptive statistics for respondents' age

Statistics	Value
N (valid)	369
Mean	44.6
Standard deviation	13.1
Median	44
Minimum	21
Maximum	79

Table 5

Distribution of respondents by Brazilian region

Region	n	%
Northeast	178	48.2%
Southeast	82	22.2%
South	77	20.9%
North	22	6.0%
Midwest	10	2.7%
Total	369	100%

Table 6

Distribution of respondents by highest educational attainment

Educational attainment	n	%
Postgraduate certificate/specialization	54	14.6%
Postgraduate certificate/specialization (not completed)	17	4.6%
Master's degree	59	16.0%
Master's degree (not completed)	51	13.8%
PhD	112	30.4%
PhD (not completed)	46	12.5%
Habilitation (<i>Livre Docência</i> , Brazil)	6	1.6%
Other	24	6.5%
Total	369	100%

Table 7

Distribution of respondents by professional status

Professional status	n	%
Academic and practitioner	119	32.2%
Academic only	98	26.6%
Practitioner only	97	26.3%
Working student	31	8.4%
Full-time student	24	6.5%
Total	369	100%