



Intercultural communication and conflict in the classroom: A case study of a Generation Z student leader in Indonesian Islamic higher education

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study investigates intercultural communication and conflict management within a collectivist higher education context at Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris State Islamic University, Samarinda. Anchored in Hofstede's, Triandis', and Thomas-Kilmann's frameworks, the research examines students' cultural orientations, female class representatives' leadership negotiations, and classroom conflict dynamics. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with three purposively selected participants and cultural orientation mapping of 33 students from the 2022 Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Program. Findings reveal that while most students exhibit collectivist, compromising tendencies to preserve harmony, the female class leader displays individualistic, competitive styles, creating contrasting expectations in decision-making. However, language mediation and respectful communication effectively bridge these gaps to facilitate consensus, while the female class president demonstrates transcultural leadership across institutional hierarchies. Ultimately, this study provides critical insights into how cultural orientations, linguistic mediation, and gendered leadership intersect to shape the negotiation of authority and interpersonal relationships in collectivist educational settings.

Keywords: *Conflict management, generation Z, classroom leadership, collectivism and individualism, intercultural communication, language and identity*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, language serves as both a means of communication and a cultural tool that shapes identity, preserves heritage, and governs social interactions (Alzubi et al., 2023). However, divergent language styles and cultural norms can trigger interpersonal conflict within diverse educational settings (Szóke, 2018). In Indonesia's collectivist environment, which traditionally prioritizes politeness, harmony, and face-saving (Tambunan et al., 2021), a generational divide emerges as Generation Z (Gen Z) increasingly embraces directness, self-expression, and digital hybrid identities, thereby challenging conventional norms and inducing classroom tensions (Musfirah et al., 2024). Consequently, robust conflict management has become a baseline for interpersonal and organizational success, placing a critical premium on leadership to cultivate collaboration and mitigate friction (Hajar et al., 2024).

Within this evolving landscape—and despite persistent male dominance—female leaders frequently employ strategic language as a means of cultural mediation, successfully balancing assertiveness with empathy while simultaneously navigating and reflecting contemporary cultural hybridity across modern leadership and gender discourses (Istiqomah et al., 2024). Although individualism–collectivism research widely addresses psychological and behavioral outcomes—such as emotional adaptation and academic resilience in East Asia (Minkov & Hofstede, 2014; Zhao & Hu, 2024)—it overlooks how language mediates cultural orientations in interpersonal conflicts and female leadership negotiations. Similarly, while Indonesian female leadership literature is expanding (Abidin & Tanjung, 2023; Syahrudin & Rohman, 2025), its focus remains confined to gender representation and socio-religious paradigms. Consequently, a critical empirical gap persists regarding linguistic orientations and the communicative negotiation of authority within educational settings.

Unlike previous studies, this research fills a gap in the literature by exploring how intercultural communication and conflict are linguistically embodied by Gen Z students in a collectivist classroom context. Focusing on a female student leader at a state Islamic university in Samarinda, Indonesia, this study examines the function of language as a cultural and interpersonal resource in mediating conflict and negotiating identity. Gen Z was chosen for its unique values, preferences, and mindsets (Ashaari et al., 2019; Aswaruddin et al., 2025; Fadillah et al., 2022; Fitriyani et al., 2024; Yudha & Praditya, 2020). Through the integration of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (DeVito's, 2023), Triandis' (1995/2018) individualism–collectivism framework, as well as Thomas and Kilmann's (2008) conflict management model, this study provides theoretical contributions to intercultural dialogue, gender-based leadership, and linguistic hybridity in Indonesian higher education, while offering practical implications for the development of students' intercultural competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language as cultural mediation

Language is essential for cultural mediation, enabling communication and understanding among diverse cultural groups in multilingual societies. It fosters inclusivity and reduces ethnocentrism, though it can also create hierarchies if mismanaged (Baraldi, 2017). In education, language media encourages intercultural understanding, which requires individuals to acquire language competence in order to engage meaningfully in conversation (Abdulrahman & Abu-ayyash, 2019; Wilhelm, 2019).

Individualist-collectivist orientation

The individualism-collectivism framework, developed by Hofstede and expanded by Triandis into horizontal and vertical dimensions, remains a cornerstone of cross-cultural research (An & Mai Phuong, 2019; Hornikx & de Groot, 2017). While Western societies traditionally champion personal goals, Asian cultures such as those in Indonesia tend to gravitate towards collectivism, prioritizing group harmony and conflict avoidance (Syarizka et al., 2021; Kim & Coleman, 2015). However, recent empirical evidence highlights the nuanced and evolving nature of these traits. For instance, classroom dynamics in Japan reflect blended approaches (Alshahrani, 2017), younger generations in Iran show individualistic shifts (Bidjari & Zahmatkesh, 2011) and individualists display lower tendencies toward academic plagiarism (Kasler et al., 2021). Furthermore, individualism does not inherently erode macro-level social welfare (Rutar, 2025). Driven by urbanization and globalization, contemporary cultural evolution has triggered widespread shifts in gender roles, family structures, and welfare attitudes, ultimately yielding a complex mix of cultural orientations across modern societies (Lansford et al., 2021).

Leadership and conflict management style

Effective leadership and strategic conflict management are critical drivers of organizational performance, employee well-being, and job satisfaction (Yueqin & Ling, 2024). Leadership styles often diverge along gendered and operational lines, ranging from servant and democratic approaches to autocratic and masculine models (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Herachwati & Basuki, 2012). These styles closely intersect with Thomas and Kilmann's five conflict-handling modes—competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating—which reflect varying degrees of concern for self and others (Patrissia & Jamalullail, 2024). Although cultural factors strongly dictate leadership effectiveness (Tang, 2024), comprehensive cross-cultural empirical studies remain significantly scarce (Lather et al., 2023).

Respectful communication

Respectful, considerate communication is cultivated through equal interaction, serving as the foundation for positive relationships across clinical, educational, and institutional settings (Azizi et al., 2024; Haddad et al., 2019). Global evidence demonstrates that structured training, local cultural contexts, and supportive frameworks enhance inclusive, respectful practices (Brownlow et al., 2021). In an increasingly globalized world, integrating cultural awareness into curricula is vital to equip individuals for diverse collaboration and conflict prevention (Awalluddin & Maznorbalia, 2023; Farid & Hakimi, 2025). Ultimately, culturally aware individuals foster respectful leadership, driving organizational engagement and loyalty within positive work environments (LaGree et al., 2023).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the essence of classroom conflict and intercultural communication within a collectivist educational setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). It was conducted with the 2022 cohort of the Islamic Communication and Broadcasting Program at State Islamic University of Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris Samarinda, Indonesia, selected for their intensive two-year history of interaction (Fitriyani et al., 2024). Data collection was initiated via a WhatsApp poll using 14 items adapted from Hofstede's cultural dimensions (DeVito, 2023) to capture preliminary cultural orientations. Out of 59 students, 33 responded voluntarily, providing descriptive contextual data for triangulation (Santos et al., 2020). Subsequently, qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews and non-participant observations. Three central figures in a specific classroom conflict were purposively selected: one female class leader and two class members (one male, one female). To ensure instrument quality, two doctoral experts in Communication Studies validated the polling items and interview protocols.

Calculations yielded an Item-Content Validity Index (I-CVI), S-CVI/Ave, and S-CVI/UA of 1.00, demonstrating excellent content validity (Polit & Beck, 2006). The interview guide for the leader was informed by Triandis' (2001) individualism-collectivism framework, while the guide for the members was adapted from Thomas and Kilmann's (2008) conflict management style model. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. Verbatim transcripts and observation notes were analysed using NVivo 12 following the recursive thematic analysis steps outlined by Castleberry and Nolen (2018): compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. The emerging themes were critically interpreted through the lenses of Hofstede's, Triandis', and Thomas-Kilmann's frameworks. Rigour was maintained through an audit trail and methodological triangulation across interviews, observations, and poll results (Santos et al., 2020; Song et al., 2018). The research flowchart is illustrated in Figure 1.

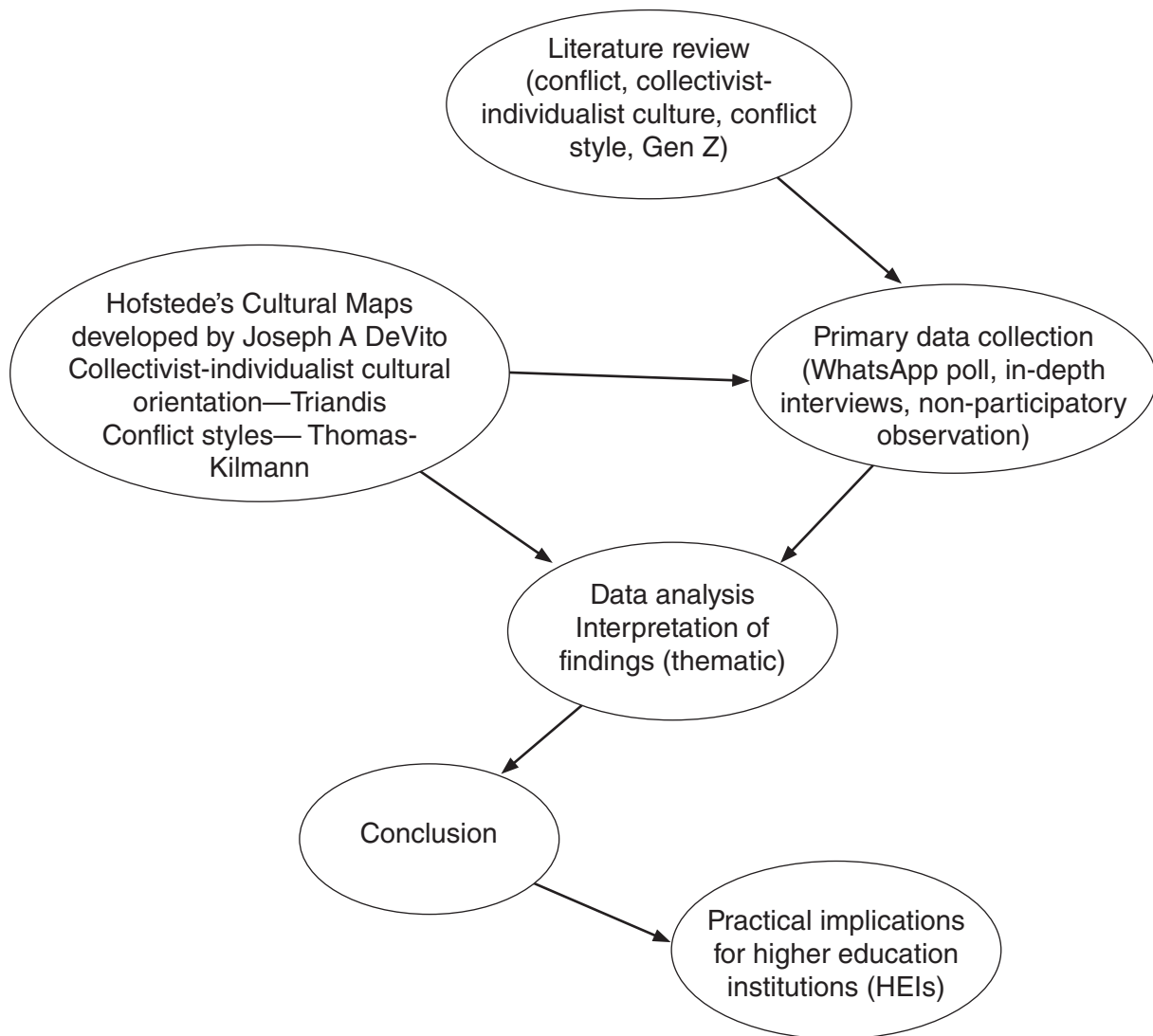


Figure 1. Research flowchart

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Cultural Map focuses on individualist and collectivist cultural orientations

Table 1. Cultural maps of individualist-collectivist from students of the Islamic and Broadcasting study program

Orientation of	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Success	33	100
Contributing to group efforts	31	93.9
The self is capable of surpassing others	2	6.1
Hero	33	100
No answer	1	3
A hero is a team player	26	79
A hero is someone who stands out from the others	6	18

The results of the WhatsApp polling, as shown in Table 1, reveal that the statement “*Success is defined as the ability to contribute to the group’s efforts*” was selected by 31 students, accounting for 93.9%. In contrast, the statement “*Success is defined as the extent to which one surpasses others*” was chosen by 2 students (6.1%). Regarding the concept of a hero, 26 students (79%) identified a hero as a team player, whereas 6 students (18%) perceived a hero as someone who stands out. One student did not respond to the concept of a hero, as they considered the statement inaccurate. Furthermore, Table 1 shows that contributions to group effort are a measure of success and that a hero is defined as a team player. It can be inferred that students in the 2022 cohort of the Islamic Communication and Broadcasting program exhibit a collectivistic cultural orientation. However, several students, representing 6.1% and 18% of the sample, respectively, selected statements indicative of an individualistic cultural orientation. This subgroup consisted of more males than females.

Furthermore, the study results show that male students are predominantly individualistic. However, two female students—including the class leader—also exhibited similar orientations due to their parents’ diverse ethnic backgrounds. According to Triandis, individualistic and collectivist orientations are not determined by gender but by the interplay of social experiences. The presence of individualistic female leaders in collective classes can lead to differences in expectations of leadership and group participation, which may trigger class conflict in Asian societies (Karim & Samsudin, 2024).

Father is Javanese, while Mother is Dayak Bentian.

(Individual interview, Informant 1)

Father is Javanese; Mother is Madurese.

(Individual interview, Informant 2)

The Cultural Map focuses on masculine and feminine cultural orientations

Leadership and conflict, as reflected in students’ responses regarding strategies for addressing disagreements, are presented in Table 2 using Hofstede’s masculinity-femininity dimensions. Most students (91%) preferred compromise to resolving conflict, whereas only 9% favoured confrontation and striving to win. Similarly, when asked how they would act in a managerial position, 97% indicated that they would prioritise employee satisfaction, while only 3% emphasised competition and assertiveness. These findings suggest that feminine values were more strongly represented than masculine values within the classroom. According to Hofstede, (as cited in DeVito, 2023), feminine-oriented cultures tend to emphasise cooperation, relationship maintenance, quality of life, and consensus-building. In contrast, masculine-oriented cultures prioritise competition, achievement, and assertiveness. The predominance of compromising behaviour and concern for collective well-being among students therefore, reflects the broader collectivist and feminine cultural tendencies that characterise the classroom environment.

Table 2. Cultural Maps of masculine-feminine dimensions from students of the Islamic Communications and Broadcasting study program

Orientation	Quantity	Percentage (%)
Addressing conflict through compromise	30	91
Addressing conflict directly and striving to win	3	9
Total	33	100
When positioned as a manager of an organisation, prioritising employee satisfaction	32	97
When positioned as a manager of an organisation, emphasising competition and aggressiveness	1	3
Total	33	100

Conflict management style within a classroom setting

From this study, we found that participants' reported conflicts commonly involved class funds, friendship circles, assignment groups, and course scheduling (see Figure 2). Although these issues appear administrative in nature, the interview findings suggest that they frequently reflect broader tensions concerning collective interests, leadership authority, and group consensus. This finding aligns with Chiarelli et al. (2024), who defined conflict as an inevitable aspect of social interaction arising from differing goals, interests, or perspectives. Accordingly, conflict management styles are shaped by interpersonal relationships, contextual demands, and cultural values. In classroom settings, conflicts may stem not only from practical issues but also from differing expectations of leadership, participation, and decision-making.

We usually take a long time to agree on how the class fund balance should be allocated.

(Individual interview, Informant 1)

Our problems, for example, arise when there is a change in the course schedule by the lecturer. In the class, friendship circles have existed from the first to the sixth semester, so when we disagree, it tends to create factions and lead to mutual criticism.

(Individual interview, Informant 2)

The most frequent issues are related to the class fund and the division of groups for each course assignment.

(Individual interview, Informant 3)



Figure 2. NVivo research data visualisation of the in-depth interview results from 3 informants (2025)

Additionally, using Thomas and Kilmann's (2008) conflict management framework, the interview findings indicate that classroom tensions were closely linked to differing expectations of leadership and decision-making. As shown in Figure 3, the female class leader, who exhibited individualistic tendencies, was perceived by some students as insufficiently attentive to the classroom's collective atmosphere. Although she regularly sought input, participants reported that her own viewpoints often prevailed in final decisions. This finding is consistent with Kim and Coleman (2015), who found that individuals with stronger individualistic orientations tend to adopt more dominating conflict styles, while collectivist-oriented individuals prefer relationship-preserving approaches. Such differences in orientation may therefore have contributed to tensions in leadership practices and decision-making.

Moreover, one participant referred to the class leader as a "public enemy," suggesting that disagreement extended beyond specific decisions to include perceptions of her legitimacy as a leader. From a transcultural leadership perspective, these findings indicate that effective leadership in culturally diverse settings requires negotiating differing value orientations through communication and relationship management. Leadership effectiveness is thus shaped by cultural expectations of authority, participation, and collaboration (Or & Berkovich, 2023). When leadership styles misalign with dominant-group expectations, tensions may arise over decision-making processes and the representation of interests.



Figure 3. NVivo research data visualisation of the in-depth interview results from 2 informants (2025)

Informants noted that the class leader sometimes negotiated for the common good. Members accepted her decisions in urgent situations or external matters, but demanded a shared opinion on internal matters to maintain harmony. This behaviour reflects a collectivist orientation and a compromising style (Thomas & Kilmann, 2008), in which consensus is built to maintain social cohesion (Liu, 2012). Classroom tensions were managed through linguistic mediation—such as discussion and consultation—rather than direct confrontation to negotiate meaning and reduce conflict. This aligns with the face-saving communication strategies and indirect interactions used in collectivist cultures to maintain relationships (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

Interviews based on Triandis' (1995/2018) framework revealed the coexistence of cultures in a female class leader: horizontal individualism (self-directed autonomy) and vertical collectivism (commitment to group responsibility). Although non-participant observation did not reveal any explicit conflict, she actively interacted with external stakeholders, including lecturers, administrators, and other class leaders. This phenomenon underscores the essence of transcultural leadership, where leaders must possess cultural adaptability and communication skills to bridge expectations and mediate diverse perspectives (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013). The role of the class president extends from internal management to mediation with external institutional actors. This study extends transcultural leadership research by demonstrating that such practices can emerge within a dynamic student organisation as it navigates cultural expectations.

Individualistic leadership orientation and knowledge management

A leader ideally maintains control over the knowledge processing environment (Purwanto et al., 2020). However, in an individualistic leadership landscape, the effectiveness of this control is often questioned because it tends to prioritise personal interests, hindering collaboration and equitable knowledge distribution. Leaders with this orientation tend to limit members' participation in decision-making and information sharing, ultimately reducing the quality of the group's knowledge management. Field findings indicate that female class leaders with an individualistic orientation rarely consider suggestions and input from group members. The ideas implemented are dominated by their own personal ideas, leading them to be perceived as a "public enemy." This phenomenon contrasts with the definition of leadership as the art of uniting organisational members, where a leader is required to understand their members' emotions in order to plan effective collective action (Yueqin & Ling, 2024).

Numerous studies demonstrate that a leader's personality and values shape team and organisational culture (O'Reilly et al., 2019). This aligns with a longitudinal study of ethnic minority adolescents in China, which concluded that individual-level collectivism facilitates adaptation, while individualism hinders it in the classroom (Zhao & Hu, 2024). While this finding differs from the situational leadership style of a female library director in Sleman, which is context-adaptive (Nizomi, 2019), it is consistent with the evidence that individualistic-oriented employees can improve organisational performance and productivity through HR management practices, even in collectivistic cultures (Cho & Yoon, 2009). In this case, the class president's individualistic tendencies enabled her to make quick decisions, especially when interacting with external parties.

Coexistence of horizontal individualism and vertical collectivism

This study revealed that the class president combined two cultural orientations. The first, a horizontal individualism, viewing oneself as an autonomous entity and upholding individual equality. This characteristic is reflected in her ability to complete tasks independently—a trait of individualistic cultures that encourage independent problem-solving (Benito-Gomez et al., 2020). The second, vertical collectivism which views oneself

as part of a collective and accepting hierarchy and inequality within the group. Collectivist characteristics are evident in a strong emotional attachment to the family as a centre of belonging, where sacrifice is considered normal. This aligns with the argument of Bartucz et al. (2022, as cited in Gorla et al., 2024) that individuals in individualistic cultures are still encouraged to rely on their nuclear family. Similar findings among students in Taiwan, Argentina, and the United States suggest that despite differing national cultural values, individualist and collectivist orientations can coexist at the individual level (Chiou, 2001).

Conflict management through language mediation and compromise

When individual characteristics are placed in a relational context, tensions that lead to organisational conflict are often inevitable. Therefore, effective conflict management is crucial for fostering healthy competition, collaboration, and communication (Abd Rahman & Abd Rahim, 2025). Interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in interpreting verbal/nonverbal cues, while self-disclosure contributes to a harmonious perception that minimises conflict (Indreswari, 2024). In the classroom, the class president's unilateral decisions are sometimes accepted (especially regarding external matters), but at other times, the majority of students demand collective decision-making to maintain harmony. Broader debates are usually framed around societal issues, positioning higher education as a space for diversity, equality, and inclusion (Chattopadhyay, 2022). This experience also prepares students for professional development, in which multicultural communication competencies are essential in diverse workplaces, such as those in Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2022).

Furthermore, language plays a crucial mediating role in managing classroom tensions. Students negotiate disagreements through discussion, consultation, and consensus rather than confrontation. This pattern reflects linguistic mediation, where communication facilitates shared understanding and the negotiation of cultural meanings (Baraldi, 2017). Students also practice respectful communication by listening to alternative perspectives and prioritising group harmony (LaGree et al., 2023).

In terms of conflict management styles, field findings indicate that: (a) the class leader dominates with a competing style (a style preferred in American culture) (Lather et al., 2023), whilst (b) class members tend to use a compromising style. This contrasts with Malaysian professionals who choose to withdraw for long-term harmony (Awalluddin & Maznorbalia, 2023) but aligns with research on Chinese and Korean populations (Lather et al., 2023) and Malaysian university students (Azmi et al., 2023), who choose compromise. The compromise approach reflects collectivist values that emphasise harmony, cooperation, group consensus, and respect for hierarchical structures (Pham, 2022).

For collectivist individuals, reaching common ground and sacrificing personal gain for the common good is natural (Awalluddin & Maznorbalia, 2023). This also indicates that intercultural communication competencies such as cultural sensitivity, empathy, communal flexibility, and social integration (Sarwari et al., 2024), are essential for creating an inclusive learning environment (Anuar et al., 2025). While this finding

differs from research by Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998), which found that Chinese and Taiwanese people prefer avoidance compared to Japanese, Korean, and American people; it supports Kirkbride et al. (1991, as cited in Cai & Fink, 2002), who found that Hong Kong respondents prefer compromise. This variation is also observed among Romanian and Greek youth, who continue to favour collaborative conflict resolution even in collective contexts (Stefenel, 2014).

The influence of the digital era and globalisation on cultural shifts

Differences in cultural orientation and conflict styles can be influenced by parents' ethnic background, levels of parental warmth (Gorla et al., 2024), and exposure to textbooks that emphasise intercultural learning (Peskoller, 2025). However, the most significant factor is the penetration of the digital era. Social media is now an essential communication tool used by approximately 90% of college students in their daily routines (Nurfazri et al., 2024; Nurhasanah & S, 2024). Furthermore, nearly 70% of college students consider smartphones indispensable for academic activities (Obeso et al., 2023), with an average daily use of 2.5 hours among those aged 16–24 (Aazam et al., 2024). In fact, Gen Z in Indonesia recorded the highest smartphone usage, averaging 8.5 hours per day (Kim et al., 2020).

This situation strengthens evidence that media has a significant influence in shaping individual culture and conflict styles, regardless of the country of origin (Allison & Emmers-Sommer, 2011). Individualism and collectivism can coexist within a single cultural group as adaptive responses to globalisation and technology (Lansford et al., 2021), as seen in Korea's cultural shift (Lim et al., 2021). Conversely, value shifts in Poland are driven more by political and economic transformations (Czerniawska et al., 2021), while for immigrants in individualistic societies, self-concept significantly influences their management of intercultural conflict (Syarizka et al., 2021).

Interestingly, despite growing up in the digital age, 44% of Gen Z still crave teamwork and face-to-face interactions (Tonis et al., 2022). As the largest demographic cohort, Gen Z's dominance significantly influences cultural norms across regions ranging from the United States to Indonesia, as reported by White (2017, as cited in Subowo, 2021). Through social media, they become highly responsive to social realities and environmental issues. This explains why some students display an individualistic orientation despite being within the Indonesian national context, which is classified as collectivist and feminine (emphasising relational harmony and quality of life). The transformation of digital media has conditioned cultural orientations to be more fluid and less rigid. Although these students do not experience physical international mobility like French students (Bartel-Radic & Cucchi, 2025), intercultural competence and sociocultural awareness remain crucial in this multicultural era (Ngo, 2025; Syahrussalamah et al., 2025). This phenomenon ultimately supports Philipsen's view, as cited in Griffin et al. (2023), that culture is no longer geographically bound, but rather socially constructed and historically transmitted.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that classroom conflict in collectivist educational settings is driven by mismatched cultural orientations—specifically, between individualistic leaders and collectivist students—that directly clash with leadership and conflict-management expectations. While the leader adopted a competing style, students favoured compromise. However, social cohesion was maintained through language mediation, negotiation, and transcultural leadership that balanced internal classroom interests and institutional authority. Consequently, conflict dynamics depend heavily on communication strategies used to negotiate relationships and responsibilities. As a localised case study, these findings cannot be generalised across all Generation Z students. Theoretically, this research advances the understanding of micro-level intercultural communication in higher education. Practically, it highlights the urgent need for integrating early cultural competence and inclusive leadership training into university curricula to enhance students' academic and professional team-building skills.

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