

A Review of Research on Top Management Team Conflict on Firm Performance: The Moderating Role of Avoidance Conflict Handling Methods

Danna Liang¹, Najihah Hanisah Binti Marmaya²

^{1,2}*Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Jalan UMS 88400 Kota kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia*

Abstract:- This paper reviews the research on the relationship among top management team (TMT) conflict, conflict management and firm performance, mainly introduces the moderating effect of avoidance conflict management style on TMT conflict and firm performance. The results of this study will provide a reference for whether senior managers should adopt avoidance conflict management when facing TMT conflicts. Previous studies mainly focused on team conflict, while studies on TMT mainly focused on the impact of TMT heterogeneity on firm performance, and the moderating role of conflict management strategies in conflict and firm performance was not fully discussed. This research clarifies the research status of conflict management theory points out that the transformation of TMT conflict needs to be adjusted by conflict management methods, focuses on the moderating effect of conflict avoidance management strategies on TMT conflict and firm performance. At the end of this paper, the trend of future research in this field is prospected.

Keywords: Top manager, Conflict management, Avoidance, Conflict types, Moderating effect, Firm developing.

1. Introduction

Conflict is "a state of inconsistency or mutual exclusion and confrontation between two or more actors due to their different goals, views, approaches, or opinions on management issues" [38]. In team management, due to various differences among members, different views on the distribution of benefits, and different understanding and handling of the same problem, there will be conflicts [17].

People's understanding of the role of conflict in business development is constantly changing. The emerging conflict view holds that conflict is constructive and managers should not avoid conflict. In some cases, managers should steer conflict and achieve constructive outcomes [13]. This view encourages managers to maintain a level of conflict in order to keep the organization alive [37]. As a result, conflict has a complex impact on the functioning of organizations, which can be both positive and negative. This depends on the nature and type of conflict and the methods used to manage and resolve it. Pelled (1999) believed that in order to improve the efficiency of the team, a team atmosphere should be created that encourages task-based conflict and resists relationship-based conflict [27].

In modern enterprises, a management team with coordinated cooperation among members has more efficient reaction, judgment and execution ability than a single manager. Therefore, an excellent executive team is of great significance to the successful operation of an enterprise. In the process of enterprise development, team conflict directly affects decision-making, performance and other business factors, changes managers' cognition and values, and inevitably affects the formation of executive team combat effectiveness and executive power. Top management team conflict is a group process of obstruction and resistance based on the perception of existing or potential confrontation [41]. It will not only affect the interpersonal relationship between members,

but also play an important role in the daily management, performance and profit of the enterprise. In the process of enterprise development, executive team conflict will directly affect the interpersonal relationship and corporate performance of the executive team, and also play an important role in the formation of strategic belief of the team.

Team conflict not only leads to a variety of opinions and solutions, but it can also lead to interpersonal tension and friction [10]. In the top management team, conflict has both an objective and a subjective side, and like everything else, it has two sides, namely, positive and negative effects. Positive conflict can promote communication and exchange between members, improve the enthusiasm and creativity of employees, get something beneficial to themselves from the conflict, and promote the healthy development of the enterprise. In team management, the most ideal situation is that conflicts are healthy, controllable, and oriented, and communication should serve as a stabilizer, otherwise it will only escalate conflicts [11]. As a result, conflict management and team performance have attracted more and more attention from scientific and applicatory perspective. In the past 20 years, there has been a lot of related academic research [40].

In this study, the impact of avoidance conflict management style on executive team conflict and firm performance is mainly discussed. According to Chen Guoqiang et al. (2005), avoiding is an important approach to managing conflict. Avoiding is the attempt to smooth over conflicts and minimize discussion of them, whereas openness encourages direct discussion. Avoiding communicates the intention that issues should not be openly discussed and dealt with. However, some scholars believe that avoidance conflict management is not an effective way of conflict management. Tjosvold and Sun (2002) pointed out that avoidance is a passive conflict management style, and avoidance will aggravate the negative and negative effects of relational conflicts, because avoidance can not solve interpersonal conflicts and interpersonal conflicts, nor can it alleviate the negative emotions of both parties to the conflict [34].

2. Research Objectives

(i) Find out what role avoidance conflict management plays in moderating the relationship between TMT conflict and firm performance. In the process of analysis, the conflict of the top management team is taken as the independent variable, the firm performance is taken as the dependent variable, and the conflict management strategy is introduced as the moderator variable.

(ii) Through the analysis of the direct impact of avoidance conflict management style on TMT conflict and firm performance, it is concluded whether it is appropriate for enterprise managers to adopt avoidance conflict management strategies when facing different TMT conflicts. Through the research conclusion of this paper, it can provide an effective reference for the managers of enterprises.

3. Theoretical perspective

3.1. Classification of conflicts and the interaction

Jehn & Mannix (2001) pointed out that team conflict can be regarded as a perceptual state caused by cognitive differences, goal differences and disharmony of desires among team members. Alper et al. (2000) consider conflict as interference or obstruction [4]. Jehn (2001), Bodtker (2001) et al believe that conflict is a mixture of negative emotions such as anxiety, jealousy, frustration and anger [20],[31]. Team conflict theory divides team conflict into intra-team conflict at individual level and conflict between individuals and teams. While individual-level conflict refers to the individual's recognition of conflict experienced from firsthand interpersonal interactions with a specific team member(s), team-level conflict refers to the team members' recognition of conflict existing in the team as a whole regardless of the focal individual's involvement [32]. According to the different subjects of conflict, the conflict of the top management team can be divided into the conflict between the members of the top management team, the conflict between the factions within the top management team, and the conflict between the individuals and the team within the top management team.

Team conflicts lead to the damage of entrepreneurial business and reputation, which makes internal team conflicts expand and affect the interests of investors and customers. Conflict in the top management team may

increase dissatisfaction and resistance, but it may also increase creativity and understanding. Amason A.C.(1996) divides this conflict into cognitive conflict (also called task conflict, substantive conflict) and emotional conflict (also called relational conflict)[3]. The cognitive conflict caused by team members' inconsistent understanding of task objectives and completion methods is functional, while team members are rational. However, emotional conflict due to negative feelings such as resentment or incompatibility built up between individuals in the team is dysfunctional and team members are emotional. The former is beneficial to brainstorming and is positively related to the quality of decision-making of the top management team. The latter is not only negatively related to the quality of decision making, but also reduces the understanding among members and frustrates the emotions among members, leading to low team performance [12]. Holahan and Amason (2019) found obvious positive correlation between cognitive conflict and emotional conflict, that is, cognitive conflict is easily transformed into emotional conflict [19].

3.2. Classification of conflict handling methods and their functions

Effective conflict management is one of the fundamental factors that determine the successful development of individuals, groups and enterprises. How to conduct effective conflict management is a common concern of scholars and practitioners. For the study of conflict management, scholars have used different similar terms in the research process, such as conflict behavior, conflict handling methods, conflict handling strategies and conflict management. Differences in conflict handling methods will directly affect the survival and development of enterprises [39].

Thomas (1976) proposed five ways to deal with conflict from the two directions of cooperation and self-affirmation, including avoiding, accommodating, competing, collaborating and compromising [33]. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument is an assessment tool that helps measure an individual's behavior in conflict situations [14]. From the perspective of caring for oneself and others, Rahim (1983) proposed five conflict handling methods: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising [29].

In addition, Tjosvold et al. (2002) conducted an empirical study on cooperative, avoidance and competitive conflict management methods, mainly taking some Chinese teams as the research background, by investigating the conflict management performance of team members in the face of conflict, and by one-way ANOVA research on employees' conflict management tendency, we found that, The education level of team members and the nature of their positions are significantly related to the choice of conflict handling methods[34].

Abdul Ghaffar (2012) believes that conflict can create an atmosphere of cooperation or competition within a team, but the specific management strategy will vary according to the situation. Avoidance strategy can avoid the direct collision of the conflict and prevent the further expansion of the problem. In some cases, avoidance strategy can also reduce the frequency of conflict and achieve self-recovery of individual conflict. However, long-term avoidance strategies will reduce the enthusiasm of all parties to the conflict, dare not face the problem directly, affect the efficiency of normal work, and affect the normal development of enterprises.

4. Consideration of avoidance conflict management style as a moderating variable

Causality has been the pursuit of many scholars in the field of behavioral science. Testing causal hypotheses not only validates a researcher's substantive theory around a phenomenon, but also answers practical questions about whether an intervention or treatment regimen has the desired effect [6]. However, as research results mature, researchers often look beyond simple descriptions of binary causality and try to understand what connects causality and what changes the magnitude or direction of causality [15],[30]. Wegener and Fabrigar (2000) clearly point out that there are three types of common causal hypotheses: direct causal effect, intermediate causal effect, and moderating causal effect [36].

Conditioning describes a situation in which the relationship between two constructions is not constant, but depends on the value of a third variable, the conditioning variable [18]. In this study, the independent variable is top management team conflict, the dependent variable is firm performance, and the conflict management

strategy is the moderating factor moderate the relationship between top management team conflict and firm performance. The following will introduce three research structures on moderators.

(i) Baron and Kenny(1986) described the moderating effect as follows[7]:

A moderating effect is a causal model that postulates “when” or whenfor “whom” an independent variable most strongly (or weakly) causes a dependent variable [7],[14], [21]. In essence, a moderator modifies the strength or direction (i.e., positive or negative) of a causal relationship.

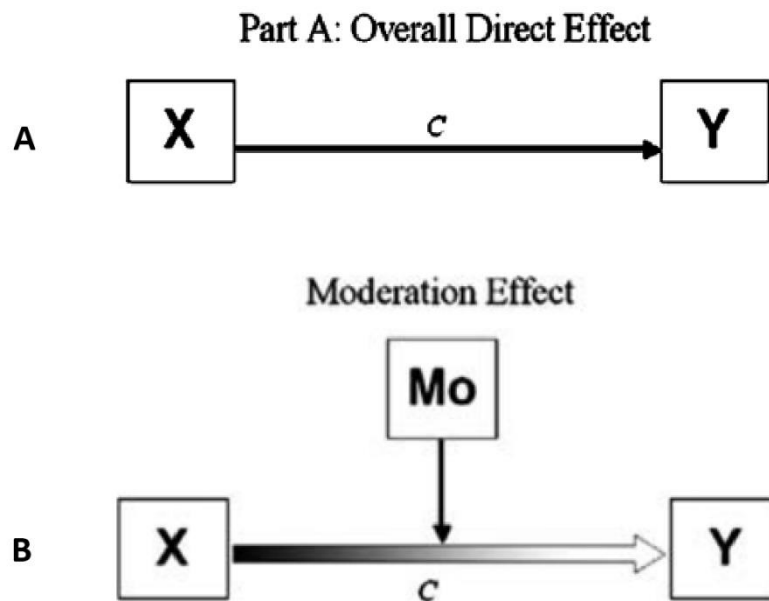


Figure 1. (A) Linear regression of Y to X and (B) The moderation effect using a conceptual diagram.
(Source: Amery et al., 2008)

There is a linear regression of Y to X.

The relationship between Y and X is characterized by the regression coefficient, which is a linear function of Mo, Mo can measures the moderation effect.

(ii) Preacher and Hayes (2004) provide SAS and SPSS macros using Sobel tests [28].

If a variable has little to do with an independent or dependent variable, it cannot be a mediating variable, but it can be a moderating variable. The ideal moderating variable has little relation with independent variable and dependent variable. It is important to note that the regulator does not vary with the independent variable and should not be correlated with it [21]. In addition, SPSS macro adjustment mediation is available [18].

In this study, conflict management strategies are not related to the independent variable TMT conflict, which belongs to the independent variable. Avoidance conflict management strategies moderate the relationship between conflict and firm performance.

(iii) The moderating effect model proposed by Hair (2021) is as follows[18]:

A moderating variable (M) that affects the relationship between Y1 and Y2.

The moderating effect (p3) is represented by an arrow pointing to the effect p1 that connects Y1 and Y2.

In addition, when the moderating effect is included in the PLS path model, there is also a direct relationship between the moderating factor and the endogenous structure (p2) [18], as shown in the following figure:

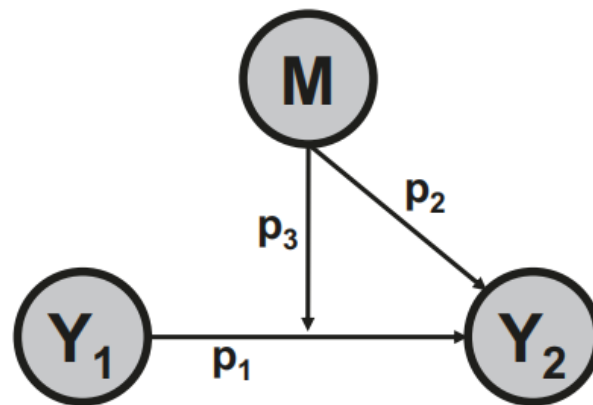


Figure 2. Moderation model example

(Source: Hair et al., 2021)

This additional path is important (and a frequent source of mistakes), as it controls for the direct impact of the moderator on the endogenous construct. If the path p_2 was to be omitted, the effect of M on the relationship between Y_1 and Y_2 (i.e., p_3) would be inflated.

In order to simplify the study, the baron and Kenny formulas were used to study the moderating effect of conflict management strategies without considering the influence of P_2 . In this study, the conflict management strategy is taken as a moderating variable, and the influence of the adjustment effect strength proposed by hair (2021) on the relationship between TMT conflict and firm performance is considered, as shown in Figure 3[18].

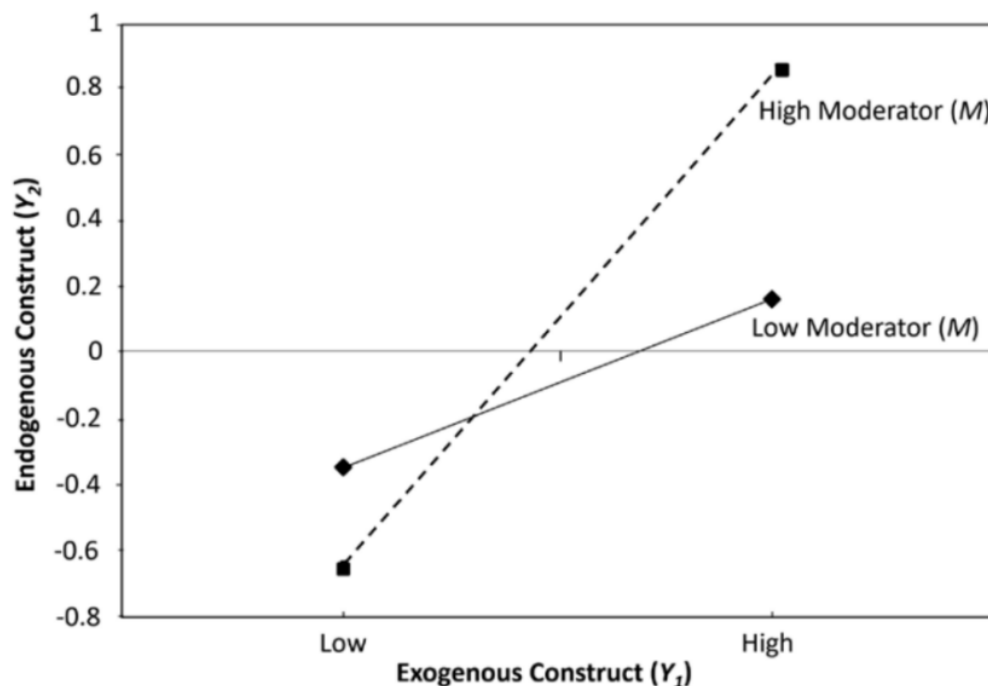


Figure 3. Slope plot.(Source:Hair et al.,2021)

5. Research content and model development

5.1. Research concepts

(i) The concept of TMT conflict

The conflict of the top management team is defined as the interdependent interaction between the top management team members and the competition and cooperation between the core team members at the level of strategy formulation and implementation. It is also a process of antagonistic or inconsistent interaction between team members due to incompatibility or difficulty in coordination of goals, cognition or emotions [12].

(ii) Concept of conflict management style

Conflict management styles, which are ways of dealing with conflict, can be divided into two categories. The first is to take appropriate and reasonable measures to resolve the conflict after it appears, and the second is to control the conflict before it escalates into a destructive conflict.

(iii) The concept of firm performance

Firm performance is the level of business efficiency in a period of time. It can also be understood as a general term for various related results obtained in the process of production and operation by enterprises to achieve established goals.

5.2. Research design and model construction

It is found that there is a direct relationship between TMT conflict and firm performance, and conflict management strategies also play an important moderating role between TMT conflict and firm performance. Different TMT conflict handling methods will produce different effects. Effective conflict management can avoid the outbreak and spread of conflicts, while ineffective conflict management can not only alleviate team conflicts, but aggravate them. Based on the analysis results, this paper builds a theoretical model of the impact of different types of TMT conflicts on firm performance under the moderating effect of avoidance conflict management strategies, as shown in Figure 4.

The theoretical model consists of three parts: Independent variables, Moderator variables and Dependent variable. Among them, TMT conflict is the Independent variables of the model, conflict management strategy is the moderating variable, and firm performance is the dependent variable.

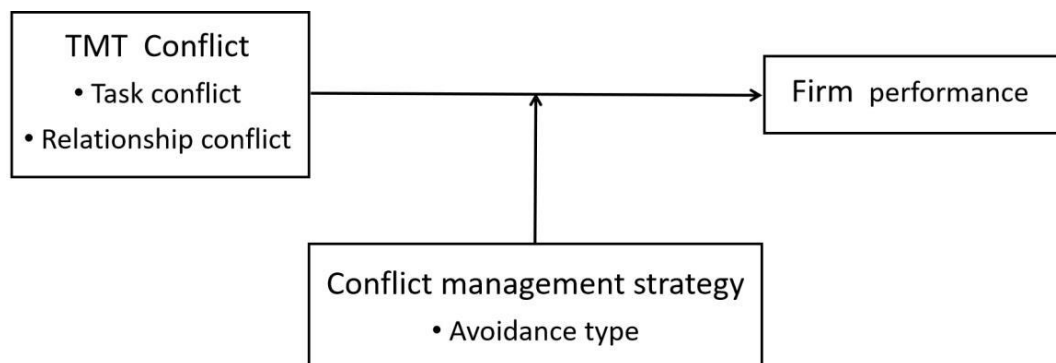


Figure 4. Research Framework

(i) TMT conflict. TMT conflict can be divided into two types: task conflict and relationship conflict. We will choose these two types of TMT conflicts as the input part of this theoretical model.

(ii) Conflict management strategy. The application of different conflict management strategies will affect the effect of internal conflict handling in TMT. Timely and effective conflict management can turn conflict into motivation, but improper conflict management will expand the problems and disagreements encountered by TMT in the process of enterprise development. Because of these problems, cooperation between team members will not work properly. Once there is a crack in cooperation, if it can't be found and repaired in time, it will easily become a hidden danger leading to the conflict of the entrepreneurial team. If TMT conflict is not solved in time in the latent process, then in the subsequent team cooperation, task conflict and relationship conflict will become more and more obvious. If the conflict is not properly managed after it has broken out, it can easily lead

to surges and widening of borders. Therefore, avoidance conflict management strategy is chosen as the moderator variable in this study.

(iii) Firm performance. Different conflict management strategies are adopted to deal with TMT conflicts and finally output firm performance results. A good conflict handling mechanism can promote business performance through conflict, but if the cooperation of team members is broken due to conflict, it will affect business performance. Team conflict will distract team members' energy and time, and the most serious consequence is that the main enterprise where the team conflict occurs stops operating. And, as the conflict escalates, its impact spreads from within the team to other external stakeholders. For example, as the impact of conflicts continues to expand, investors will have a crisis of trust in the main enterprise or even the entire entrepreneurial team, believing that the enterprise is difficult to achieve commercial value and economic benefits, so they choose to withdraw capital to avoid risks.

5.3. Research hypothesis

(i) TMT task conflict and firm performance

Task conflict occurs when team members have inconsistent views, concepts and judgments on work objectives and implementation methods [16]. The academic community generally believes that the division types of team conflict proposed by Jehn (1995) correspond to those of Amazon and Schweiger (1994), and the concepts of task conflict and cognitive conflict are basically the same [16]. As for the relationship between team conflict, strategic decision quality and firm performance, scholars' research results are inconsistent. Jehn (1995) believes that task conflict is positively correlated with team performance, because task conflict helps to generate new ideas, enable the team to have a deeper understanding of the task, and increase team members' commitment to decision making [16]. Amazon (1996) found that cognitive conflict in the top management team can stimulate internal discussion, help enterprises make better strategic decisions, and promote innovation. Task conflict can also deepen team members' understanding and acceptance of decisions.

According to the literature research on the relationship between TMT task conflict and firm performance, scholars believe that TMT task conflict can promote the development of firm performance and has a positive impact on firm performance. Meanwhile, according to Baron and Kenny's theory, X is TMT task conflict, Y is firm performance, and there is a direct causal relationship between X and Y. Therefore, we can draw the following graph:

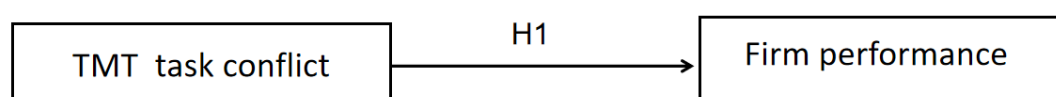


Figure 5. Relationship between TMT task conflict and firm performance

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1: TMT task conflict has a positive impact on firm performance

(ii) TMT relationship conflict and firm performance

When the interpersonal relationship of team members is disharmonious and inconsistent, it will cause relationship conflict, which is often accompanied by tension, hostility, anger and other symptoms [16]. The academic community generally believes that the division types of team conflict proposed by Jehn (1995) correspond to those of amazon and Schweiger (1994), and the concepts of relational conflict and affective conflict are basically the same (Model Creation, 2018). According to Tobias R. Burgel et al. (2023), relationship conflict (i.e., tension and anger among group members) is negatively correlated with corporate decision-making and is not conducive to the achievement of performance goals [35].

According to the literature research on the relationship between TMT relationship conflict and firm performance, scholars believe that TMT relationship conflict will weaken firm performance and have a negative impact on firm performance. Meanwhile, according to Baron and Kenny's theory, X is TMT relationship conflict, Y is firm performance, and there is a direct causal relationship between X and Y. Therefore, we can draw the following graph:

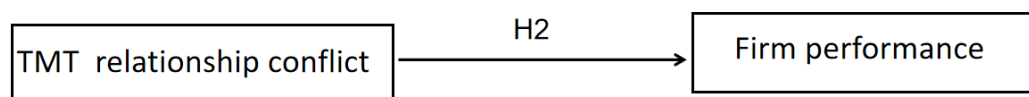


Figure 6. Relationship between TMT relationship conflict and firm performance

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H2: TMT relationship conflict has a negative impact on firm performance

(iii) Avoidance conflict management style will moderate the relationship between TMT task conflict and firm performance

Liu Jun (2008) argues that avoidance styles have no effect on the functions of the two types of conflict, including task conflict and relational conflict [24].

Avoidance conflict handling will also reduce the positive effect of task conflict, because the avoidance problem makes the parties to the conflict have no opportunity to express different views and opinions, which is not conducive to the enterprise to find problems and improve the quality of decision-making. According to Mei Qiang (2012), the more team members tend to adopt conflict avoidance management, the less significant the role of task conflict in promoting entrepreneurial performance[25].

According to the literature on the moderating effect of conflict avoidance management strategies on the relationship between TMT task conflict and firm performance, we know that the use of conflict avoidance management strategies in TMT task conflict has a moderating effect on firm performance. At the same time, according to the moderating effect mentioned in Baron and Kenny's theory, conflict avoidance management strategy, as a moderating factor, will moderate the causal relationship intensity (positive or negative) between TMT task conflict (X) and firm performance (Y), as shown in the following figure:

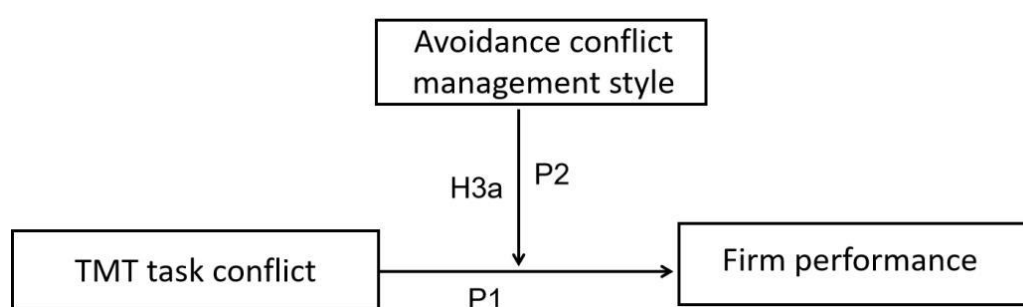


Figure 7. Moderating effect between TMT task conflict and firm performance (Avoidance conflict management strategy as the moderator)

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H3a: Avoidance conflict management strategy can moderate the relationship between TMT task conflict and firm performance;

(iv) Avoidance conflict management strategies will moderate the relationship between TMT relationship conflict and firm performance

Scholars generally believe that avoidance conflict management is not an effective way of conflict management. Since the parties that take an evasive approach to conflict management do not care about their own interests and expectations and do not have the desire to resolve the conflict, the parties to the conflict are unable to obtain the basic information for effective conflict resolution. Tjosvold and Sun (2002) pointed out that avoidance is a passive conflict management style, and avoidance will aggravate the negative and negative effects of relationship conflict, because avoidance cannot solve interpersonal conflict and interpersonal conflict, nor can it alleviate the negative emotions of both parties to the conflict[34].

Liu Xin (2010) believes that avoidance conflict management will increase task conflict and relationship conflict in enterprises. The avoidance strategy is called conflict avoidance [23]. Any organization using this method is sitting on a keg of gun-powder [26]. According to Mei Qiang (2012), the more team members tend to adopt conflict avoidance management, the less significant the role of relationship conflict in promoting entrepreneurial performance [25].

According to the literature on the moderating effect of conflict avoidance management strategies on the relationship between TMT relationship conflict and firm performance, we know that the use of conflict avoidance management strategies in TMT relationship conflict has a moderating effect on firm performance. Meanwhile, according to the moderating effect mentioned in Baron and Kenny's theory, avoidance conflict management strategy, as a moderating factor, can regulate the causal relationship intensity (positive or negative) between TMT relationship conflict (X) and firm performance (Y), as shown in the following figure:

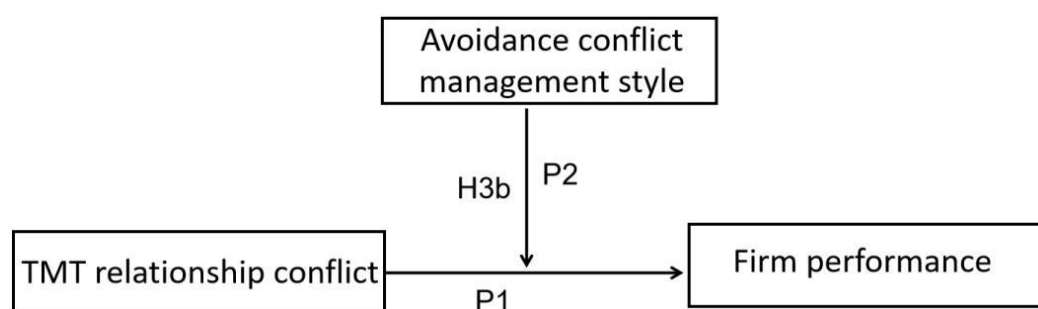


Figure 8. Moderating effect between TMT Relationship conflict and firm performance (Avoidance conflict management strategy as the moderator)

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H3b: Avoidance conflict management strategy can moderate the relationship between TMT task conflict and firm performance;

(v) Summary of research hypotheses

On the basis of clarifying the nature of TMT conflict and firm performance, this study reviewed the impact of different types of TMT conflict and avoidance conflict management strategies on firm performance, and found that avoidance conflict management strategies play a moderating role between conflict and firm performance. Specifically, there is one dependent variable, two independent variables, and one moderator variable. After summarizing the research hypotheses of this paper, the research model of this paper is as follows:

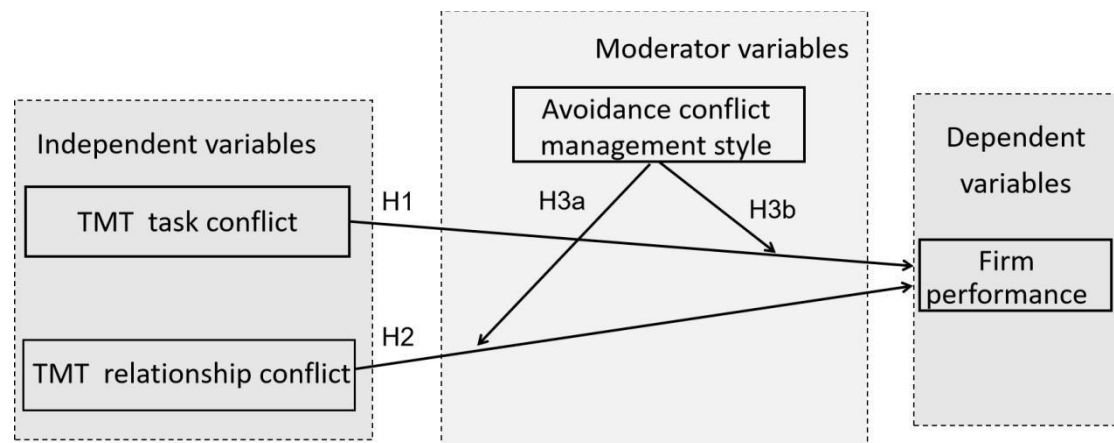


Figure 9. Summary of research Hypothesis

6. Conclusion and Future directions

It is found that TMT task conflict can promote firm performance. TMT relationship conflict has a destructive effect on firm performance. Avoidance conflict management style plays an aggravating role in TMT relationship conflict, but has no significant moderating role in task conflict.

The result of TMT conflict is multi-dimensional, whether it is team members or the whole team, it may promote the development of the team and the enterprise, or it may have destructive consequences for the development of the enterprise. Benign conflict can improve corporate performance and is conducive to the continuous improvement of corporate performance. Destructive conflicts will reduce or hinder the promotion and improvement of corporate performance [22]. Considering that TMT conflicts in most cases will harm the interests of the company, consume the resources of the company, hinder the development of the company, and even lead to the demise of the company in serious cases, the leaders of the company should timely use their power and influence to minimize the harm of harmful conflicts. As a way to face conflict indirectly, avoidance conflict management strategy in many cases is due to the fact that enterprise managers have no experience in dealing with conflicts and adopt irrational ways to deal with them. In the face of TMT conflict, managers should have a certain awareness of conflict management, rather than allowing it to develop freely. Business leaders with rich experience in conflict management can prevent harmful conflicts before conflicts occur and avoid damaging the interests of the company. Understanding and mastering the relevant knowledge of the conflict field can enable the senior managers of the enterprise to timely choose the right way to deal with the conflict when the conflict of the senior management team is irreconcilable and detrimental to the development of the company, so that the company can develop in a positive direction and avoid coming to an end.

Different types of TMT conflicts have different impacts on firm performance. Similarly, when TMT conflicts occur, intervention using a conflict management approach will play a moderating role. The application of different conflict management methods has different adjustment effects. At present, there are few researches on the impact of TMT conflict on enterprise performance, and there are many blank areas. In particular, there are few researches on the application of conflict management strategy as a means of adjustment to TMT conflict. Therefore, further research in this field needs to be explored and explored.

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