Antecedents of frontline manager handling relationship conflicts

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Abstract

Purpose – Conflicts are inevitable in organizations and are a significant challenge for frontline managers (FLMs). This study aims to investigate the relationship between the leadership styles of FLMs and relationship conflicts (RLCs), with the indirect intervention of emotion regulation (ER) and five conflict-handling styles (CHSs).

Design/methodology/approach – Research data were obtained from 243 FLMs in the Pakistan textile industry. SPSS 23 and PROCESS macros software were used to test and verify hypotheses regarding leadership styles, ER, CHSs and RLC. The authors conducted 5,000 bootstrap replications to verify mediation.

Findings – Leadership styles are significantly associated with RLC. A high degree of ER can negatively moderate RLCs through transformational leadership (TFL) and transactional leadership (TCL) styles and positively moderate RLCs through a laissez-faire leadership (LZF) style. Among CHSs, a compromise style mediates the relationship between RLC and the TFL and LZF styles, and a domination style mediates the relationship between RLC and the TCL style.

Practical implications – FLMs should be trained to overcome workplace interpersonal conflicts. Appropriate cognizance of a conflict before it occurs is a requisite skill. FLMs must be able to use all five given CHSs.

Originality/value – This study identifies the association of leadership styles with CHSs and ER to manage RLC in a non-Western context. The study enhances understanding of the use of the ER factor with the different CHSs of FLMs.

Keywords Relationship conflict, Emotion regulation, Leadership style, Conflict handling styles, Frontline manager

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Frontline management refers to second- and first-level staff who are responsible for the supervision of employees and the production of goods and services (Teague and Roche, 2012). In this regard, a frontline manager (FLM) is a leader who is responsible for a work

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group, where employees working under him or her do not have leadership roles. Thus, an FLM has diversified roles such as managing routine operations and people (Mintzberg, 1980). Brewster et al. (2013) describe FLMs as translators and responsible leaders who convert policies into actions; however, Hales (2005) argues that an FLM is an “organizational leader” who motivates people by igniting passion and inspiring subordinates. Another study describes FLMs’ role as a “whole series of small actions which managers undertake on a daily basis that have a major impact on the employees” (Purcell et al., 2003). Leaders respond to problems by harmonizing misunderstandings, easing tensions and resolving difficulties through punishment, reward, encouragement and support (Fisher, 2000). According to Northouse (2007), leadership theories can be classified as trait, behavioral, contingency and transformational. Other than such theories, leadership styles are taken into consideration (Wright and Nishii, 2007). For example, Bass (1985) describes a three-dimensional model of leadership styles, which include transformational leadership (TFL), transactional leadership (TCL) and laissez-faire leadership (LZF) styles. Such leadership styles are developed to reduce turnover numbers, provide employees with satisfaction at work and enhance organizational commitment, behavior, managerial performance, job involvement and performance (Kark et al., 2003).

Conflicts can be handled with five distinctive styles: integration, domination, obligingness, compromise and avoidance (Rahim, 2002). The integration and obligingness styles are considered to be constructive handling styles and are associated with transformational leaders who are more facilitative in nature (Hendel et al., 2005). Further, transactional leaders use the compromise style, whereas avoidance is associated with the LZF style. Thus, characteristics, personality traits, conflict-handling styles (CHSs) and demographics affect conflict management (Gbadamosi et al., 2014).

Relationship building among the employees of an organization is vital for success (Knapp et al., 1988). Researchers have found that nearly 75 per cent of negative interfaces at work concern managers, subordinates and coworkers (Penney and Spector, 2005). Many types of conflict exist, but the frequency of relationship conflict (RLC) is higher than any other type of conflict in an organization. Indeed, the incidence of RLC ranges from 25 to 50 per cent of the conflicts in any workday (Hahn, 2000). RLC is a disagreement between team members that is characterized by anger, hostility, frustration, distrust, power struggles/personal incongruities, tension, friction and animosity (Parayitam and Dooley, 2009). Approximately, 30-42 per cent of a manager’s time is spent in conflict resolution between employees (Watson and Hoffman, 1996). For a manager to handle conflicts effectively, he or she must be able to understand the nature of emotions and conflicts. Emotional intelligence (EI) can make it easier for a leader to deal with conflicts (Fisher, 2000). EI is the ability to recognize and manage personal emotions and those of others (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). EI involves rational thinking and judgment, as well as emotion regulation (ER) (Chien-Cung and Jaramillo, 2014). Gross (1999) argues that ER enables individuals to influence their emotions and express them in a rational way. In addition, according to Brackett et al. (2010), ER helps an individual to handle feelings accurately and positively, thereby sustaining good quality affiliation with others. However, some leaders fail to handle conflicts for various reasons (Rahim, 2002).

The study was conducted in a non-Western environment, the Pakistani textile industry. In this industry, issues such as low productivity, low job satisfaction and conflicts that cause high employee turnover have been common (Yasmin, 2008).

In the foregoing context, this study has two main purposes, as follows:

- to investigate the existing relationship between leadership styles and RLC; and
- to discover the importance of using the five CHSs to regulate emotions and achieve effective relationships.
This study is the first to link the leadership styles of FLMs with ER and conflict handling. It also considers CHSs in the non-Western textile industry. Further, the study explains the importance of relationship building through effective leadership styles.

**Literature review**

*Frontline management*

Guest and King (2001) say that frontline management is regarded as an outcome of the delegation of many management activities that aim to organize a large number of employees. However, Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) observe that frontline management is overlooked in the research field. Purcell et al. (2003) and Hales (2005) suggest that such a management role involves the conversion of policies into actions. This role is homogeneously given several titles such as manager, boss, supervisor, leader, team leader and FLM but is rarely explored. According to Townsend (2014), FLMs must have managerial skills, operational capabilities and access to vital, but complex, procedural information. Samantha (2015) highlights that in many cases, leaders are promoted from employee level and have supplementary, allied managerial responsibilities. Hales (2005) says that such responsibilities vary in accordance with the organization and industry. Further, Khilji and Wang (2006) suggest that FLMs are organizational leaders who are expected to achieve conflict-free environments.

*Hypotheses’ development*

*Leadership styles*

Andersen (2016) states that leadership is a process of using influence to ensure that work is done and to achieve desired results. Bass and Avolio (1994) name the necessary leadership styles as TFL, TCL and LZF.

Doucet et al. (2015) say that TFL involves motivating employees to exceed certain expectations. Tajasom et al. (2015) and Bass (1997) agree that transformational leaders motivate employees to work beyond the usual boundaries of their imaginations and beliefs.

According to Bass (1997), TCL refers to leaders who use the carrot and stick approach to accomplish organizational goals. Hartog et al. (1997) state that transactional leaders like to adhere to normal routine tasks to achieve targets rather than embrace innovative ideas from employees. Smith et al. (2016) remark that this leadership style involves a corrective bipolar approach: using promotions and rewards and managing by exception.

The LZF style is that of leaders who avoid decision-making. Skogstad et al. (2007) describe LZF as the absence of leadership or zero leadership and a failure to take responsibility. Eagly et al. (2003) state that this leadership style fails to introduce rewards and punishments. However, Yang (2015) argues that the effectiveness of LZF is that in a particular situation, it does not promote the ineffectiveness of other leadership styles.

*Relationship conflict*

Boohar (2001) remarks that a person who never experiences conflict in the workplace is living in a dream world, blind to his or her environment or confined in a private domain. Conflict refers to a disagreement between at least two parties, which can be caused by the different prioritization of goals, inadequate resources and interference in goal achievement. Maintaining friendly relations with coworkers is not easy. According to Amason and Schweiger (1997), RLCs occur more often than operational issues and do not directly relate to project tasks. The conflicts arise when teammates have disagreements and concerns that are of an emotional or personal nature or relate to a power struggle or incompatibilities that result in tension, animosity, friction, hostility and distrust (Jehn, 1995). Greer et al. (2008) find
that in RLCs, individuals spend their energies on observing each other’s behaviors rather than concentrating on their tasks.

Relationships between the leadership styles of frontline managers and relationship conflicts

According to Behfar et al. (2011), it is vital to consider how the leadership style of FLMs can help to avoid RLCs. Lim and Ployhart (2004) state that a leader should display team-supporting behavior and psychological attachment and develop a shared identity and values that others can incorporate into a self-concept. Bass (1985) suggests that transformational FLMs inspire others to work beyond prescribed processes, whereas team identification enables FLMs to prioritize collectiveness. Alper et al. (2000) suggest that such leaders believe that conflict is a shared problem that requires mutual attention and an integrative resolution so that all participants can strive toward goal achievement. In addition, according to Tyler and Blader (2003), the group-value concept creates a platform where everyone willingly wants to discuss issues open-mindedly and purposefully seek a solution that benefits all team members.

Podsakoff et al. (1990) say that the TFL style of FLMs can impede RLCs in several ways. Kramer et al. (1996) remark that such a leadership style could also create an information-sharing environment that results in a high degree of involvement. Tjosvold (1993) suggests that paying attention to workers helps to reduce frustration among them. Schwarz and Clore (1983) say that this approach can reduce the sources and intensity of negative emotions.

In contrast, the LZF style has received less attention in research because it promotes negative emotions, stress, and reduced motivation among workers. According to Bass and Avolio (1994), the LZF style is considered non-strategic, zero or absent leadership or an outcome of negligence and ignorance. Judge and Piccolo (2004) agree that the LZF style is an inactive form of leadership, whereby an FLM possesses no confidence in his or her abilities, avoids solving problems, engages in paperwork and disowns and delegates responsibilities to other people. Further, Bass and Avolio (1994) argue that such leaders become disorganized when dealing with problems of dominance, talk more and undertake less. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed, based on the literature:

H1. FLMs’ TFL (H1a) and TCL styles (H1b) are negatively related to the perception of RLC, whereas the LZF style (H1c) is positively related to the perception of RLC.

The moderating role of emotion regulation

Salovey and Mayer (1990) state that “emotional intelligence (EI) as a subset of social intelligence is the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions”. EI operates through a series that starts with emotional perceptions that precede rational emotions and cultivates ER. According to Chien-Cung and Jaramillo (2014), the regulation of emotions is a crucial constituent of EI that shows the ability to self-manage emotions. Gross (1999) describes ER as the ways in which individuals influence their emotions in terms of when they have them and how they experience and express them. Labouvie-Vief and Diehl (1998) suggest that there are two general ER styles. One is responsible for maintaining a positive affective state and the other involves an exploration of positive and negative emotions and thus involves the amplification of emotional experience. Urry and Gross (2010) present a model of ER that explains the underlying processes. Explicitly, situation selection based on emotions will evoke cognitive change, namely, reinterpreting a situation to alter an emotional response that demonstrates a change of feelings and behaviors. Griffith et al. (2014) suggest that the use of an appropriate ER strategy can potentially promote positive
outcomes related to RLCs. Rusting and Nolen-Hoeksema (1998) remark that using an ER strategy during times of high cognitive load, rather than cognitive reappraisal, may lead to better group outcomes.

Conflicts are emotionally driven (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001), and whether functional or dysfunctional, all conflicts are emotionally inherited (Jordan and Troth, 2004). It is apparent that emotion and the tactics of regulation underpin certain attitudes connected with conflicts, which are the outcomes of interpersonal interactions (Bodtker and Jameson, 2001). A strong relationship among team members creates an environment in which knowledge is shared, enabling shared emotional schemas through the appropriate interpretation of emotions and resulting in fewer provocations (Yang and Mossholder, 2004). Brackett et al. (2010) say that ER is more effective when feelings can be judged more accurately and approaches can be adopted to change negative feelings. According to Van den Berg et al. (2014), managers should be conscious of the effect of ER and the investment required. Ayoko and Konrad (2012) explain that leaders who recognize the relationship between emotion and conflict have the opportunity to manage conflicts effectively by reducing negative emotions and thereby enhancing teams’ performance. Daus and Ashkanasy (2005) state that appropriate emotional expressions are fundamental for the effective functioning of leadership. However, Jehn (1997) argues that leaders who show overreliance on emotions in conflict management are less effective at conflict handling and may cause negative impacts. Schildman and Reid (2008) and Hopkins and Yonker (2015) remark that a leader who can manage emotions adequately is also able to reduce conflict and resolve situations that stimulate conflict. Ayoko and Konrad (2012) suggest that there is growing evidence that emotional proficiency can be learned and developed. Goleman et al. (2002) explain that EI helps leaders to have excellent ER abilities, thereby enabling such leaders to solve conflicts effectively.

According to the affective event theory of Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), EI can differentiate RLCs from other conflicts because the former are event-oriented or situational. Bruk-Lee and Spector (2006) and Schlaerth et al. (2013) in their meta-analysis argue that EI is positively related to constructive conflict management and the degree to which an employee avoids confrontation. However, Hinkin and Schriesheim (2008) say that the LZF style is considered non-strategic or absent leadership that is the opposite of TFL and TCL. Kelloway et al. (2005) argue that LZF can be a passively destructive form of leadership and a cause of workplace stressors, strains and bullying. In addition, Gardner and Stough (2002) find a negative association between emotional cognizance and LZF. Thus, the following hypotheses based on the moderating role of ER are posited as follows:

\[ H2. \text{ ER moderates the relationship between the leadership styles of FLMs (TFL, } H2a; \text{ TCL, } H2b) \text{ and RLCs. The moderated relationship is stronger (more negative) at higher degrees of ER.} \]

\[ H2c. \text{ ER moderates the relationship between the LZF style of FLMs and RLCs. The moderated relationship is stronger (more positive) at higher degrees of ER.} \]

\[ \text{The mediating role of conflict-handling styles} \]

Kelloway et al. (2005) suggest that the ways that can be used to deal with conflicts include demonization, integration, compromise, suppression and avoidance. Moreover, Blake and Mouton (1964) identify five other different ways, namely, withdrawing, forcing, smoothing, problem-solving and compromising. In this context, Rahim and Bonoma (1979) and Rahim and Magner (1995) explain that individuals try to satisfy their own concerns and those of
others. According to the extensive research work of Rahim and his colleagues, a leader can use five different styles that handle conflicts.

The integration style means having as much concern for the self as for another party because it involves active collaboration, resulting in an outcome that satisfies every party. Gross and Guerrero (2000) state that the integration style focuses on problem-solving, which is an effective way of managing conflict. The obligingness style is an accommodating and yielding style that requires individuals to have less concern for themselves and more concern for others (Rahim, 2000). Rahim (2000) state that someone who depicts this style tends to have more concern for others or fails to express his or her own approach or ideas.

The domination style centers on power and competition (Chen et al., 2012). According to Rahim and Buntzman (1989), leaders who use this style fail to achieve targets because behaviors toward their subordinates are inappropriate, thereby escalating conflicts. The avoidance style is also known as the ignoring or withdrawal approach and is characterized by the postponement of issues and withdrawal of confrontation (Rahim, 2000). Gross and Guerrero (2000) say that leaders who use this style detach themselves from a conflict and change the subject, stating that the conflict does not exist. The compromise style involves concern for the self and others, whereby leaders are interested in mutually adequate solutions for each party. Montes et al. (2012) suggest that this style can also be referred to as the cooperative CHS. Rahim (1983) remarks that the style is associated with the effective handling of conflicts and subsequent congruous relationships, resulting in better organizational performance. Song et al. (2006) agree that the leader who uses this style maintains a good relationship with others and is supported by them when in pursuit of organizational success.

Chen et al. (2016) maintain that competitive behavior is encouraged to a greater extent in Western research. However, in Eastern culture, harmonious relationships, forbearance and pro-social organizational behaviors are preferred. In a study of five cultures, Ting-Toomey et al. (1991) find that Americans adopt the domination style of handling conflict more so than the Japanese and South Koreans. Tang and Kirkbride (1986) explain that British government executives prefer the collaboration and competition styles in Hong Kong. Ma (2007) discovers that the confrontation style of managing conflict causes lower degrees of satisfaction among group members because competition and coercion result in closed minds. Tjosvold and Sun (2001) argue that adopting an integration style of handling conflict can result in a better perception of interpersonal consequences. Saeed et al. (2014) explain that leadership styles have influenced CHSs. Significantly, according to Hendel et al. (2005), studies about nursing have found that TFL influences the integration and obligingness styles of conflict handling. Further, the TCL style has a positive relationship with the compromise style of conflict handling (Bass and Avolio, 1994), whereas those who use the LZF style significantly prefer the avoidance style. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. CHSs mediate the relationship between the leadership styles of FLMs (TFL, H3a; TCL, H3b; LZF, H3c) with RLCs.

Research methodology

Participants and procedure

The aim of this study is to investigate the mediating role of FLM in conflict management by utilizing various CHSs that foster ER. This study investigates the private textile sector in Pakistan. The textile industry is one of the major industries of Pakistan, employing 40 per cent of the total labor force and contributing 60 per cent of overall exports. Of the exports 25
per cent goes to the USA, 20 per cent to the EU and the remainder to countries such as China, the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and South Africa. The industry utilizes skilled and semi-skilled labor in the fields of marketing, quality control and production (Yasmin, 2008). In addition, the textile industry is divided into three subsectors, namely, spinning, processing and garments (Tufail, 2014). From these subsectors, the most notable organizations are registered under the All Pakistan Textile Mills Association (APPTMA). APTMA is a regulatory authority of the textile industry in Pakistan.

A paper questionnaire was used to collect data from FLMs of the textile industry. The participants were required to fall under the definition of an FLM regardless of their job titles. In this regard, frontline management is the first layer of management that is involved in technically implementing organizational policies and decisions through the management of responsibilities and dealing with subordinates. FLMs are responsible for helping subordinates to work toward the overall improvement of organizational performance (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). The current study focused on actual job responsibilities where organizations lacked effective HR practices (HR – human resources) and job descriptions for employees. After explaining to the participants the study’s rationale and emphasizing the significance of their responses, the self-administered questionnaires were handed over (Becker et al., 2012). The participants were asked to recall incidents that they had faced in the prior year and report on the specific CHSs that they had adopted. It should be noted that they were asked about the ways in which they recalled the emotional events that they had encountered and how they had handled the situations. Data in this study were collected over two months. A stratified random sampling technique was used. From all three subsectors of the textile industry, the researcher selected 53 organizations as the sample population. A total of 330 FLMs were contacted and asked to respond to a questionnaire that covered the issues highlighted in this study. The questionnaire was assessed to take only 20 min of the participants’ time. The FLMs were assured that any information they gave would be treated in confidence and that the questionnaire was voluntary. In total, 287 surveys were completed, resulting in 243 usable responses. The sample comprised 187 men (77 per cent) and 56 women (23 per cent). Not a single female respondent was from the production side (weaving, spinning, knitting, dyeing and printing), which meant that the female respondents were only from the quality control and marketing departments. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table I.

Leadership styles (transformational leadership, transactional leadership and laissez-faire leadership)

This study’s multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ 5X short form) was used to identify leadership styles because it can measure the full 45-item range of leadership models (Bass, 1985). The questionnaire measured prominent leadership styles (TFL, TCL and LZF) in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Educational Background</th>
<th>Working experience</th>
<th>Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Age in years; 1 = 20-25, 2 = 26-30, 3 = 31-35, 4 = 36-40, 5 = Above 40, Education; 1 = Intermediate/DAE, 2 = B. Tech, 3 = Bachelor, 4 = Textile Diploma 5 = Masters, Department; 1 = Weaving, 2 = Spinning, 3 = Knitting, 4 = Dyeing, 5 = Printing, 6 = Stitching, 7 = Packaging
items 1 to 36. The remaining items measured outcome behaviors (extra effort, satisfaction and effectiveness). The items were rated by participants in accordance with a five-point Likert scale (0 = never; 4 = almost always). The items included the following: “I go beyond self-interest for the good of the group”, “I avoid getting involved when important issues arise” and “I wait for things to go wrong before taking action”. The Cronbach’s α measures of reliability were 0.90, 0.89 and 0.87 for TFL, TCL and LZF, respectively.

Emotion regulation
The measurement used for ER in this study is the Wong and Law emotional intelligence scale (WLEIS) (Law et al., 2004). The scale measures distinctive behaviors and comprises four subscales in accordance with the definitions of Mayer and Salovey (1997). Moreover, four items were incorporated to measure the regulation of emotion on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The items included “I am able to control my temper so that I can handle difficulties” and “I can always calm down quickly when I am very angry”. The reliability coefficient for ER was 0.87. Individuals who had high scores on the WLEIS scale were good at recognizing and expressing their emotions.

Conflict-handling styles
A 37-item instrument, the organizational conflict management inventory was used to measure each FLM’s approach to conflict management (Anis-ul-Haque et al., 2004). A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the responses (1 = never; 5 = always). The items included “I use my expertise to make a decision in my favor”, “I occasionally use my power to win a competitive situation” and “I try to investigate an issue with my subordinate to find an acceptable solution”. The reliability coefficients for CHSs are presented in Table II.

Relationship conflict
According to Jehn (1995) and Spector and Jex (1998), RLC is measured by using a three-item scale that asks participants to report on the frequency of involvement in workplace conflict. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always, is used for this purpose. The items include “How often do people get angry while working in your group?” This three-item scale was used in the current study. Good scale reliability was evident (α = 0.89).

Common method bias
When data collection is undertaken with a self-reporting questionnaire, common method variance (CMV) may be a concern that needs to be addressed. The reason is that dependent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Item loading</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>Cronbach’s α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transformational leadership</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.0076</td>
<td>0.1989</td>
<td>0.80-0.91</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional leadership</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5993</td>
<td>0.3491</td>
<td>0.79-0.87</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laissez-faire style</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.6716</td>
<td>0.9145</td>
<td>0.78-0.88</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion regulation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.0160</td>
<td>0.5492</td>
<td>0.81-0.94</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating style</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.5405</td>
<td>1.0903</td>
<td>0.78-0.91</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obliging style</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.2603</td>
<td>1.0169</td>
<td>0.82-0.91</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromising style</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.1821</td>
<td>0.3943</td>
<td>0.88-0.95</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominating style</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.7180</td>
<td>0.4192</td>
<td>0.81-0.91</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding style</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.6786</td>
<td>1.2825</td>
<td>0.77-0.87</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship conflict</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2558</td>
<td>0.2458</td>
<td>0.76-0.88</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Means, SD, reliability and convergent validity (n = 243)
and focal explanatory variables are perceptual measures derived from the same respondent (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). This study did not ask for any personal information from the questionnaire’s participants such as names. Several scholars address CMV by using Harman’s single factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In this study, the researchers entered all scale items into a principal components analysis and examined the unrotated factor solution. With regard to the unrotated factor analysis, taking into account all construct items in this study, there is < 0.50 variance. Further, the analysis extracted dissimilar variables from all measured items of the independent and dependent variables. In this regard, no variable has a variance greater than 0.50. The first factor is RLC with 28.7 per cent of explained variance, which suggests that there is no common method bias.

**Results**

**Descriptive statistics**

Table I presents the demographic description of the study. The number of respondents with more than five years’ experience in the textile industry is 121. The respondents’ ages are given in five different categories, with a minimum age of 20 years old and a maximum age above 40. Of the respondents, 83 have four-year textile diplomas, with specialties according to their departments. Construct validity was assessed using average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) statistics. AVE is an estimate of how much an item is at variance from the construct. If AVE is larger than 0.50, this indicates that the measurement has good convergent validity. CR is similar to the α coefficient for establishing the overall reliability of a model’s items. Hair et al. (2010) say that CR should be larger than 0.60. Convergent validity is demonstrated when items load highly (loading > 0.50) on their associated factors. Convergent validity is also adequate when constructs have an AVE value of at least 0.50. All the loadings of the measures in this study are higher than 0.50; further, AVE of the two constructs meets the suggested threshold. Thus, convergent validity is acceptable (Table II). The TFL style is highly preferred, with the highest mean (3.01). Among the five CHSs, the most preferred style of conflict handling is the compromise style (4.18), followed by the domination style (3.72) and the integration style (3.54). The avoidance style (2.68) is the least preferred. It is interesting to note that the integration style is very close to the domination style and that the avoidance style is the least preferred (Table II).

Table II displays the correlations among the three leadership styles and shows that TFL is the most preferred by FLMs. The correlation coefficients depict the correlation between two contrary styles. In this regard, the integration style is collaborative and the domination style involves dictating and competing; however, the two styles are significantly correlated (Table III).

**Hypothesis testing**

H1a-H1c propose that TFL and TCL are negatively associated with RLC, whereas LZF is positively related to RLC. The results shown in Table III indicate that TFL and TCL are negatively related to RLC (α = –0.166 and –0.071, respectively, p < 0.05), whereas LZF is positively related (α = 0.198, p < 0.05). Hence, H1a-H1c are fully supported. ER is negatively associated with RLC (α = –0.714, p < 0.05). H2a posits the moderating effect of the ER traits of FLMs. Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to test moderation effects. Variables were entered into the model in the following order: control variables, TFL, ER and TFL × ER. Table IV presents the results of the hierarchical regression analysis for the main and interaction effects on RLC. The last column of Table IV shows the moderating effects with the value of $R^2$ change. The main effect of TFL ($β = –0.165$) remains significant at first. The main effect of ER ($β = –0.664$) and the significant interaction effect between TFL
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>EDU</th>
<th>DEPTT</th>
<th>W.EXP</th>
<th>TFL</th>
<th>TCL</th>
<th>LZF</th>
<th>ER</th>
<th>INTG</th>
<th>OBLG</th>
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Notes: N = 243, EDU = Education, DEPTT = Department, W. Exp = Working experience, TFL = transformational leadership style, TCL = Transactional leadership style, LZF = Laissez-faire, ER = Emotion regulation, INTG = Integrating, OBLG = Obliging, DOMN = Dominating, AVOI = Avoiding, COMP = Compromising, RLC = Relationship conflict, Italics Number < 0.05
and ER ($\beta = -0.395$) on RLC are also found. Thus, ER moderates the relationship between TFL and RLC. Consequently, $H2a$ is fully supported. $H2b$ proposes the moderating effect of ER on the relationship of TCL and RLC. The last column of Table IV presents the moderating effects of change in the value of $R^2$. The main effect of TCL ($\beta = -0.231$) remains significant at first. The main effect of ER ($\beta = -0.572$) and the significant interaction effect between TFL and ER ($\beta = -0.417$) on RLC are also found. Thus, ER moderates the relationship between TFL and RLC.

$H2c$ posits the moderating effect of ER on the relationship between LZF and RLC. The main effect of LZF ($\beta = 0.200$) remains significant at the first and second step. The significant interaction effect between LZF and ER ($\beta = -0.203$) on RLC is also found. Thus, ER moderates the relationship between LZF and RLC negatively. Thus, $H2c$ is supported (Table IV).

Figure 1 reveals that FLMs with higher degrees of ER experience high amounts of workplace RLC when they use low degrees of TFL. In contrast, when FLMs use high degrees of TFL, high degrees of ER result in less RLC ($\beta = -0.395$, $p < 0.05$). Figure 2 reveals the moderating effect of ER on the relationship of TCL and RLC. A high degree of TCL with a high degree of ER may reduce RLCs; however, a low degree of TCL with a high degree of ER may increase RLCs. Figure 3 provides supplemental support showing that RLCs are not affected differently under conditions of either low or high degrees of use of the LZF style when FLMs have low degrees of ER. Moreover, differences emerge when FLMs have more ER ($\beta = -0.203$, $p < 0.05$). In sum, there is a significant difference in RLCs when

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Table IV.
Results of moderated regression analysis of emotion regulation

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<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
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<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
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Notes: $F$ values $< 0.000$, Control variables are Gender, Age, Education and Department
Antecedents of frontline managers

Figure 1. Supporting graph for $H3a$

Figure 2. Supporting graph for $H3b$

Figure 3. Supporting graph for $H3c$
FLMs use a low degree of LZF and a low degree of ER compared with a situation where FLMs use a high degree of LZF and a high degree of ER. In the latter case, there is greater RLC.

FLMs’ leadership styles are significantly related to five CHSs. Table III shows that TFL is significantly related to the integration style ($\beta = 0.204, p < 0.05$), the obligingness style ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.05$), the compromise style ($\beta = 0.23, p < 0.05$) and the domination style ($\beta = 0.280, p > 0.05$) and negatively related to the avoidance style ($\beta = -0.035, p > 0.05$). TCL is significantly related to the integration style ($\beta = 0.030, p < 0.05$), the obligingness style ($\beta = 0.025, p < 0.05$) and the domination style ($\beta = 0.168, p < 0.05$) and negatively insignificant to the avoidance style ($\beta = -0.143, p < 0.05$) and insignificant to the compromise style.

LZF is positively and significantly related to the avoidance style ($\beta = 0.662, p < 0.05$), negatively and significantly related to the obligingness style ($\beta = -0.128, p < 0.05$) and the integration style ($\beta = -0.17, p < 0.05$) and insignificantly related to the domination style. The integration style and compromise style are negatively and significantly related to RLC ($\beta = -0.391$ and $-0.35$, respectively, $p < 0.05$); however, the domination style and avoidance style are positively and significantly related to RLC ($\beta = 0.325$ and $0.088$, respectively, $p < 0.05$). Further, the obligingness style is insignificantly related to RLC. Figure 4 presents the conceptual framework with the results.

To test the mediating roles of CHSs as posited in H3a-H3c, this study adopted indirect test methods endorsed by Preacher (2015) and Hayes and Preacher (2014). This approach was taken because the classic three-step method, “the causal steps approach”, of Baron and Kenny (1986) can be criticized for several reasons. Researchers have concluded that the

![Figure 4](conceptual_framework_with_results.png)
causal steps approach uses the significances of other statistics to measure indirect effects; however, the approach does not measure the indirect effect of mediators, resulting in the potential for estimate errors. Additionally, the confidence interval of a mediation effect is not given. The Sobel test is another mediation test that can overcome some of the shortcomings of the causal step approach. However, it has a challenging requirement for the normal distribution of a data set. Because of such reasons, this study used a bootstrap approach in preference to the Sobel test (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). The indirect effect-testing syntax developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) was used with SPSS software to run tests with all significant CHSs together in one model with one independent variable simultaneously. Further, the data were bootstrapped 5,000 times. The results show that for H3a, the compromise style (z = −3.1191, p < 0.05) mediates the relationship of TFL with RLC at a confidence interval of 95 per cent. Other CHSs are not significant. With regard to H3b, the domination style (z = −2.8905, p < 0.05) significantly mediates the relationship of TCL with RLC at a confidence interval of 95 per cent. With regard to H3c, the compromise style (z = 2.0706, p < 0.05) significantly mediates the relationship of LZF and RLC at a confidence interval of 95 per cent. Table V presents the results.

**Discussion**

FLMs face many workplace challenges. These include handling conflicts, which are inevitable within any organization. A research study involving 660 human resource practitioners indicates that 44 per cent of respondents have to manage conflicts that often cause increased absenteeism and employee turnover (CIPD, 2008). Drawing upon a random sample of FLMs working in the textile sector of Pakistan, the current study empirically tested whether the leadership styles of FLMs influence the ways in which conflicts are handled. ER was also considered in this context. It was observed that ER helps to capture the severity of RLCs. Some CHSs used by FLMs are associated with poor leadership styles and result in overall negative outcomes. The novel nature of this study is that it aims to

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Table V.

**Notes:** IV = Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Laissez-faire DV = Relationship Conflict, level of confidence for confidence interval: 95.00; *p < 0.05
synthesize and analyze several factors that affect human resource management, in particular conflict management.

According to the results, the use of an appropriate ER strategy can potentially reduce negativity and the outcomes associated with RLC. Jehn (1997) and Jehn et al. (2008) suggest that one of the principles associated with conflict is negativity. This current study explains that FLMs’ leadership styles directly associated with conflict is negativity (Griffith et al., 2014). TFL is an effective and facilitative style that provides satisfaction and motivation for subordinates. It also enhances positivity about personal emotions and those of others (Saeed et al., 2014). Significantly, it was observed in the current study that few FLMs use the LZF style. This form of leadership can enhance the severity of conflicts because it is contradictory and takes undesired directions (Rahim, 2002). Those leaders who practice such a leadership style are known to be emotionless. The findings of the study conclude that emotions are critical for controlling the interpersonal conflicts that arise in the workplace (Mulki et al., 2015). The findings also suggest that leaders with higher degrees of ER can easily understand and distinguish the emotions of others. Transformational leaders with high degrees of ER are better at manipulating and utilizing emotions and are more experienced in occupational objectives (Hopkins and Yonker, 2015). George (2000) observes that transactional leaders can also address the interpersonal conflicts that occur around them through ER; however, such leaders are less effective than transformational leaders. The current study’s results also suggest the weak moderating effect of ER, the TCL style and RLC because of the nature of their performance. Substantially, the ability of any leadership style to succeed in relationship building and conflict management depends on the degree of ER applied. Leadership styles become effective when FLMs use higher degrees of ER (Yeung et al., 2015). However, using lower degrees of ER weakens the ability of various leadership styles to overcome conflicts.

The compromise style is one of the most preferred CHSs, according to prior research (Shih and Susanto, 2010). The textile industry is undergoing many challenges. Managers must solve problems on their own because of the current impractical HR practices, whereby managers encounter a high rate of employee turnover and feel responsible for this (Tufail, 2014). However, the reason why FLMs use the compromise style more than any other CHS is implicit (Zhang et al., 2015).

Significantly, the compromise style helps to promote healthy working relationships by maintaining harmony among workers (Saeed et al., 2014). The domination style ranks second, followed by the integration style. While FLMs resolve conflicts by compromising through a give-and-take approach, the domination style overcomes interpersonal conflicts instantly because senior management is highly engaged and dominates. The current study also contributes to an understanding of the mechanism by which CHSs and FLMs’ LZF style exert their effects on RLC. The findings suggest that those FLMs of the textile industry who have a low degree of LZF style are more likely to affect RLC negatively when compared with their counterparts who have a high degree of LZF style. In addition, delaying tactics are problematic in RLC because they cause conflicts to erupt more quickly. It is suggested here that leaders with lower degrees of ER can regulate situations more effectively. However, using emotions at this point would cause greater problems. Remarkably, FLMs with low degrees of LZF style are more likely to be associated with non-involvement techniques that make the managers ineffective (Yang, 2015).

The mediating role of CHSs indicates that the compromise style has direct and indirect impacts on RLC in the textile industry. Transformational leaders are good at controlling their emotions and dealing with routine matters at work. Thus, they establish good
relationships with others. Such leaders face uncertainty firmly and are less concerned with bad and negative emotions (Shih and Susanto, 2010). When conflict erupts, it is likely that these leaders will choose the compromise style to handle conflict (Liu et al., 2009). In contrast, with regard to TCL and RLC, the domination style is found to be the mediating factor. The domination style is associated with assertive and target-oriented behavior without the involvement of emotions. Transactional leaders are rigid in nature and avoid prolonging conflict situations. Such leaders are more concerned with task completion and objectives (Kulno and Toomet, 2013). Last, it was observed here that the compromise style has indirect effects on RLC in combination with the LZF style. Only the compromise style can mediate the effect of LZF on RLC. Other styles do not mediate this relationship. This finding implies that LZF has a harmful effect on RLC.

Implications for management
From a theoretical viewpoint, the study supports the hypotheses and contributes to prior work on leadership and conflict management. First, the study examines the conceptual similarities and differences among different leadership styles that are used to overcome RLC. Second, it promotes a theoretical model that investigates ER as used by industrial leaders to handle emotions. Third, it examines how leaders use CHSs in collaboration with leadership styles to manage conflict in the Pakistani textile industry. In this regard, the study is the first in its field.

One conclusion that can be derived from the study is that successful FLMs must be able to use various conflict management styles. Conflict is normally situational and context specific. Thus, the appropriate selection of a CHS depends on circumstances. However, ideally, FLMs should practice more cooperative conflict-resolution styles. Moreover, FLMs must recognize the specific situations that demand certain tactics to resolve conflicts and must be able to adjust to other tactics where necessary. The ability to recognize and address the underlying apprehensions in conflicts before such apprehensions escalate could also help FLMs to deal with conflicts.

FLMs should also be able to understand the emotions that arise in conflicts and be perceptive about selecting effective styles of conflict resolution. An ER strategy can be used to manage emotions effectively to maintain relationships and prevent conflicts from starting. The ability to foresee conflicts also helps to reduce negative outcomes among employees. Training and development can be used to enhance FLMs’ abilities and improve interpersonal interactions. Managers should be educated about all the styles of conflict resolution and trained how to put the styles into practice. Last, leaders are expected to be role models, especially in terms of conflict management, and should possess behaviors that they believe must be exhibited throughout organizations.

Limitations and directions for future research
This study explores the importance of controlling RLC and thereby contributes to the literature. However, the study has some limitations. First, the sample size is limited because all the data were from the textile industry of Pakistan. Second, the research findings should be interpreted with caution to avoid generalization. Industry differences may cause different results regarding conflict resolution styles. Third, CMV may be a concern for this study as data were collected from a single source and self-reported. To account for the problem of CMV, Podsakoff et al. (2003) suggested collecting data from different sources. However, it would have been less than ideal to ask other raters to assess participants’ emotional, leadership and conflict handling styles. Fourth, this study is cross-sectional; however, the relationship between leadership styles and RLC could be studied in the context of long-term circumstances. Thus, it is recommended
that future researchers use a longitudinal design to establish the relationship between FLMs’ leadership styles and conflict. Last, when measuring leadership styles in this study, the wording of the Likert scale refers to “FLM”. The respondents may have had multiple roles and could have been confused when responding to the scale. Such confusion is a result of poor job descriptions. In a few cases, leaders may not even have been aware of their specific roles. This limitation must be considered in future studies that investigate frontline management. Moreover, the use of ER and conflict resolution as moderators and mediators, and some other factors that can reduce RLCs such as communication behaviors and knowledge sharing, should be examined in the future.

Conclusion
This study is the first to examine the associations among the conflict resolution styles, ER and implicit leadership styles of FLMs of the textile industry, specifically in a non-Western context. The results indicate that there is room for improvement in the FLMs’ use of conflict management skills, the regulation of their emotions, and their leadership styles. FLMs in a conflict situation need skills and abilities to make informed judgments and thereby effectively manage conflicts. Emotions help provide lateral support to an individual’s conceptualization of a conflict, particularly regarding the selection of an appropriate resolution style. This study identifies specific relationships between leadership styles and RLCs in the context of the indirect effects of ER and five specific CHSs. Significantly, the results suggest that the use of ER can reduce the severity of RLCs in the textile industry. Moreover, the appropriate selection of CHSs can help FLMs to solve RLCs. Further, the use of ER is associated here with RLCs and relates to the leadership styles of FLMs. Thus, the study explores the impacts of leadership styles in circumstances where ER and CHSs are discussed.

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