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Conflicts in Ethiopian Universities: Its Nature and Perceptions

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Abstract

University conflicts are becoming more numerous, diverse, and complex. Universities are currently dealing with a variety of internal and external factors and pressures, which affect the types and numbers of disputes that arise. Therefore, the study's primary goals are to investigate the types of disputes that are happening and how stakeholders perceive student conflict at universities. Two research questions were created in order to accomplish this objective. What sorts of confrontations occur amongst university students in Ethiopia? How do stakeholders view student conflict at universities? Data were collected from 394 research participants using both quantitative and qualitative data to help address these research questions. Multistage sampling was used. The study employed an embedded mixed research design, with qualitative data complementing the quantitative findings. The results of this study demonstrated that persistent conflict has been causing problems for institutions. Conflicts between ethnic groups that are motivated by politics are particularly common and hinder students' ability to learn. A significant observation is often believed that confrontation is usually unpleasant, negative, and damaging, conflicts tend to escalate, leading to more extreme behaviors. This narrow understanding excludes the positive side of the conflict, which, when managed effectively, can be advantageous to the entire community. Universities should actively instruct and train students about the value of their important mission of working with stakeholders to produce human capital. Politics should not be allowed to influence universities negatively.

1 Introduction

This study clarifies significant aspects of the nature and stakeholder perceptions of conflicts within Ethiopian universities. Conflict is a fundamental element of human interaction, often manifesting as interpersonal hostility, anger, and misunderstanding. It is a frequent occurrence At home, school, work, or anywhere else where there are people with diverse beliefs, values, and experiences, it happens frequently. According to Swanström and Weissmann (2005), Due to competing interests, limited resources, divergent goals, and frustration, it develops (Swanström & Weissmann, 2005). Its prevalence stems from the constant interaction among individuals. Because they engage with one other frequently, different people get into conflict. It is a universal occurrence that no one can escape; specifically, it has occurred, is occurring, and will continue to occur among and amongst students, instructors, and administrators in the context of universities. Beyramijam *et al*. (2020) highlight that when handled properly, workplace or organizational conflict, such that found in universities, is unavoidable and healthy (Beyramijam *et al*.,

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2020). Scholars extensively discuss the nature of the conflict in organizations, including its forms and intensity. Depending on an organization's complexity, the nature and root causes of conflicts may differ. Hamayun *et al* (2014) note that while colleges experience many conflicts, they are not properly addressed. They argue that institutions must take action to address this problem, as leaving it unattended could damage their reputation. Leaders spend more than 40% of their time managing conflict since it is an inherent part of academic life in the university context (Christine, Stanley, Algert, and Nancy, 2007).

University conflicts are becoming increasingly numerous, diverse, and complex. Universities are currently facing a variety of internal and external factors and pressures, which influence the types and numbers of disputes that arise. Among the contributors to conflict are various student behaviors (Egwunyenga, 2009), although conflicts predominantly arise within the university setting itself. In addition, Isabu (2017) points to issues such as overlapping authority, limited resources, and differences in perspectives as common causes of conflict in organizations.

Within this context, ethnic-based disputes have emerged as a particularly challenging type of conflict in Ethiopian universities. These conflicts are often influenced by the political and governmental factors that have historically contributed to ethnic tensions in Ethiopia under various administrations (Adamu, 2013). As students represent a dynamic segment of society, they often reflect and simulate broader ethnic, religious, and political concerns present in the wider community, leading to similar confrontations on campus. Effective management and resolution are crucial for these conflicts, ensuring that individuals involved do not experience unnecessary emotional tension during the process (Roseline & Taripanyeofori, 2020).

Beyond their negative consequences, conflicts can also hold significant potential advantages for institutions when managed constructively. Isabu (2017) suggests that a total cessation of hostilities can cause an excessive amount of comfort and sluggishness. While unmanaged conflict undoubtedly creates a negative atmosphere that hinders productivity and satisfaction, a certain level of functional conflict can stimulate creative thinking, foster healthy competition, and energize behavior. Therefore, organizational conflict, when managed well, can be considered beneficial. Rahim (2001) makes the case that while a lack of conflict might promote groupthink and stagnancy, unmanaged organizational conflict can lead to severely dysfunctional outcomes and even cause an organization to disintegrate if excessive.

The severe reality of unmanaged conflict in higher education is starkly affirmed by the numerous instances of turmoil in higher education institutions, such as those experienced in Nigeria, where confrontations have resulted in campus chaos, disruption of the academic calendar, and destruction of property (Jacob & Kehinde, 2011). Similarly, conflict at state universities in Ethiopia has been a major source of concern. Protests, violence, and disruptions, including months-long university closures due to disorder, were particularly frequent features of Ethiopian higher institutions between 2017 and 2019.

Despite the clear impact and severity of these conflicts, particularly the ethnic and political dimensions highlighted by recent events, a comprehensive understanding of their specific nature within the contemporary Ethiopian university context and, critically, how key stakeholders perceive these conflicts and their potential resolution, remains vital for developing effective strategies. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the nature of the disputes occurring in Ethiopian universities and examine how stakeholders perceive student conflict. Based on the study's aim, the following research questions were addressed:

a. What is the nature of conflicts among university students in Ethiopia?
b. How do stakeholders perceive conflict among university students in Ethiopia?

2 Methods

Research Design: An embedded mixed methods design (QUAN/qual) was employed in this study. This design was chosen because the study primarily relied on quantitative data, with a smaller compo-

nent of qualitative data included to provide deeper context and explanation. The goal of the embedded design is to gather both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously or sequentially, but each type of data must complement the other. The purpose of collecting the additional data is to augment the original data, and this design enables the researcher to obtain data and conduct analysis simultaneously, concurrently, or before one another. Creswell (2012).

Research Paradigm: Consistent with the mixed methods approach, the research was guided by a pragmatic paradigm. The philosophical and theoretical foundations for conducting research are known as the research paradigm (Khatri, 2020: 1435). Pragmatism, recognized as a suitable conceptual foundation for mixed research (Creswell, 2014), emphasizes using the most appropriate methods to understand the research problem. This paradigm aligns with the study's aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of university conflict through both quantitative measurement and qualitative exploration of perceptions.

Source of Data: Primary data were collected from students, instructors, and university council members. Data were obtained using Semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaires were the main tools used to obtain data.

Sample size and sampling technique: A multistage sampling strategy was used. In the initial stage, three public universities (Dilla, Wolaita, and Bulehora) were selected by lottery from the seven public universities in Southern Ethiopia, using Simple Random Sampling (SRS). In the second stage, departments within the selected universities were selected using SRS, followed by the selection of students and instructors from these departments, also using SRS. University council members were included in the sample through purposive sampling, selected based on their administrative roles and potential insights into university conflict. Based on population data from the universities' registrar offices in 2021, there was a total population of 24, 484 individuals across the three selected universities (23,680 regular students, 634 instructors, and 170 university officials). The required sample size for the quantitative survey was determined using the Yamane (1967) formula for a 95% confidence level and 0.05 margin of error.

$$\text{n}=\frac{N}{(1+Ne^2)}$$

Where,
N= Population size,
e=Correct Sample size, and
e= margin of error, e=0.05

Based on the above formula, the correct sample size calculated as:

$$\text{n}=\frac{N}{(1+Ne^2)} = \frac{24084}{(1+24484(.05)^2)} = \frac{24484}{61} = 394$$

From a total of 394 sample population, 130 instructors and 264 students were involved in the survey. Based on this reality analysis was undertaken. The quantitative data were analyzed based on this sample composition. In addition to this, 30 council members' key informants were added purposively based on the researchers' belief of getting detailed information. Thus, a total of 394 participants were involved in the quantitative survey, and 30 key informants participated in the qualitative data collection (interviews/FGDs), resulting in a total sample size of 424 participants for primary data collection.

The data collection tools employed in this research included survey questionnaires, used to gather quantitative data on the nature and perceptions of conflict from participants, and semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs), which were utilized to collect qualitative data to provide deeper context and insights. The methods section explicitly states that semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaires were the main tools used to obtain data, while the results section further confirms the use of qualitative data from the Focused Group Discussions (FGDs).

Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used for the quantitative data analysis. To make inferences, the mean and standard deviation from the descriptive and independent t-tests were used. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (independent t-tests) were used. Data were computed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) Version-20 software, analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version

20 software. The alpha threshold for all meaningful tests was set at 0. 05. The average mean values cut points range was used for quantitative data analysis. Cutoff points for interpreting mean values based on a five-point Likert scale were used: 1–1.80 indicates a strong disagreement, 1.90–2.60 indicates disagreement, 2.70–3.40 indicates an undecided response, 3.50–4.20 indicates agreement, and 4.21–5.00 indicates a strong agreement. The responses gleaned from interviews were examined using the narrative analysis technique. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were analyzed using narrative analysis. Validity and Reliability: Using Cronbach's alpha statistics, the survey instruments were assessed for reliability in a pilot study at Hawassa University, and 67 participants were randomly included. They were shown to be reliable and yield an average coefficient of 0. 789 or above. The literature backs up the idea that reliability should be at least. 70 or higher (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). The following Table 1 and Table 2 show results generated by SPSS, indicating internal consistency. Tables 1 and 2 present the results of the reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha, assuring internal consistency of the survey items.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics for Nature of Conflicts

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.761	7

Table 2: Reliability Statistics for Perceptions of Conflicts

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.817	11

3 Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework is built upon established theories concerning the nature of organizational conflict and how conflict is perceived. To clarify the types of conflicts that might occur in organizations, this article draws upon Jehn's (1997b) theory. Jehn (1997b) and Eruzun (2004) recognized several types of conflict that can occur in every organization. These include affective (relationship) conflict, substantive (task) conflict, conflict of interest, conflict of values, institutionalized versus non-institutionalized conflict, goal-related conflict, and realistic versus non-realistic conflict. In this study, Jehn's typology was used to investigate the types of conflict that are most common in universities.

Affective conflict is defined as "a situation in which team members experience interpersonal conflict that is accompanied by resentment, frustration, and other negative emotions". Substantive conflict, according to Jehn (1997b), refers to "differences among group members' thoughts and feelings about the task being achieved, such as disagreement regarding an institution's current strategic situation". Conflict of interest is defined as a disagreement between two or more parties about how to distribute a scarce resource or make a decision where preferences diverge. This type of conflict arises "when each group favors a different and to some extent mismatched solution to an issue, including either a distribution of limited income among them or a decision to allocate the effort of resolving it".

Conflict of Values happens when two different communal bodies vary in their values or particular ideology issues. This is similarly called political conflict. Goal conflict emerges when a favored consequence or an outcome of two societal entities is varying. In infrequent cases, "it may include differing favorites across all of the decision outcomes, establishing a loose-loose game".

Regarding Realistic versus Non-realistic conflict: Realistic conflict between or among groups that is "typically goal-oriented and reasonable" in its disagreement. Non-realistic conflict, on the other hand, is conflict that naturally arises without any pre-established organizational goals; it occasionally may be caused by egotistical desire and without any kind of rationale. Concerning institutionalized versus non-institutionalized conflict, the former is characterized by circumstances in which performers adhere to established guidelines, exhibit predictable behavior, and have a sustained affiliation, which may be under line-staff conflict or labor-administration debates. Where these circumstances do not exist, most racial conflict is non-institutionalized (Jehn, 1997b).

Empirical studies have shown that various types of conflict, such as affective, substantive, conflict of interest, conflict of values, goal conflict, and realistic/non-realistic conflict, are experienced within organizations (Pelled, Druckman, Broome, & Korper, 1988; Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Rahim, 2001). Conflict was perceived by people in a variety of ways. Therefore, to understand stakeholder perceptions, this article is also based on theories describing different views on conflict, including perspectives discussed by Robbins (2005), Tripp (1987), De Dreu & Van de Vliert (1997), Roseline, & Taripanyeofori (2020), and Thakore (2013), which illustrate how perceptions of conflict have evolved. Various observers have noted this shift in conflict perception throughout time. Key perspectives include the traditional, human relations, and interactionist views.

According to the traditional view of conflict, as described by Robbins (2005), conflicts are detrimental to any institutions because they are bothersome, aberrant, and signify a type of deviant behavior that must be avoided and eliminated if the goals of the institute are to be achieved. According to this perspective, conflict situations can have terrible consequences for the general public and a negative impact on corporate success. This view was often associated with earlier management theories focused on creating rigid institutional structures to prevent or quickly suppress conflict.

The human relations view, in contrast, considers conflict to be a natural and inevitable outcome of human interaction within organizations. While still acknowledging potential negative consequences, this perspective suggests that conflict is not necessarily pathological and can be managed to minimize its disruptive effects. Conflict can be avoided by fostering an atmosphere of trust and friendliness, despite how humans perceive conflict to be. Conflict avoidance and rapid resolution have always been the organization's main priorities.

A more recent perspective, the Interactionist view of conflict, argues that some conflict should not merely be realized as evil or good but rather that particular conflict is definitely necessary for a group to accomplish effectively (De Dreu and Van de Vliert, 1997). This view posits that a minimal level of conflict can be beneficial, stimulating critical thinking, innovation, and organizational change. For example, it is considered healthy when subordinates openly challenge their management or boss for doing anything improper, or when colleagues quarrel in front of the manager about what they believe is right, provided the conflict is managed constructively

Additionally, from this viewpoint, conflict is a necessary part of organizational life and its impact is measured by how well the organization handles it. The most recent viewpoint openly endorses instances of constructive conflict inside organizations.

4 Results

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative survey and qualitative data collection, addressing the nature of conflicts and stakeholders' perceptions. The first research question explored the nature of conflicts among university students in Ethiopia. Based on quantitative data collected via survey questionnaires, out of 394 distributed questionnaires, 335 were completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 85%. The majority of these participants were students (n=220, 66%), while the remainder were instructors (n=115, 34%). Table 3 summarizes descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for student and instructor perceptions on various types of conflict, along with results from independent samples t-tests comparing the mean scores between the two groups.

Based on the overall mean scores for each statement (inferred from the narrative's $\overline{x}$ values), respondents were generally "Undecided" about the presence of realistic conflict ($\overline{x}$ =2.70), goal conflict ($\overline{x}$ = 2.65), and substantive conflict ($\overline{x}$ = 2.92), with mean values falling within the 2.61-3.40 range.

In contrast, respondents indicated "Agreement" or "Strong Agreement" (mean values ranging from 3.50 to 4.08) regarding four other types of conflict: affective conflict ($\overline{x}$ = 3.53), conflict of interest ($\overline{x}$ = 3.50), conflict of values ($\overline{x}$ = 3.60), and non-institutionalized conflict ($\overline{x}$ = 4.04).

Table 3: Nature of Conflicts among University Students by Participant Group (N=335)

Variable Statement	Group	N	Mean	SD	T-test	p-value	Levene's p
1. There is affective conflict in our university	Instructors	115	3.11	1.446	2.091	.037**	0.149
	Students	220	3.75	1.446			
2. There is Substantive conflict in our University	Instructors	115	2.95	1.34	0.315	0.753	0.221
	Students	220	2.9	1.34			
3. There is conflict of interest in our University	Instructors	115	3.43	1.373	1.987	.048**	0.685
	Students	220	3.69	1.373			
4. There is conflict of values in my University occurring due to differ in values/ideologies	Instructors	115	3.46	1.318	1.572	0.117	0.211
	Students	220	3.67	1.318			
5. There is goal conflict in our University	Instructors	115	2.89	1.307	2.867	.004**	.047**
	Students	220	2.53	1.307			
6. There is realistic conflict	Instructors	115	2.79	1.443	1.62	0.106	0.755
	Students	220	2.55	1.443			
7. There is non-institutionalized conflict in my University	Instructors	115	3.96	1.077	1.2	0.231	.005**
	Students	220	4.08	1.077			

$p < 0.05$; **Levene's test significant

Note: Interpretation based on mean scores: 1.00-1.80 Strong Disagreement; 1.81-2.60 Disagreement; 2.61-3.40 Undecided; 3.41-4.20 Agreement; 4.21-5.00 Strong Agreement

Among all assessed types, non-institutionalized conflict received the highest overall mean score ($\overline{x}$ = 4.04), indicating a strong level of agreement that this type of conflict is present. As defined, this is characterized as ethnic conflict where causes are perceived as non-existent or unclear.

Independent samples t-tests comparing mean scores between instructors and students revealed significant differences ($p < 0.05$) for affective conflict ($p = .037$), conflict of interest ($p = .048$), and goal conflict ($p = .004$). Students reported significantly higher affective conflict and conflict of interest, while instructors reported significantly higher goal conflict. Non-institutionalized conflict had the highest mean for both groups, with no significant difference between them ($p = .231$).

Providing deeper context, the qualitative data from the Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) offered valuable insights into the perceived drivers of these conflicts, particularly the high prevalence of non-institutionalized ethnic conflict.

For example, a participant from FGD Group II, identified as "B", shared that: "Conflict happening in different Ethiopian universities including our university was highly related with political interest & it was imposed externally; politicians were using students for mob conflict to attain their political interest. Of course later they achieved their goal. But, destruction and psychological negative impact is still there. "The participant further elaborated, stating that "most political parties in Ethiopia were organized on ethnic base group which is not recommendable & aggravating ethnic conflict".

Similarly, FGD Group II participant "C" corroborated this, stating that "nature of conflict happening in Ethiopian Universities was ethnic based. It doesn't mean that, existences of several ethnicities in Ethiopia are source of conflict. Instead, politician interferences are main catalyst to activating occurrences of conflict to easily achieve their goal".

These qualitative accounts resonate strongly with the quantitative finding that non-institutionalized conflict, described as ethnic conflict, is the most highly rated type. They provide critical context by suggesting this prevalent ethnic conflict is perceived by stakeholders as being fueled and exploited by external political actors operating along ethnic lines.

The second research question explored how stakeholders perceive conflict in Ethiopian universities. This was assessed using perception statements in the survey, complemented by qualitative data.

Table 4 summarizes the overall mean scores and standard deviations for each perception statement across all participants (N=335)

Table 4: Stakeholders' Perceptions about Conflict in Ethiopian Universities (N=335)

Variable Statement	N	Mean	SD	t-test	p-value	Levene's p
1. I feel that conflict is caused by failure of leaders	335	3.33	1.3	0.884	0.377	.021**
2. I feel that conflict is always bad, negative and destructive	335	3.63	1.3	3.297	.001**	11.95*
3. I feel that there are times when conflict can be desirable	335	3.25	1.2	2.652	.008**	6.84*
4. I believe that conflict can be avoided at all.	335	3.18	1.2	0.653	0.514	0.424
5. I believe that if conflict is effectively managed, results in creativity	335	3.11	1.2	1.583	0.114	2.52
6. I feel that conflict can prevent members from doing tasks at all.	335	3.18	1.3	1.546	0.123	2.43
7. I believe that conflict fosters open-mindedness	335	2.97	1.4	0.155	0.877	.024**
8. I feel that in conflicts, someone will always get hurt.	335	3.14	1.5	1.727	0.085	2.98
9. I believe that conflict can be a medium that can be aired and solutions arrived at.	335	2.81	1.3	1.221	0.223	1.491
10. I feel that conflict may facilitate change	335	2.9	1.3	0.63	0.529	0.398
11. I believe conflict in an organization like in universities is inevitable	335	2.73	1.5	2.885	.004**	8.20*

*p < 0.05; **Levene's test significant (p < 0.05), equal variances not assumed for t-test; Levene's F value presented instead of p-value in original table.

Note: Interpretation based on mean scores: 1.00-1. 80 Strong Disagreement; 1.81-2.60 Disagreement; 2.61-3.40 Undecided; 3.41-4.20 Agreement; 4.21-5.00 Strong Agreement.

Based on the overall mean scores presented in Table 4, respondents were generally "Undecided" on most statements about conflict perception. This included perceptions on conflict as a medium for airing issues and finding solutions ($\overline{x}$ = 2.81), its potential to facilitate change ($\overline{x}$ = 2.90), its inevitability ($\overline{x}$ = 2.73), fostering open-mindedness ($\overline{x}$ = 2.97), potential for creativity ($\overline{x}$ = 3.11), avoidability ($\overline{x}$ = 3.18), potential to prevent tasks ($\overline{x}$ = 3.18), belief someone always gets hurt $\overline{x}$ = 3.14), and desirability ($\overline{x}$ = 3.25).

The only statement where the overall mean score indicated "Agreement" ($\overline{x}$ > 3.40) was: "I feel that conflict is always bad, negative and destructive" ($\overline{x}$ = 3.63, SD = 1.33). This suggests a dominant perception that conflict is inherently negative. Independent samples t-tests revealed significant differences (p < 0.05) between instructors and students for statements 2, 3, and 11. Students reported significantly higher agreement that conflict is always bad, negative, and destructive (p =.001). Conversely, instructors reported significantly higher agreement that there are times when conflict can be desirable (p =. 008) and that conflict in universities is inevitable (p =. 004).

The qualitative findings from the FGDs provided deeper context for these perceptions. Echoing the dominant quantitative finding, a majority of respondents in the FGDs expressed the view that conflict is inherently bad and destructive. For instance, FGD participants C and F stated that: "conflict is not good since it has negative effects like destruction, life loose, & create disparity among individuals".

However, the FGDs also captured the nuance hinted at by the quantitative "Undecided" means and the instructors' higher agreement on conflict desirability/inevitability. Participants A, D, and J in the FGDs contrasted the prevalent negative conflict with the potential for constructive conflict, explaining that "if the dispute was occurring for work-related issues & the common good, it was constructive; however, what had been happening in our university was reverse of this".

The combined quantitative and qualitative results paint a picture of complex stakeholder perceptions. While most aspects of conflict perception elicit an "Undecided" response, the strongest agreement is on the negative view: conflict is primarily seen as bad, negative, and destructive. This dominant negative perception is strongly reinforced by qualitative accounts linking conflict to severe outcomes like destruction and loss of life. This perspective is understandable within the specific Ethiopian context, where recent experiences of university conflict have often involved violence and significant disruption. However, the qualitative data also reveals that stakeholders, or at least some groups like instructors, hold a contrasting, albeit less dominant, understanding that conflict can be constructive, particularly when related to work-related issues or the common good. The distinction drawn by participants between what has been happening (destructive,

externally imposed conflict) and the potential for constructive conflict is a critical insight.

5 Discussion

This study's primary goal was to investigate the nature of conflicts among university students in Ethiopia and how stakeholders perceive these conflicts. The findings reveal that several distinct types of conflict are prevalent in Ethiopian universities, aligning with categories described in Jehn's (1997b) typology used as the theoretical framework. Specifically, the study found evidence of affective conflicts, characterized by interpersonal friction, resentment, and negative emotions among students; conflict of values, arising from differences in students' beliefs or ideologies on particular issues; and significantly, non-institutionalized ethnic-based conflicts. Quantitative survey results, supported by insights from qualitative interviews and focus group discussions, indicate a particularly high prevalence of non-institutionalized conflict. These results resonate with and expand upon findings from previous research in the Ethiopian context. Specifically, the finding on ethnic-based conflict supports those discovered by Adamu (2013), who investigated the drivers of ethnic disputes and tensions among university students in Ethiopia. His study highlighted the role of Ethiopia's system of ethnic federalism in contributing to ethnic tensions and clashes within the nation, including in public universities. Adamu (2013) argued that the current ethnically oriented federalism was a root cause of the conflict between different ethnic groups in the university setting and identified both internal and external factors contributing to student ethnic conflict.

Building on Adamu's work, the current study's qualitative findings particularly emphasize external political interventions as the primary perceived source driving these ethnic-based non-institutionalized conflicts. As indicated by the qualitative data, conflicts occurring in various Ethiopian universities were frequently seen as motivated by external political interests and imposed from outside the university system. Participants perceived politicians as utilizing students in group conflicts to achieve their political objectives, suggesting that external pressure is viewed as a more significant cause of conflict at Ethiopian universities than purely internal or administrative factors. This perspective offers a crucial insight specific to the Ethiopian context, where universities are often seen as battlegrounds for wider political and ethnic struggles. Another significant finding relates to stakeholders' perceptions of conflict.

Quantitative survey results, supported by qualitative data from interview and focus group participants, indicate that a dominant perception among university stakeholders is that conflict is always bad, negative, and destructive. This strong negative view contrasts sharply with the interactionist school of thought on conflict perception, which posits that conflict in organizations like universities is not only inevitable but can also be necessary and even beneficial when managed constructively (Stoner & Freeman, 1989; De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997).

Murphy (1994) also suggests that leaders should recognize that conflict can have both beneficial and harmful outcomes. The study's finding of a widespread negative perception, despite the theoretical possibility of constructive conflict, likely reflects the lived experience of destructive, non-institutionalized ethnic and political conflict prevalent in Ethiopian universities, as documented in this study and highlighted by participants. While some qualitative data did acknowledge the potential for constructive conflict (e.g., when related to work issues for the common good), this view appears less dominant compared to the overwhelming perception of conflict as harmful, shaped by recent violent and disruptive events.

6 Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that Ethiopian universities face persistent challenges due to recurrent conflicts. Specifically, ethnic-based conflict, often motivated by political interests, is a dominant type that negatively impacts the university environment, leading to physical and psychological distress. This situation is exacerbated by a prevailing perception that conflict is always bad, negative, and destructive. This narrow understanding overlooks the potential positive aspects of conflict, contrary to the interactionist view which considers conflict a potential catalyst for change and, when wisely managed, capable of contributing constructively to

the community.

Therefore, universities, in collaboration with stakeholders, should implement intensive training and awareness programs for students emphasizing the importance of maintaining academic spaces free from undue political interference and focusing on the core mission of human capital development. Additionally, addressing the root causes of conflict requires federal and regional governments, along with concerned political parties, to engage in dialogue, negotiation, and reconciliation efforts aimed at reducing the ethnic-based political volatility that adversely affects both universities and the country at large.

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Ethical Approval

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Research and Dissemination Office of Dilla University prior to beginning data collection. The approval was assigned batch number DU/m/012/21. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Oral consent was obtained from individual participants, and appropriate consent was secured from relevant organizational representatives. Participants' desire to participate was respected, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in reporting the findings.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, design, and execution of this study. The research proposal was jointly prepared and defended. Following ethical approval, data collection and analysis were conducted collaboratively by all authors. Specific tasks in manuscript preparation were allocated as follows: Mesfin Molla Demissie drafted the introduction and related literature review; Berhanu Mekonnen Yimer drafted the theoretical framework and compiled the references; and Mesfin Demissie Ducalie primarily undertook the interpretation of results, discussion, and conclusion sections. All authors read and approved the final manuscript before submission for publication.

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Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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