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Conflict Issues in Start-up Co-founders: Typology and Measurement

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Abstract

This work develops and validates the Conflicts among Co-founders (COCO) scale, expanding the existing typology of conflicts. In the first study, qualitative results suggest the existence of four types of conflict issues. In the second study, analyses yield three dimensions of the COCO scale. In the third study, Confirmatory Factor Analysis and reliability analyses show psychometric robustness of the COCO scale: money, norms, and vision. This work addresses a gap in the currently available measures of conflict tailored to the specific context of start-ups. Implications for entrepreneurial practice are discussed.

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Conflict Issues in Start-up Co-founders: Typology and Measurement

Start-ups, often founded by teams of entrepreneurs (Lazar et al., 2020; Carland & Carland, 2012), are among the current top priorities for economic growth. Founding teams are crucial to venture performance, investment decisions, and survival (Knight et al., 2020). To survive and flourish in an extremely competitive context, these teams need to be highly innovative and effective. Although team-based start-ups offer considerable advantages over solo ventures, they often fail to realize their full potential due to conflicts that give rise to dysfunctional team dynamics (Schoss et al., 2022). Indeed, 50% (United States Department of Labor, 2016) up to 95% (Gage, 2012) of new businesses fail in their first years, conflicts between co-founders being one of the top reasons for this failure (DeMers, 2018; Lance, 2016).

However, conflicts are inevitable in high-performing teams (Amason, 1996; Wheelan, 1994), and they are not always destructive. Paradoxically, conflicts can boost innovation and decision-making quality (de Wit et al., 2012), contributing in this way to venture entrepreneurial success. This paradox of conflict is inherent for start-up co-founders whose core task is to come to shared decisions on high-stakes issues (e.g., investments, operations, values) while operating in a unique context of high demands and low resources (Ensley et al., 2002) that makes them fertile ground for conflicts.

The current scales for evaluating workplace conflict categorize it into different types that do not assess the actual substance of the conflict. However, negotiation literature recognizes conflict issues as a fundamental dimension of any disagreement (Odell, 2013). A growing body of research shows that the nature of the conflict issue, or what the conflict is actually about, is a key predictor of negotiation processes and outcomes (Harinck et al., 2000; Harinck & Van Kleef, 2012). For instance, negotiations involving scarce resources, such as money, are generally more feasible but tend to elicit less integrative behavior, as one party's gain is perceived as the other's loss. In contrast, negotiations centered on qualitative issues (e.g., norms or long-term rules) often promote more flexible and exploratory behavior (Odell, 2013). However, when norms and values are at stake, reaching agreement becomes particularly difficult, as these issues are not easily subject to trade-offs (Steinel & Harinck, 2020). Unlike financial resources, values are often deeply tied to individuals' identities, and parties may resist collaboration if they believe that mutually beneficial outcomes would require compromises that threaten their core moral beliefs (Wade-Benzoni et al., 2002). Thus, to capture the complexity of conflict dynamics, it is essential to move beyond traditional typologies of conflict and directly examine the content of conflict issues.

Building on this, in the context of new venture teams, conflictive issues specific to entrepreneurial settings can be seen as potential stressors (Kozusznik & Euwema, 2020). Such issues are likely to represent both opportunities and threats (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and may trigger stress-related responses. Because these stressors are subjective, they can impact the well-being of entrepreneurs in different ways. This requires a tool that measures specific conflict issues while allowing for individual interpretation of that stressor, rather than relying on traditional conflict types that assume uniform effects (e.g., "task" vs. "relationship" conflict). This approach aligns with the growing interest in well-being in entrepreneurship research (Stephan et al., 2023) and may help identify factors that protect against negative outcomes such as burnout.

The purpose of this study is to uncover a typology of conflict issues among start-up co-founders and to develop a tool to measure those. Achieving these aims will allow us to advance scholarship on the management of contradictions to understand the origins and consequences of organizational conflict (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992), as well as to design interventions aimed at

improving co-founders' decision-making quality, team efficiency, and start-up entrepreneurial success.

Performance and Survival of Start-ups

Start-ups are the engine of the US (Haltiwanger et al., 2013) and the European (Malchow-Møller et al., 2011; see also Morris et al., 2016) job growth. Keeping with the Small Business Jobs Act (Office of Entrepreneurial Development, 2019) and the Small Business Act (European Commission, 2008) principles, governments worldwide aim at supporting entrepreneurs in creating new businesses and ensuring more supportive environments for start-ups, so they can thrive and grow. To achieve this high performance, start-up co-founders need to survive as a team, operate in an extremely uncertain, challenging, and competitive context (Hmieleski & Cole, 2021; Lazar et al., 2022), and be highly innovative by developing excellent performance and decision-making (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005).

We understand start-ups as recently formed companies (up to five or so years) with a clear growth ambition (Covin et al., 2006; Morris et al., 2016), unconstrained by geography. In this way, we draw a distinction between potential high growth start-ups (Sohl, 1999) and a broader concept of a new venture that are companies in their "early stages of development and growth" (Klotz et al., 2014, p. 227), which includes more types of ventures (e.g., "survival" or "lifestyle" companies (Morris et al., 2016).

The management of start-ups is generally a shared effort (Gartner et al., 1994), and start-ups are likely to be founded by teams of entrepreneurs (Carland & Carland, 2012; Lazar et al, 2020). Start-up *c*o-founders are persons who jointly launch a business (Forster & Jansen, 2010) and who *"actively participate in the development and implementation of its strategy (e.g., setting the vision and mission, obtaining resources, hiring employees)"* (Klotz et al., 2014, pp. 227–228). The importance of start-up co-founders for venture success resonates with the upper echelon perspective (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996) that has been adopted as the primary lens for studying new venture team performance (Klotz et al., 2014) and that links top team dynamics with the whole firm performance (Amason, 1996; Ensley et al., 2002). Indeed, it is known that, in the start-up context, co-founders' influences on their organization can last for years after the founders have left or even passed on (Nelson, 2003). Indeed, conflicts between co-founders are one of the top reasons for start-up failure (DeMers, 2018; Lance, 2016). One of the explanations for this collapse is that poorly managed conflicts have deleterious effects on decision making (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005), which is key for effectiveness and innovation (Leaptrott, 2009), and survival of the start-up (de Wit et al., 2012; Dijkstra et al., 2009).

Even though the number of studies focused on entrepreneurial teams increased (Cooney, 2005), co-founders as key actors for start-up functioning have received limited attention in research (Forster & Jansen, 2010). Indeed, a review by Wennberg (2013) shows that still only 30 out of 134 studies on high-growth ventures published between 1985 and 2013 contained data on their co-founders or top teams.

The Paradox of Organizational Conflict

Conflict, the interactive social process arising from tensions between two or more people due to actual or perceived differences in ideas or values (Wall & Callister, 1995), is inevitable and essential in the development and functioning of high performing teams (Amason, 1996; Wheelan,

1994), being a continuous challenge for organizations (Babalola et al., 2018). For start-up co-founders, managing conflictive issues is core business, and it is not bad *per se* (Belén García et al., 2015; de Wit et al., 2012). Indeed, paradoxically, conflict might have positive outcomes (de Wit et al., 2012): it can facilitate superior start-up performance (Ensley et al., 2002), ensure creativity and high-quality decision making, yet, being at the same time, an impediment to it (Amason, 1996), because it may weaken the ability of the group to work together (Schweiger et al., 1986) or even lead to departure by offended team members (Ensley et al., 2002). Likewise, the pursuit of consensus (lack of conflict) may reduce creativity (De Dreu & De Vries, 1997) and decision quality (Amason, 1996). This paradoxical relationship resonates with the dialectic perspective that conceives of such contradictory forces as the need for innovation as well as stability that are simultaneously present in high-performing teams of co-founders and that are central to organizational dynamics (Kellett, 1999). Dealing with the paradox of conflict to ensure optimal decision making requires what is referred to as constructive controversy, understood as an open-minded discussion of opposing views for mutual benefit (Tjosvold et al., 2015).

Conflictive Issues Among Start-up Co-founders

Conflicts are especially relevant for start-up co-founders because the issues on their agenda require challenging discussions. Specifically, they are confronted with nonroutine, ambiguous, and complex types of tasks (Ensley et al., 2002) that require intense decision making (Jin et al., 2017) and make some amount of disagreement inevitable (Ensley et al., 2002). These tasks include reaching agreement on the business plan, investment strategies, product or service development and promotion, seeking customers and potential partners, and putting into place organizational processes and procedures (Amason et al., 2006; Edelman et al., 2016; Zahra et al., 2000).

Furthermore, decision-making among start-up co-founders occurs under stressful conditions, exposure to which is known to be associated with an increase in conflict (O'Brien & DeLongis, 1997) and predictive of conflict-inducing behavior, such as withdrawal, aggressive or antisocial behavior (Bergen et al., 2004; Sprague et al., 2011; Verona & Kilmer, 2007). These stressful conditions arise from the high job demands that start-up co-founders face and the limited resources they possess (Ensley et al., 2002). On the one hand, the start-up environment is highly uncertain (Chandler et al., 2005; Lazar et al., 2022), volatile, and ambiguous (Chen et al., 2017), which is especially the case for high-tech innovative start-ups that embrace rapid technological change (Keeble, 1990). To be successful, start-ups see themselves pressured to stand out from the existing companies on the market, and this requires creativity and intensive learning, with minimal losses in efficiency and motivation (Ensley et al., 2002). The uncertainty, novelty, and high stakes in entrepreneurs' daily lives make maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships particularly challenging (Yu et al., 2022). On the other hand, in their early stages, start-ups have limited resources (Hitt et al., 2011), including poor working conditions (Hasle & Limborg, 2006), a lack of necessary capital, and liquidity constraints (Evans & Jovanovic, 1989). Start-up founders have often limited, if any, business knowledge, entrepreneurial experience, and business relations (Nielsen & Lassen, 2012).

Additionally, founding teams still need to establish shared norms for collaboration and joint strategic decision-making, making conflict a common and critical aspect of interactions within these teams (De Jong et al., 2013). Under such conditions, new firms often face crises, which can trigger destructive behaviors in response to ego threats (Brownell & Embry, 2024).

Misalignment among team members can even lead to the premature departure of co-founders during the early formation phase of the venture (Lazar et al., 2020).

Finally, the composition of the co-founding team can also be a source of conflict. During the early stages of start-up team formation, members bring complementary expertise, which, while beneficial, can lead to discrepancies. Without common ground, these can lead to entrenchment that can undermine communication and coordination, and potentially result in early turnover or costly efforts to address the conflictive issues (Lazar et al., 2022). Co-founding teams are also typically diverse in age, gender, ethnicity, education, and life experiences, all of which can exacerbate conflicts (Leffel et al., 2012). Also, start-ups are often built on long-standing relationships (e.g., among close friends or family members) that are more exposed to conflict than non-family firms (Ensley & Pearson, 2005), formed by less closely related business partners. In fact, the co-founder relationship, characterized by a shared vision, has been compared to that of a married couple (Overall, 2025). These close relationships are often put at stake when developing their business, which can add heat to an already challenging situation.

Towards the Development of the Typology of Conflict Issues Among Start-up Co-Founders

Several studies explain the overall nature of organizational conflict. Scholars distinguish task, relationship, and process conflict (Jehn et al., 2008) that can co-occur (de Wit et al., 2012). Empirical findings suggest that different team members can experience more conflict than others while exposed to the same conflict types (Sinha et al., 2016) and they show that the extent to which the type of conflict can have detrimental effects on individual well-being and organizational effectiveness can vary (de Wit et al., 2012).

Current scales for evaluating workplace conflict categorize it into types typically seen as either constructive (task-oriented, cognitive) or destructive (emotional, interpersonal), in relation to team outcomes. However, meta-analyses indicate that traditional measures of task conflict (the so-called 'constructive' conflict) show zero correlations with team performance (de Wit et al., 2012; O'Neill et al., 2013). Also, these scales do not assess the actual substance of the conflict. This research explicitly refers to the particular conflict-eliciting issues encountered by start-up co-founders that require daily management of tensions, which can be "*catalyst*[s] *for creativity and understanding as well as for animosity and resentment*" (Ensley et al., 2002, p. 366).

In this study, we build on Deutsch's (1973) theoretical framework of conflict, which emphasizes that the nature of the issue is a core determinant of whether conflict escalates or is resolved constructively. Deutsch (1973) identifies several types of conflictive issues- including control over resources (e.g., money), beliefs, and values- as fundamental to understanding conflict dynamics. These dimensions align with the Money, Norms, and Vision dimensions of the COCO scale, supporting that traditional conflict typologies (e.g., task vs. relationship conflict) may overlook critical nuances in start-up co-founder conflict.

We also draw from the contingency theory of conflict management perspective (Rahim, 2002), which explains that effective conflict resolution depends on aligning strategies with the specific characteristics of the conflict situation, including the issue at stake. Thus, understanding *what* co-founders disagree about is critical, as different conflict issues may differentially predict team functioning, decision quality, and venture success. The COCO scale addresses this gap by offering a validated, context-specific tool to assess conflict issues in early-stage start-ups.

Negotiation research helps further explain why conflict issues matter, viewing them as a fundamental dimension of disagreement (Odell, 2013). Research has shown that the nature of the

conflict issue significantly predicts negotiation processes and outcomes (Harinck et al., 2000; Harinck & Van Kleef, 2012). For example, negotiations over scarce resources often promote distributive behavior, while qualitative issues, such as norms or rules, encourage more exploratory, integrative behavior (Odell, 2013). However, when norms and values are at stake, reaching agreement becomes particularly difficult, as these issues are not easily subject to trade-offs (Steinel & Harinck, 2020). Therefore, a focus on the content of conflict is critical for understanding and managing the complexities of interpersonal conflict in start-ups.

We situate these ideas within the entrepreneurial context through the lens of the upper echelons perspective (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996), which explains how top team disagreements shape venture performance (Amason, 1996; Ensley et al., 2002; Klotz et al., 2014). By capturing the core issues of co-founder conflict, the COCO scale offers a deeper lens on early-stage team functioning and start-up outcomes. We address the call to carry out more research that focuses on the intricate nature of conflict (Olson & Golish, 2002) that would uncover specific conflict issues among start-up co-founders. Although conflicts among start-up co-founders appear to be an important subject for study (Chen et al., 2017; Ensley et al., 2002), conflict issues among start-up co-founders have remained largely unexplored.

Entrepreneurial teams significantly differ from ordinary work teams in organizations due to a lack of established norms, the presence of equity sharing, and a high degree of managerial decision-making latitude (Li et al., 2025), which can all constitute unique conflict issues within these teams. First, unlike traditional work teams that function under established norms, routines, and structures, early-stage entrepreneurial teams are characterized by weak social situations in which norms regarding appropriate behavior have yet to be established (Klotz et al., 2014; Li et al., 2025). In this context, disagreements over norms, such as expectations around appropriate behavior and role responsibilities, appear to be one of the core conflictive issues in entrepreneurial teams. These disagreements are closely linked to the concept of role ambiguity, which refers to a lack of clarity regarding duties, authority, time allocation, and interpersonal relationships, as well as the absence of clear guidelines or predictable consequences for behavior (Rizzo et al., 1970). Co-founding teams are particularly vulnerable to role ambiguity, which is associated with increased tension, hostility (Kahn et al., 1964), and interpersonal conflict (Tidd et al., 2004), which highlights the importance of understanding conflict in entrepreneurial teams (Chen et al., 2017).

Second, equity sharing among entrepreneurial team members increases their sensitivity to conflicting viewpoints on the venture's strategic direction (Chen et al., 2017), making them particularly vulnerable to money-related conflict issues. The extensive literature on negotiation emphasizes the role of conflicts of interest in shaping such disagreements. Specifically, equity-sharing negotiations within entrepreneurial teams can evoke fixed-pie perceptions, where team members assume that any gain in ownership or decision rights for one individual necessarily entails a loss for another (Thompson, 1990). This reflects a systematic judgment bias, especially in negotiations over tangible resources such as money, where integrative outcomes and mutual gains are often possible (Thompson and Hastie, 1990; Bazerman and Neale, 1983). These misperceptions can fuel or escalate financial disagreements.

Finally, entrepreneurial teams operate with a high degree of managerial discretion and decision-making latitude, meaning that their vision shapes the venture's long-term success (Klotz et al., 2014), but also may expose them to diverging opinions, making disagreements about the venture's vision likely to emerge. This context can also promote behaviors like asserting dominance, devaluing others' contributions, or forming coalitions that undermine teamwork (Bendersky and Hays, 2012). Along these lines, Wakefield and Sebora (2004) identified four

conflictive issues as particularly salient in new family businesses: conflicts over money and compensation, managerial roles, ownership and control, and strategic vision. While these dimensions offer a useful starting point for understanding conflictive issues in entrepreneurial settings, the authors did not provide a rationale for how the four conflict dimensions were conceptually derived, nor did they describe the development process or psychometric validation of the items used to measure them.

In this study, we seek to advance scholarship on the management of disagreements by broadening the typology of conflicts to include conflict issues among start-up co-founders that would allow us to gain more detailed insight into the topics over which start-up co-founders have disagreements. Specifically, the aim of this work is twofold: 1) to expand the existing typology of conflicts to include a classification of conflict issues especially present among start-up co-founders; and 2) to develop and validate a tool that allows measuring conflict issues among start-up co-founders that is tailored to the specificity of start-ups.

Uncovering the conflictive issues among start-up co-founders and classifying these allows us to enhance our understanding of the catalysts for the paradoxical (positive and negative) outcomes of conflict for start-up top team performance. By focusing specifically on the topics of conflict among start-up co-founders, we can advance our understanding of the interactions in start-up teams and begin to build a new, issue-centered conceptual framework of conflict in start-ups that may help explain both start-up failure and entrepreneurial success. Also, uncovering a typology of conflict issues among start-up co-founders and validating a new instrument to assess these will allow us to design interventions intended at creating awareness of conflict issues and at addressing the most relevant heated themes in start-up top teams since the early stages of development of the venture. All this can help to prevent a destructive accumulation of tensions among co-founders and to ensure space for constructive controversy that may enable innovation, team efficiency (see Tjosvold, 2008 for a review), and boost start-up top team strategic advantage (Chen et al., 2005).

Study 1. Types of Conflictive Issues in Start-ups

The two main objectives of Study 1 were (a) to determine the types of conflictive issues among start-up co-founders and (b) to classify them in meaningful categories. To address these aims, we used a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches: first, we carried out semi-structured interviews to obtain qualitative data about conflictive issues among start-up co-founders. This qualitative information served to elaborate categories of conflict issues in start-up top teams by means of multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis.

Method

Participants and Procedure

In order to determine units of analysis, we carried out interviews with 21 start-up founders and entrepreneurship experts who were independent of one another, reaching in this way the

recommended sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were contacted directly or through a university incubator of entrepreneurship between January and February 2018. 73% of the start-up founders were men. 80% were married or in a marriage-like relationship, and 20% were single. The start-ups were founded between 2012 and 2017 and thus ranged between 1 and 6 years (M = 2.93, SD = 1.54) and had between 2 and 5 co-founders (M = 3.0, SD = .88). The participation was voluntary, and the participants were assured of the confidentiality of their data.

Because we were interested in collecting detailed information about conflictive issues among start-up co-founders, we adopted a participant-driven method of inquiry. This decision was grounded in established practices for inductive item generation, particularly when constructs are underexplored, conceptual dimensions are not yet well-defined, and content is best derived from the lived experiences of the target population (Hinkin, 1998). As Clark and Watson (1995) emphasize, drawing item pools from participant experiences is essential for content validity. Our approach closely aligns with the methodology of Behfar et al. (2008), who also used a participant-driven method of inquiry to understand how participants themselves (rather than the researchers) think about team conflict dynamics (Behfar et al., 2008). To this end, we carried out semi-structured interviews during which we included two open-ended questions, asking start-up co-founders to describe "the topics of disagreements (if any) they had with their start-up co-founder(s) since their start-up was created" and "give examples of the milestones or events in the development in the start-up that provoked most tensions or disagreements with their start-up co-founder(s)" to elicit both broad and context-specific accounts of conflict (Clark & Watson, 1995; Hinkin, 1998). We used the term "disagreements" in our interview questions rather than "conflict" to encourage more open and accurate participant responses. In line with prior work in social and organizational psychology, we follow a definition of conflict that centers on interpersonal disagreement (e.g., Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Barki & Hartwick, 2004; Jehn, 1995; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Research suggests that individuals may perceive the term "conflict" as emotionally charged or stigmatized, which can lead them to downplay or avoid acknowledging its presence (Kerwin et al., 2011). In contrast, "disagreement", while lying at the core of interpersonal conflict, is generally less emotionally loaded (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). We asked about critical milestones because tensions between co-founders often arise during key transitional events in the start-up lifecycle, such as external financing rounds, product launches or modifications, recruitment, strategic shifts, and organizational growth (Hellmann et al., 2019; Kaulio, 2003; Leffel et al., 2012; Sarfati et al., 2020). All interviews were carried out face-to-face by a psychologist, except for one, which, due to geographical constraints, was carried out over the phone.

Analyses: Classifying Conflictive Issues Among Start-up Co-Founders by Using Participant Concept Mapping

The concept mapping method is a participatory content analysis (Jackson & Trochim, 2002) that combines traditional content analysis and semantic mapping analysis (Behfar et al., 2008), allowing, in this way, to analyze the responses on the types of conflict issues among start-up co-founders. The aim of concept mapping is to produce clusters of similar thematic categories, and it is carried out in five-steps: (a) determining units of analysis, (b) participant sorting of units, (c) multidimensional scaling analysis, (d) cluster analysis, and (e) cluster labelling (Behfar et al., 2008).

Determining Units of Analysis. In this step, units of analysis were created from the statements generated by the respondents in response to the two open-ended questions in the semi-

structured interviews. All the responses about the conflictive issues were decomposed into single statements by the research team. Repetitions from the same person were eliminated. This process yielded 136 statements on sources of conflicts among start-up co-founders.

Participant Sorting of Units of Analysis. To avoid introducing researcher bias to the remaining steps of the concept mapping analysis, post-graduate students attending "Organizational Change" course (91% master, 9% doctoral) were used as decision makers. Because students in this course had expertise with the topic of organizational conflict, we considered this group an adequate one to sort the units of analysis. We gave 22 students (77% women) a set of cards with printed statements (i.e., units of analysis) on them and instructed them to organize cards containing similar ideas together into piles. We asked them to create as many piles as they considered adequate, to give each of their piles a name, and not to create a "Miscellaneous/others" pile. The students worked in dyads, none of which had formally appointed leaders. Thus, both members of each dyad were jointly responsible for making decisions in the group.

Multidimensional Scaling Analysis. We used the information from the sorting to carry out a multidimensional scaling analysis in order to create a map of conceptual similarity between the units of analysis. First, we created a 136 x 136 binary square matrix (rows and columns represent statements on sources of conflicts among start-up co-founders) for each individual sorter. Cells indicated whether or not a pair of statements was classified by a particular coder as belonging to the same category (1 = yes vs. 0 = no). Second, we aggregated the 11 individual matrices and, based on the multidimensional scaling of the aggregated matrices, we used SPSS v.22 software (IBM Corp., 2017) to create coordinate estimates that served to elaborate a two-dimensional map of distances between the statements. We chose a two-dimensional space as it provides the most relevant input for a cluster analysis (Kruskal & Wish, 1978).

Cluster Analysis. We carried out a two-step cluster analysis developed by Chiu and colleagues (2001) on the multidimensional scaling coordinates to find the cluster solution (i.e., the classification of conflict issues among start-up co-founders) that best represented the structure of the data. In order to do that, we used the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and the cluster solution silhouette.

Cluster Labelling. After arriving at a final cluster solution, we reassessed the statements in each category. We took into account the names for each pile given by the original sorters to choose labels that best reflected the quintessence of each category. We based all the cluster labels on the original labels given by the sorters or on the statements formulated by the participants.

Results

Initial List of Conflict Statements

The interviews yielded 136 statements on sources of conflicts among start-up co-founders. Example statements were: "Setting the division of the shares"; "Another co-founder being tied stronger with his/her another activity than with the start-up"; "Not feeling valued by the other founders"; and "Objectives of adventure are not shared by all co-founders (e.g., a fast exit orientation vs. a long-term orientation)."

Concept Map of Conflicts Among Start-up Co-founders

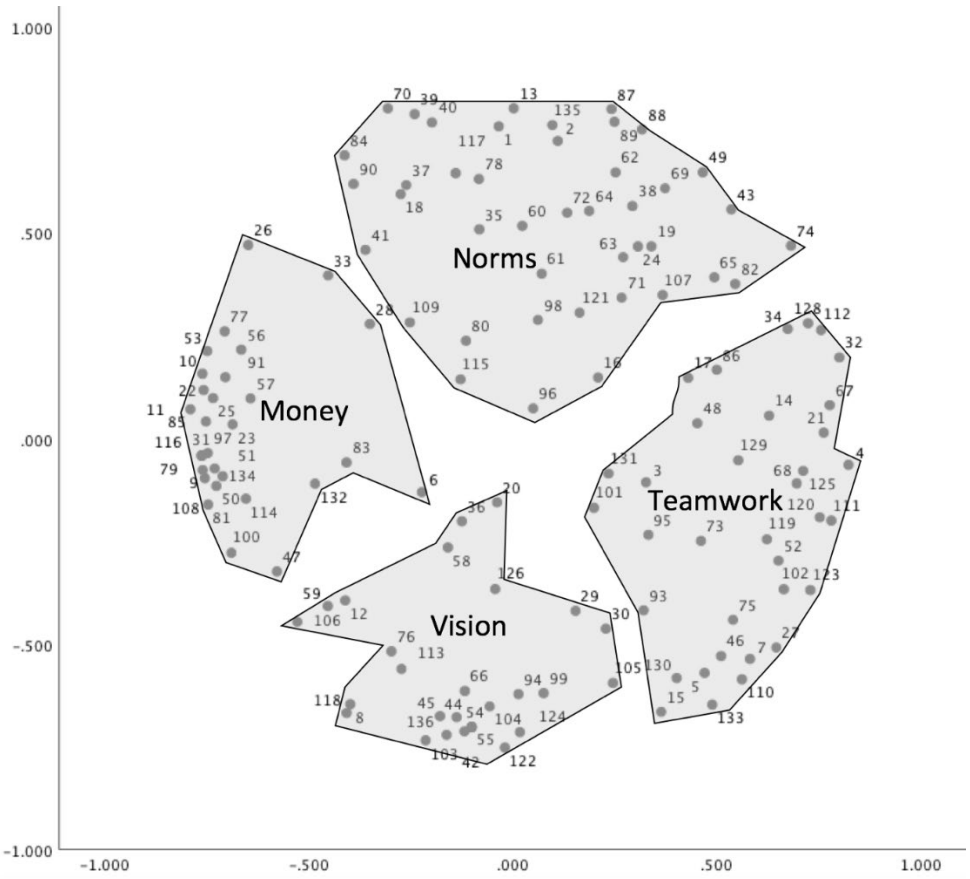
In the next step, we carried out multidimensional scaling analysis using the aggregated proximity matrices composed of all 11 of the individual matrices produced by the classifications of statements by the raters. In this way, we created a two-dimensional map of distances between the statements on conflicts among start-up co-founders.

The auto-clustering algorithm of the two-step cluster analysis with Euclidean distances applied to the statements' coordinates indicated that the statements could be best classified in four clusters as per the smallest BIC (129.84) and the biggest ratio of distance measures (2.07). The average silhouette measure of cohesion and separation was .60. The four clusters of conflict issues statements that emerged were: (a) money, (b) norms, (c) teamwork, and (d) vision. The final map from the concept mapping analysis of the types of conflict issues in start-ups is presented in Figure 1. In the final concept map, each of the 136 statements produced by the participants is represented as a point in space. Each of these points is then included in a cluster. The location of each of the clusters on the map is not relevant; what is meaningful is the relative distance and position between the clusters. The clusters that are closer to each other contain statements that have been classified together in the same piles more often by the sorters. Those clusters that are farther away from each other include statements that were considered less similar to each other than those statements that are closer. Although the form and the magnitude of each cluster may reflect a wide-ranging or narrow concept, it does not allow for drawing meaningful conclusions, for example, the size of the cluster does not reflect the number of statements contained in it (Behfar et al., 2008).

Cluster Content

Representative statements from each cluster are displayed in Table 1. Each cluster includes conceptually similar statements (e.g., the money cluster embraces statements about money-related discussions among start-up co-founders). However, in each category, the ideas range to include several aspects of the main concept. For example, in the money category, the ideas ranged from dealing with economic problems, setting up agreements on money-related start-up strategy, to equity issues and dividing shares. The norms cluster included issues of role division, communication procedures, and individual effort. The teamwork category covered ideas from negative attitudes of the top team members, individual differences in temperament, and not feeling valued or respected by others. Finally, the vision category embraced ideas from sharing the same vision, mission, and values.

Figure 1. *Final Cluster Solution with Conflict Issues Among Start-up Co-Founders Statement Points*



Note. Similar statements are closer together.

Table 1. *Representative Statements from Each Cluster of Conflict Issues Among Start-up Co-founders*

Cluster name	Representative statements
Money	Deciding the division of shares. The fact that one of the co-founders wants to earn more money than the others. Decision on selling the company or on staying for less but in shares. Lack of agreement with respect to the amount of initial investment. Feelings of lack of fairness when comparing received money to the work carried out.
Norms	Lack of clearly defined roles among the founders. Perception that one has more work than initially agreed. Limited availability of some of the team members in comparison to all-day availability of the others. Other start-up founders that do not want to commit their lifestyles to the start-up. Lack of agreement on whether co-founders' progress should be informed to other co-founders.

Teamwork	Feeling more used than others. Disrespectful behavior of another co-founder. Not feeling valued by the other founders. Inability to admit one's fault by another co-founder.
Vision	Different visions of development of their start-up. Unrealistic, utopic start-up vision of some co-founders. Lack of a common belief in the project. Not sharing the same hands-on work ethic.

Study 2. Development of the Conflicts among Co-founders (COCO) scale

The main objectives of Study 2 were (a) to develop and select the appropriate conflictive issues among start-up co-founders that could be included in the COCO scale, and (b) to find the most appropriate factor structure to ensure satisfactory reliability for the COCO scale dimensions. First, we explored the relationships among the 36 items in the item pool. Second, we performed exploratory factor analysis. The items were required to have adequate loadings with their respective dimensions proposed in Study 1. Finally, we employed item-subscale correlations. The cut-off value of Cronbach's α for each dimension was .70 (Nunnally, 1978).

To create the COCO scale, as a starting point, our research team formulated 36 items that best represented the essence of each of the four dimensions: money, norms, teamwork, and vision. We used as input and/or inspiration some statements generated in Study 1. We strived to formulate items that were specific to the context of start-ups, while tapping as much as possible the breadth of each category. As a result, we arrived at an initial list of 8 items for money, 9 items for norms, 11 items for teamwork, and 8 items for vision. The instruction to the participants was to indicate the extent to which they experience or witness the following disagreements in their start-up top team. The response scale ranged from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*A lot*), where higher scores indicate greater levels of conflicts among start-up co-founders.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The participants in this study were start-up top-team members from the Flemish region. We approached only current start-ups that were founded a maximum of 5 years ago. Given that the focus of this study is on conflicts among start-up co-founders, we included start-ups only with at least two co-founders or with a clear top team. Participants were informed that taking part in the study was voluntary, that their data will be pseudonymized and confidential, and that the study sticks to the ethics guidelines as it has received approval from the University Ethics Committee.

In total, 116 participants filled out the questionnaires. Descriptive statistics of the sample included in this study can be found in Table 2. The majority were men (70%), with a university degree (master's degree or other post-graduate training) (55%), and the mean age was 29.18 years (SD = 5.99). According to the power analysis for a correlational study using G*Power software, our study has sufficient statistical power (>.87) to demonstrate a small effect size (r=.25).

Table 2. *Sample Characteristics (Study 2).*

Characteristics	*M (SD) / n* (%)
age	29.18 (5.99)
sex	
Female	35 (30.2)
Male	81 (69.8)
Marital status	
Single	27 (23.3)
Separated / Divorced	1 (0.9)
Married / Living with partner	88 (75.9)
The highest education reached	
Compulsory education (primary or secondary)	5 (4.3)
Occupational training	6 (5.2)
University degree (Graduated)	34 (29.3)
University degree (master's degree or other post-graduate training)	64 (55.2)
Doctoral degree (PhD., MD, etc.)	4 (3.4)
Other	3 (2.6)
Socio-Economic Status	6.75 (1.08)

Note. $n = 116$.

Results

Item-Item Correlations

First, we subjected all 36 items from the initial item pool of the COCO scale to a classic item analysis, and we calculated separate interitem correlations for the COCO scale. Because no items were "positively correlated with some and negatively correlated with others in a homogenous set […]" (DeVellis, 2003, p. 106), we retained all the items.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

Second, the intercorrelation matrices among the items were subjected to principal axis factoring analysis using R (version 4.4.2, R Core Team, 2025), in conjunction with RStudio (Version 2024.12.1, RStudio Team, 2024) to reveal the structure of an underlying set of variables and the least number of factors to explain the common variance (Allen & Bennet, 2010). A parallel analysis was performed to determine the appropriate number of factors to retain (Horn, 1965). The results indicated that three factors should be retained. Based on the assumption that conflicts in start-ups are unlikely to emerge in isolation (e.g., a conflict on vision might be related to disagreements about money allocation), as well as on literature suggesting that multiple types of conflict can appear simultaneously (Korsgaard et al., 2008; Rispens, 2012; Speakman & Ryals, 2010), an oblique (oblimin) rotation, which assumes that factors are not entirely independent, was applied to account for the relationships among factors (Fabrigar et al., 1999). This decision was further justified by inspecting the inter-factor correlation matrix that indicated moderate correlations between factors (Factor 1- Factor 2: $r = .53$; Factor 1 – Factor 3: $r = .27$; Factor 2 – Factor 3: $r = .16$). Factorial structures for the COCO scale were determined by retaining items with

significant loadings of ≥ .35 on their corresponding factors (Overall & Klett, 1972). Based on the results of the factor analysis, we identified three categories of conflict issues among start-up co-founders, containing a total of 36 items.

The proposed three-factor solution explained 47.6% of the variance. Factor 1 (Norms, 20 items) accounted for 24.9% of the variance, Factor 2 (Vision, 7 items) accounted for 14.7% of the variance, and Factor 3 (Money, 8 items) accounted for 8.0% of the variance. The average factor loadings for the items in the Norms, Vision, and Money factors were robust (.62, .72, and .48, respectively). There were nine items with slight to moderate cross-loadings (≥.30) and one item that did not reach a significant factor loading (≥.35, according to Overall & Klett, 1972).

Our goal was to create a compact tool with few items per scale to assess conflict issues among start-up co-founders, without compromising the quality of each subscale. Therefore, based on the EFA, we selected the items that had the highest loadings to their corresponding factors, the least cross-loadings to other factors, and that conceptually tapped best the essence of each factor. In this way, we arrived at the final solution of nine items loading on 3 factors. Table 3 shows Exploratory Factor Analysis with item loading for every factor of the initial item pool of the COCO Scale.

Table 3. *Exploratory Factor Analysis: Item loading for every factor of the initial item pool of the COCO Scale (36 items, Study 2).*

Items and name for each factor	Factor Loadings		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Factor 1. Norms-related conflicts			
1…regarding who takes the final decisions.	.705	-.127	.159
2 …regarding delimitation of roles and contributions of the co-founders.	.600	.042	.260
3 …regarding co-founders' task interference.	.736	-.092	.166
4 …regarding perceived relative effort of each of the co-founders.	.602	-.047	.316
5 …when the quantity of work to do differs from that initially agreed.	.637	.027	.189
6 …regarding communication of work progress among the top team.	**.757**	-.149	.227
7 …regarding procedures on how to inform about each other's progress.	**.809**	-.144	.215
8 …when there is failure to fulfill responsibilities.	**.796**	-.102	.218
9 ...regarding differences in commitment to the start-up of top team members.	.494	.115	.403
10. Lack of honesty.	.524	.106	-.058
11. Differences in characters/temperaments in the top team.	.674	.064	-.162
12. Feeling more used than others.	.471	.249	.011
13. Understatements.	.639	.140	-.177
14. Disrespectful behavior of another co-founder.	.580	.225	-.283
15. Not feeling valued enough in the top team.	.615	.280	-.177
16. Lack of trust in the top team.	.749	.156	-.261
17. Not keeping the word.	.692	.185	-.269
18. Not respecting each other's competencies and skills.	.545	.368	-.205
19. Negative attitude of another co-founder.	.516	.326	-.145

20. Resistance and rigidity of the other top team member when taking decisions.	.733	.150	-.115
Factor 2. Vision-related conflicts			
1. Failure to share the vision for the start-up by all co-founders (e.g., regarding the product, clients).	-.071	**.748**	.065
2. Unrealistic start-up vision of some co-founders.	-.010	**.785**	-.042
3. The start-up failing to match the ambitions of all co-founders.	.080	.695	.023
4. Lack of a common understanding of the product among the co-founders.	-.134	.724	.176
5. Lack of a common belief in the project in the top team.	-.024	.719	.053
6. Failure to share the same sense of mission by all co-founders.	.112	**.747**	.104
7. Failure to share the same values in the top team.	.240	.641	.080
8. Failure to share the same hands on work ethics in the top team.	.400	.390	.027
Factor 3. Money-related conflicts			
1.…regarding the division of the shares in the company.	.114	.268	**.429**
2 …regarding funding (e.g. initial investment, raising funds).	.075	.368	.498
3 …when comparing received money to the work carried out.	.188	.373	.304
4 …regarding different attitudes of the cofounders towards making money (e.g., short- vs. long-term orientation).	.183	.279	.369
5 …when cofounders want more equity.	.119	.277	**.628**
6 …when having to share real money.	.137	.223	**.680**
7 …when the start-up has financial problems.	.309	.357	.375
8 …when there is a breach in the initial agreement if it comes to financial investment.	.039	.385	.475

Note. $N = 116$. Factor loadings of items included in the final 9-item version of the COCO scale under each specific factor are marked in bold.

Item Subscale Correlations

Finally, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients were computed between each item and the total corrected score of its corresponding COCO subscale. Mean item-subscale correlation was .74. Since all the items correlated with the total score of their respective subscales at a significance level of at least .05, we retained all 9 items. The α coefficients for the final COCO scale in this sample ranged from .82 to .91 ($M = .86$).

Study 3. Scale Refinement and Evaluation

The COCO scale developed in Study 2 included three dimensions corresponding to different types of conflict sources among start-up co-founders: Money, Norms, and Vision. To

seek additional information on the dimensionality of the COCO scale, we used a new sample to further analyze the selected items and the internal consistency reliability of the subscales. We inspected subscale correlations, and we carried out a confirmatory factor analysis to compare the unidimensional and the three-factor solution for the COCO scale. We also examined possible correlations of the COCO scores with other constructs, and we assessed discriminant validity of the COCO scale dimensions against the traditional conflict dimensions (i.e., task, relationship, and process), as well as analyzed Differential Item Functioning and measurement invariance across sex groups.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Descriptive statistics of the sample included in this study can be found in Table 4. We chose a sample of Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) employees as a relevant population for our research objectives. In order to reach a sample of entrepreneurs, we have established a qualification requirement "Borrower – Business Loan equal to true" to focus on respondents who have a higher probability of running their own business ventures. Also, in the survey, we used four filter questions: "Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?", "Do you work in a team?", "Do you consider your company to be a start-up?", and "Do you consider that your company was a start-up at some point in the past?". Inclusion criteria were an affirmative response to the first two questions and an affirmative response to either question 3 or 4. A negative response to any of the first two questions disqualified the person from proceeding with the survey.

Table 4. *Sample Characteristics (Study 3).*

Characteristics	*M (SD) / n (%)*
Age	34.08 (8.01)
Sex	
Male	83 (69.7%)
Female	36 (30.3%)
Marital status	
1. Single	35 (29.4%)
2. Married/Living with partner	75 (63.0%)
4. Separated/Divorced	9 (7.6%)
Highest education level reached	
1. Compulsory education (primary or secondary)	4 (3.4%)
2. Occupational training	7 (5.9%)
3. University degree (Graduated)	55 (46.2%)
4. University degree (MA, MSc)	47 (39.5%)
5. PhD	4 (3.4%)
6. Other	2 (1.7%)
Occupational category	
1. Manager	67 (56.3%)
2. Highly qualified professional	26 (21.8%)
3. Technician	11 (9.2%)
4. Administrative work	9 (7.6%)

5. Auxiliary work	1 (0.8%)
6. Other	5 (4.2%)
Type of workday	
1. Full-time	114 (95.8%)
2. Part-time	4 (3.4%)
3. Not applicable	1 (0.8%)
Socio-Economic Status	6.12 (1.55)
Number of subordinates	12.50 (29.45)

Note. N = 119.

MTurk has been widely used in social science research (see Cheung et al., 2017 for a review). Although data provided by MTurk participants has been found to have satisfactory psychometric properties comparable to characteristics of published studies (Buhrmester et al., 2011), we have used both reactive and proactive approaches (Meade & Craig, 2012) to identify respondents who are likely to have engaged in insufficient effort responding (IER). First, it is "unlikely for participants to respond to survey items faster than the rate of 2s per item" (Huang et al., 2012, p. 106). Therefore, using this tentative cutoff score, we eliminated from our sample 6 participants who responded in less than 5 minutes. Second, we eliminated 5 more participants who had very low Intra-individual Response Variability (<.8) (Dunn et al., 2018), suggesting possible response patterns. Finally, we employed a form of a catch question, in case of which, in an open-ended question, we asked the participants, "Please, describe in 2-3 sentences the company with which you currently work". We eliminated an additional 10 participants whose responses were not relevant to this question.

In total, 159 MTurk employees filled out our questionnaires. After excluding the participants who did not fulfil the inclusion criteria and who were suspected of IER, we obtained a final sample of 119 entrepreneurs who all reported working in a company that is or has been a start-up at some point. According to the power analysis for correlational study using G*Power software, our study has sufficient statistical power (>.87) to demonstrate a small effect size (r=.25). Monte Carlo simulation analyses (1,000 replications) indicated high power for factor recovery and model fit, supporting the adequacy of the sample size for confirmatory factor analysis (cf. Brown, 2015; Wolf et al., 2013).

Measures

COCO scale. The 9 items used corresponded to the three hypothetical types of conflict issues among start-up co-founders from the final version of the COCO scale, described in Study 2. The response scale ranged from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*A lot*).

Interpersonal conflict. Interpersonal conflict was measured using a tool developed by Jehn and colleagues (2008). This scale has three subscales that refer to task, relationship, and process conflicts. *Task conflicts* are "*disagreements among group members, concerning ideas and opinions about the task being performed*" (Jehn et al., 2008, p. 467), and they were measured using 6 items (α = .89). *Relationship conflicts* are "*disagreements and incompatibilities among group members regarding personal issues that are not task-related*" (p. 467). Relationship conflicts were

measured using 4 items (α = .89). *Process conflicts* involve disagreements over logistical and delegation matters, including how tasks should be accomplished within the team, and who is responsible for specific duties (Jehn et al., 2008). Process conflicts were measured using 5 items (α = .91). The response scales were from 1 (*No, I totally disagree*) to 7 (*Yes, I totally agree*).

Team effectiveness. Team effectiveness was measured using a scale developed by Pearce and Sims (2002). This scale has 7 subscales: output effectiveness (5 items, α = .86), quality effectiveness (3 items, α = .80), change effectiveness (3 items, α = .80), organizing and planning effectiveness (4 items, α = .79), interpersonal effectiveness (4 items, α = .84), value effectiveness (3 items, α = .80), overall effectiveness (4 items, α = .79). The response scale was 1 (*Definitely not true*) to 5 (*Definitely true*).

Commitment. Commitment was measured using a 24-item scale by Allen and Meyer (1990). This scale has three subscales: Affective commitment (8 items, α = .77), continuance commitment (8 items, α = .42), normative commitment (8 items, α = .73). The response scale was 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Given the low α for continuance commitment, this dimension was excluded from further analyses.

Mutual satisfaction in teams. Mutual satisfaction in teams was measured by a 6-item scale created by Smith and Barclay (1997), adapted to fit teams (instead of dyads). The response scale was 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). The initial internal consistency of the scale was acceptable (α = .79). However, item analysis indicated that removing Item 1 would improve reliability (α = .89). Consequently, Item 1 was excluded from further analyses.

Cohesion. Cohesion was measured using a 4-item scale used by Besieux (2014) with Cohesion was measured using a 4-item scale used by Besieux (2014). The response scale was 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). The initial internal consistency of the scale was relatively low (α = .59). However, item analysis revealed that removing Item 4 would substantially improve reliability (α = .88). As a result, Item 4 was excluded from subsequent analyses.

Power struggles. Power struggles were measured using a 3-item scale by Greer and van Kleef (2010) (α = .93) with a response scale from 1 (*No, I totally disagree*) to 7 (*Yes, I totally agree*).

Results

Item Analysis, Item-Scale Correlation, and Internal Consistency Reliability

Means and standard deviations for each subscale of the COCO scale are shown in Table 5. Correlations among the 3 items in the Money scale ranged from .72. to .73 (*M* = .72), among the 3 items in the Norms scale correlations ranged from .43 to .70 (*M* = .56), and among the 3 items in the Vision scale correlations ranged from .59 to .74 (*M* = .64).

Table 5. *Means, Standard Deviations, Item-subscale Correlations, Standardized Factor loadings, and Standard Errors of the COCO scale (Study 3)*

Names of Factors and Items	*M*	*SD*	*RCS*	*Est.*	*SE*

F1. Norms (α = .80)					
6. …regarding communication of work progress among the top team.	4.03	1.90	0.75	0.88	-
7. …regarding procedures on how to inform about each other's progress	3.98	1.93	0.65	0.82	0.08
8. …when there is failure to fulfil responsibilities.	4.18	1.78	0.53	0.57	0.10
F2. Money (α = .89)					
1. …regarding the division of the shares in the company	3.67	1.93	0.78	0.86	-
5. …when cofounders want more equity	3.97	1.83	0.78	0.85	0.06
6. …when having to share real money	3.92	1.95	0.77	0.85	0.07
F3. Vision (α = .84)					
1. Failure to share the vision for the start-up by all co-founders (e.g., regarding the product, clients).	3.09	1.68	0.74	0.86	-
2. Unrealistic start-up vision of some co-founders	3.17	1.72	0.75	0.85	0.09
6. Failure to share the same sense of mission by all co-founders	3.04	1.78	0.64	0.70	0.12

Note. N = 119. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; RCS = Item-subscale Correlations; $Est.$ = Standardized Factor Loading (Estimate); SE = Standard Error of the loading. SEs are only reported for items with estimated parameters; reference indicators (set to 1.00) do not have SEs reported.

Furthermore, all item-scale correlations were significant at the $p < .001$ level. The highest item-scale correlation was .78 for the dimension of Money and Item 1 ("…regarding the division of the shares in the company"), the lowest was .53 for the dimension of Norms and Item 8 ("…when there is failure to fulfil responsibilities"). Six items showed an item-scale correlation greater than .70 and three items a correlation greater than .50, which indicates their satisfactory contribution to scale reliability. Cronbach's α coefficients for four COCO subscales are shown in Table 5. Cronbach's α coefficient for the composite COCO score was .89, showing a high degree of internal consistency reliability. In conclusion, the analyses suggest that the COCO items constitute a cohesive scale to measure each of the three types of conflict issues among start-up co-founders.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

In order to assess whether we can find support for the proposed factor solution in the empirical data, we carried out CFA (Konarski, 2009) using R (version 4.4.2, R Core Team, 2025), in conjunction with RStudio (Version 2024.12.1, RStudio Team, 2024). We tested and compared the fit of two alternative models: 1) a single-factor model and 2) a three-factor model. In the single-factor model, all 9 items loaded on a single factor. In the three-factor model, there were three factors: money, norms, and vision. Each of these three factors had 3 items loading on them. The three-factor model obtained excellent fit[1] ($\chi^2(24) = 22.91$, $\chi^2/df = 1.19$, $p = .53$; robust CFI = 1.000, robust TLI = 1.007, robust RMSEA = .000 (90% CI [.000, .076]), and SRMR = .032), as opposed

[1] For the Maximum Likelihood (ML) method, a cut-off value of .06 for RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation), .95 for CFI (comparative fit index) and TLI (Tucker–Lewis index), and .08 for SRMR (standardized root mean square residual) is needed to conclude that there is an excellent fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data, whereas we considered that an acceptable fit exists when a model fulfils the following criteria: RMSEA ≤ .08, CFI ≥ .90, TLI ≥ .90, SRMR ≤ .10 (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000).

to the single-factor model that did not show a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2(27) = 149.08$, $\chi^2/df=5.52$, $p < .001$, CFI = .797, TLI = .729, RMSEA = .195, 90% CI [.165, .226], SRMR = .095). The compared models were significantly different, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 46.30$, $p < .001$, and as per differences in the RMSEA, CFI, and TLI values (Chen, 2007). All this makes us consider the three-factor solution adequate for the COCO scale.

Convergent Validity

Next, convergent validity of the COCO scale was conducted by relating its subscales to the team effectiveness (Pearce & Sims, 2002), commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990), mutual satisfaction in teams (Smith & Barclay, 1997), cohesion (Besieux, 2014), and power struggles (Greer & van Kleef, 2010) scales (for descriptives and correlations see Table 6). Conflict has been consistently linked to lower team efficacy (Schoss et al., 2022), performance, reduced team member satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), diminished team cohesion (Bettinelli et al., 2022), and decreased relationship commitment (Knee et al., 2004). Additionally, the COCO scale's "money" and "vision" dimensions reflect resource-based tensions that form the core of power struggles within teams (Greer & Chu, 2020; Greer & van Kleef, 2010). The results indicate significant negative correlations between vision-related conflicts and team effectiveness (i.e., team output, team organizing and planning, team interpersonal, team value, and overall effectiveness), affective commitment, mutual satisfaction, and cohesion, as well as a significant positive correlation with power struggles., the results indicate a significant negative correlation between money-related conflicts and affective commitment, as well as a positive correlation with power struggles. Finally, the results show a significant positive correlation between norms-related conflicts and power struggles, and a significant negative correlation with affective commitment. Interestingly, there is a positive correlation between norms-related conflict and team effectiveness (i.e., team quality effectiveness, team change effectiveness, team organizing and planning). These results and their fundamental implications are addressed in the Discussion section.

Discriminant Validity

Finally, we assessed the discriminant validity of the COCO scale dimensions against the traditional conflict dimensions (i.e., task, relationship, and process) (see Table 7). We evaluated discriminant validity using two complementary approaches. First, according to the criterion of Fornell and Larcker (1981), discriminant validity holds if a latent variable accounts for more variance in its associated indicator variables than it shares with other constructs in the same model. To satisfy this requirement, each construct's average variance extracted (AVE) must be higher than its squared correlations with other constructs in the model. The results support the discriminant validity of the Money and Norms dimensions of the COCO subscales against traditional conflict dimensions, since all AVE values are higher than the values of squared correlations. The Vision dimension showed some conceptual overlap, with squared correlations ranging from .64 to .77, exceeding its AVE of .66. Second, we have carried out the multitrait-multimethod analysis that provided further support for the discriminant validity of the COCO scale dimensions against traditional conflict dimensions. HTMT ratios were well below the conservative threshold of .85 for the Money and Norms scales (ranging from .37 to .56), supporting discriminant validity. For the Vision dimension, HTMT values were slightly higher (ranging from .80 to .87) but remained below the more liberal .90 threshold (Henseler et al., 2015), suggesting acceptable

Table 6. *Correlations Between the Dimensions of the COCO Scale and the Related Constructs (Study 3).*

	M	SD	Coco Money	Coco Norms	Coco Vision	Eff. Output	Eff. Quality	Eff. Change	Eff. Org.	Eff. Interp.	Eff. Value	Eff. Overall	Com. Aff.	Com. Cont.	Com. Norm.	Mut. Sat.	Cohes.	Power Strug.
Coco Money	3.85	1.72	1	.69***	.54***	-.05	.10	.17	.05	-.03	-.13	-.07	-.44***	.13	-.01	-.09	-.11	.51***
Coco Norms	4.06	1.58		1	.43***	.13	.25**	.29**	.21*	.12	.01	.06	-.26**	.05	.00	.04	-.02	.44***
Coco Vision	3.10	1.51			1	-.20*	-.11	.01	-.25**	-.28**	-.32***	-.29**	-.53***	-.02	-.18	-.28**	-.29**	.51***
Eff. Output	4.03	0.74				1	.80***	.68***	.67***	.52***	.58***	.58***	.45***	-.04	.23*	.52***	.44***	-.16
Eff. Quality	4.00	0.80					1	.77***	.76***	.64***	.61***	.63***	.42***	-.01	.29**	.61***	.48***	-.01
Eff. Change	3.94	0.79						1	.68***	.61***	.47***	.56***	.37***	.07	.29**	.57***	.46***	.00
Eff. Org.	4.12	0.70							1	.76***	.73***	.79***	.39***	.13	.37***	.71***	.58***	-.02
Eff. Interp.	4.11	0.70								1	.69***	.71***	.41***	.18*	.32***	.62***	.56***	-.16
Eff. Value	4.21	0.77									1	.71***	.38***	.05	.20*	.62***	.59***	-.18*
Eff. Overall	4.26	0.64										1	.44***	.07	.38***	.71***	.64***	-.11
Com. Aff.	5.17	1.16											1	.15	.42***	.47***	.48***	-.41***
Com. Cont.	4.54	0.84												1	.36***	.16	.17	.00
Com. Norm.	4.60	1.06													1	.37***	.36***	-.10

	M	SD	Coco Money	Coco Norms	Coco Vision	Eff. Output	Eff. Quality	Eff. Change	Eff. Org.	Eff. Interp.	Eff. Value	Eff. Overall	Com. Aff.	Com. Cont.	Com. Norm.	Mut. Sat.	Cohes.	Power Strug.
Mut. Sat.	5.64	1.08														1	.80***	-.17
Cohes.	5.85	1.13															1	-.25**
Power Strug.	3.61	1.86																1

Note. $N = 119$. *$p \leq .05$; **$p \leq .01$; ***$p \leq .001$ (2-tailed); The numbers on the diagonal in parentheses are Cronbach's alphas. Coco = Conflicts among Co-founders scale; Eff. Output – output team effectiveness; Eff. Quality - Team quality effectiveness; Eff. Change – Team change effectiveness; Eff. Org. – Team organizing and planning effectiveness; Eff. Interp. – Team interpersonal effectiveness; Eff. Value – Team value effectiveness; Eff. Overall – Team overall effectiveness; Com. Aff. – Affective commitment; Com. Cont. - Continuance commitment; Com. Norm. - Normative commitment; Mut. Sat. - Mutual satisfaction in the team; Cohes. – Cohesion; Power strug. - Power struggles.

discriminant validity. This means that, even though there are significant positive relationships between the dimensions of conflictive issues among start-up co-founders captured by the COCO scale and the existing conflict types, the COCO scale dimensions offer relevant information above and beyond the existing conflict typology.

Table 7. *Constructs' Average Variance Extracted, their squared correlations with other constructs, and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio for each of the scales.*

		Squared correlations			HTMT ratio		
	AVE	Task con.	Rel. con.	Proc. con.	Task con.	Rel. con.	Proc. con.
Money	.72	.29	.36	.20	.54	.56	.44
Norms	.59	.25	.18	.16	.49	.37	.39
Vision	.66	.75	.77	.64	.87	.86	.80

Note. $N = 119$. HTMT – Heterotrait-Monotrait; AVE – Average Variance Extracted; Task con. – Task conflict; Rel. con. – Relationship conflict; Proc. con. – Process conflict.

Differential Item Functioning and Measurement Invariance Across Sex Groups

A Differential Item Functioning (DIF) analysis was conducted to examine whether the items in the COCO scale functioned differently across sex groups (male vs. female) using the lordif package in R and the Chi-square detection method, with an initial significance threshold of $\alpha = .01$. Results indicated that none of the items were flagged for DIF after the first iteration, suggesting that item responses did not significantly differ across gender groups, $\chi^2(9) = 0$, $p > .01$. Additionally, cross-tabulations of item responses across sex groups showed comparable response distributions, further supporting that the COCO scale does not exhibit sex bias.

To examine the measurement invariance of the COCO scale across sex groups, we conducted a multi-group confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) using three nested models: configural invariance (baseline model), metric invariance (equal factor loadings), and scalar invariance (equal factor loadings and intercepts). Model comparisons were assessed using Chi-square difference tests and changes in fit indices (ΔCFI < .010 supplemented by ΔRMSEA < .015 or ΔSRMR < .030 for testing loading invariance, and ΔCFI < .010 supplemented by ΔRMSEA < .015 or ΔSRMR < .010 for testing intercept invariance; Chen 2007, Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). First, the configural invariance model showed an acceptable fit, $\chi^2(48) = 73.32$, $p = .011$, CFI = .961, TLI = .941, RMSEA = .094, and SRMR = .050, suggesting that the same factor structure holds for both sex groups. Second, when metric invariance was imposed, model fit slightly decreased but remained acceptable, $\chi^2(54) = 82.77$, $p = .007$, CFI = .956, TLI = .941, RMSEA = .095, and SRMR = .067. The Chi-square difference test was statistically significant ($\Delta\chi^2(6) = 14.41$, $p = .025$), suggesting some variation in factor loadings between groups. However, the changes in CFI (ΔCFI = -0.008), RMSEA (ΔRMSEA = 0.006) and SRMR (ΔSRMR = 0.017) remained within the recommended cutoff values, supporting metric invariance. Finally, in order to test scalar invariance, we additionally constrained intercepts to be equal across groups. The model fit remained satisfactory, $\chi^2(60) = 84.13$, $p = .022$, CFI = .963, TLI = .955, RMSEA = .082, and SRMR = .067. The Chi-square difference test between the scalar and metric models was not significant ($\Delta\chi^2(6) = 1.32$, $p = .971$), and the changes in CFI (ΔCFI = -0.007), RMSEA (ΔRMSEA = 0.012), and SRMR (ΔSRMR = 0.000) met the invariance criteria. Overall, these results indicate

full measurement invariance of the COCO scale across sex groups. This suggests that the scale is interpreted similarly across gender groups, allowing for meaningful comparisons of latent means.

Longitudinal Measurement Invariance

To assess the stability of the COCO scale over a 3-month period, we conducted a longitudinal measurement invariance analysis, using a subsample of 71 participants who responded at both baseline (T1) (a subsample of 116 participants in Study 2) and at the 3-month follow-up (T2)[2]. Using a multi-group confirmatory factor analysis, we tested configural, metric, and scalar invariance models. Model fit indices suggested that measurement invariance was fully supported across time, as changes in comparative fit index (ΔCFI = 0.000) and root mean square error of approximation (ΔRMSEA = 0.000) were well within the recommended thresholds (ΔCFI < 0.01, ΔRMSEA < 0.015). Additionally, latent factor correlations between Time 1 (baseline) and Time 2 (3 months later) were examined to assess test-retest reliability. Results indicated moderate to high stability for COCO Norms (***r* = .73**), COCO Vision **(***r* = .60**)**, and COCO Money **(***r* = .48**)**. These findings suggest measurement stability of the COCO scale.

General Discussion

The purpose of this study was to expand the existing typology of conflicts by uncovering a classification of conflict issues, especially present among start-up co-founders. Also, we aimed to develop and validate a tool that allows measuring conflict issues among start-up co-founders that is specifically tailored to the context of start-up top teams.

In Study 1, we initially identified four types of conflict issues among start-up co-founders: (a) money, (b) norms, (c) vision, and (d) teamwork. In Studies 2 and 3, through further development and validation, we refined the structure and developed a more compact tool, the COCO scale, that measures three dimensions of conflict issues among start-up co-founders: money, norms, and vision. The three factors of the COCO scale explained 47.6% of the total variance for these conflict issues. The items in the COCO scale are generic enough to be used across a variety of specializations of start-ups. The results of these studies show that, based on its strong psychometric properties, the COCO scale is an important and valuable tool for practice and theory. The three studies in the present article are the first to uncover the typology and to develop and

[2] To assess whether our sample size (N=71) was adequate for confirmatory factor analysis, we conducted a Monte Carlo simulation based on our hypothesized 3-factor model. Across 1,000 replications, average power to detect standardized loadings above 0.60 exceeded 80% for all indicators. Model fit indices were consistently strong (CFI = .97, RMSEA = .034, SRMR = .069), supporting the adequacy of our sample for the specified model structure. Additionally, longitudinal measurement invariance testing can be meaningfully conducted when the model is well-specified and factor loadings are high (Kang et al., 2016), even with smaller samples. As this study involved repeated measures within the same individuals, statistical power was enhanced due to the within-subjects design, which reduces variability and increases precision of estimation. Furthermore, our model included a limited number of factors and items per factor, which reduces model complexity. In this context, our sample size could be considered acceptable for testing configural, metric, and scalar invariance over time.

examine the psychometric properties of the COCO scale aimed at assessing conflict sources among start-up co-founders.

The results show that conflict issues have both positive and negative associations with organizational outcomes, in this way embodying the paradoxical nature of conflicts (de Wit et al., 2012) that are essential for high-performing teams (Amason, 1996). Specifically, on the one hand, the results indicate several adverse outcomes associated with (1) vision-related conflicts in terms of decreased team effectiveness (related to output, organizing and planning, interpersonal, value, and overall team effectiveness), affective commitment, mutual satisfaction, and cohesion, as well as greater power struggles; (2) money-related conflicts in terms of decreased affective commitment and greater power struggles; and (3) norms-related conflicts in terms of decreased affective commitment and increased power struggles. In general, these results align with research that shows that conflicts can have deleterious effects on proximal group outcomes, by impairing cohesion (Bettinelli et al., 2022), team efficacy (Schoss et al., 2022), performance, team member satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), and relationship commitment (Knee et al., 2004). Also, the positive relationship between the COCO scale dimensions and power struggles is consistent with the idea that the COCO scale dimensions capture resource-based tensions that lie at the core of power struggles within teams (Greer & Chu, 2020; Greer & Van Kleef, 2010).

It is noteworthy that only vision-related conflict issues turned out to be associated with impaired team effectiveness. We may interpret this result by considering that vision-related conflicts often involve deeply held values and long-term strategic goals, which are less amenable to compromise than more tangible issues like money, making agreements particularly difficult (Steinel & Harinck, 2020), and potentially undermining team effectiveness. Also, frustration and dissatisfaction of some co-founders regarding the vision implied by the presence of these conflict issues can be indicative of co-founders' perception of compromised trust, team climate, or shared mental models related to the start-up, which are important predictors of team effectiveness and team performance (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005; DeChurch & Mesmer-Magnus, 2010; González-Romá et al., 2009).

On the other hand, the results indicate that norms-related conflict is positively related to quality, change, and team organizing and planning effectiveness, which goes in line with research showing that conflicts are not bad *per se* (Belén García et al., 2015; de Wit et al., 2012) and can, in fact, lead to positive outcomes (de Wit et al., 2012). This positive association between norms-related conflicts and effectiveness may be explained by the fact that disagreements over qualitative issues, such as norms or rules, promote more exploratory and integrative behavior (Odell, 2013) that may lead to beneficial outcomes. Also, norming (i.e., the stage when roles and norms are established in a team) is one of the key stages of small group development (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) that are widely referred to in popular and practitioner literature available to start-up founders (e.g., Dworkin, 2018; Gehrich, 2012; Kersten, 2018). Therefore, it may be that start-up founders recognize dealing with a conflict issue related to norms as a necessary step to establishing new ways of functioning in their start-up and, therefore, may be prepared to accept dialogue on this topic and deal with it more constructively, with is key to a successful management of change and developing team innovation (West et al., 2004).

Additionally, although the results of the HTMT analysis show acceptable discriminant validity of the three COCO scale dimensions, suggesting that the COCO scale captures unique variance not accounted for by existing measures, we acknowledge that the Vision dimension is conceptually related to traditional conflict types (especially task and relationship conflict). Disagreements about vision often reflect diverging views about strategic decision making and

judgmental differences about how best to achieve the organization's objectives—core aspects of task-related conflict (Amason, 1996; Ensley et al., 2002). However, because vision is often strongly tied to founders' personal identity and values (Crosina et al., 2024; Powell & Baker, 2014), such disagreements can also become personal and threaten the self-concept, reflecting characteristics of relationship conflict (de Wit et al., 2012). Despite this overlap, vision conflict appears conceptually broader and more future-oriented than traditional conflict types. It goes beyond immediate tasks or specific actions to address long-term strategic purpose, priorities, direction, and start-up identity—aspects that are not typically captured by existing measures of task or relationship conflict.

Our results, showing both positive and negative associations between conflict issues and outcomes, are consistent with the contingency theory of conflict management (Rahim, 2002), which posits that conflict outcomes depend on the specific characteristics of the conflict situation, particularly the issue at stake. They also resonate with research showing that the nature of the conflict issue significantly influences negotiation processes and outcomes (Harinck, De Dreu, & Van Vianen, 2000; Harinck & Van Kleef, 2012).

Our findings align with Deutsch's (1973) theoretical framework of conflict, which highlights that the nature of the conflict issue is a core determinant of whether conflict is resolved constructively. The COCO scale captures three key conflict domains—money, norms, and vision—that largely correspond to the core types of conflictive issues identified by Deutsch (1973), such as control over resources, beliefs, and values. This issue-centered approach to conflict offers nuances that traditional conflict typologies (e.g., task vs. relationship conflict) may overlook in entrepreneurial contexts. Moreover, the COCO scale dimensions conceptually align with earlier work by Wakefield and Sebora (2004), who discussed key conflict issues in entrepreneurial settings; however, the COCO scale advances this work by offering a clear conceptual foundation and a theoretically grounded, empirically validated measure of conflict issues among start-up co-founders.

Finally, the strong correlations among certain COCO dimensions (particularly between money and norms, and money and vision) suggest that some cofounder teams may face multiple conflictive issues simultaneously. This supports prior research showing that teams often exhibit distinct conflict profiles, which can affect team outcomes (O'Neill et al., 2018).

All these results resonate with the upper echelon perspective (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996) that suggests that top team dynamics are connected to the performance of the whole venture (Amason, 1996; Ensley et al., 2002). Also, they corroborate that nonroutine, ambiguous, and complex types of tasks (Ensley et al., 2002) with which start-up co-founders are confronted and that require intense decision making (Jin et al., 2017) all make the start-up team of co-founders a fertile ground for conflicts.

Theoretical Contributions

Developing a deeper understanding of conflict issues among start-up co-founders can inform both scholarly entrepreneurship and organizational behavior literature. By revealing conflictive issues that arise among start-up co-founders, the COCO scale also allows us to advance our understanding of the origins and consequences of organizational conflict (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992). Identifying these specific issues contributes to a more nuanced knowledge on the 'antecedent conditions' (Pondy, 1967), which gets us closer to understanding the catalysts behind the paradoxical outcomes of conflicts, and the everyday interactions of start-up co-founders that

may sustain destructive dynamics leading to start-up failure or that nurture constructive ones that enhance start-up entrepreneurial success. This study addresses the need to focus on the intricate nature of conflict and conflict-inciting topics (Olson & Golish, 2002), especially in start-up teams where tensions often emerge around fundamental decisions (Ensley et al., 2002). By uncovering these issues, the COCO scale equips start-up co-founders with a tool to better manage tensions, contributing to more effective daily functioning and long-term performance.

Second, the COCO scale addresses a critical gap in entrepreneurship research, where the co-founder conflict has remained largely unexplored despite its recognized relevance for start-up team functioning (De Jong et al., 2013; DeMers, 2018; Lance, 2016; Yu et al., 2022). Third, it integrates theoretical insights from negotiation research (e.g., Harinck & Van Kleef, 2012; Odell, 2013; Steinel & Harinck, 2020), contingency theory of conflict management (Rahim, 2002), and the upper echelons perspective (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996), offering a framework to understand how specific conflict issues can shape team dynamics and start-up performance. By identifying the content of co-founder disagreements, the COCO scale provides a context-specific tool that enables a more precise understanding of how different types of conflict issues may differentially affect team functioning, decision quality, and ultimately venture success.

Fourth, the scale is specifically designed for the highly uncertain (Chandler et al., 2005; Lazar et al., 2022), volatile, and ambiguous (Chen et al., 2017) environment of start-ups, where lack of formalized norms, equity-sharing dynamics, and strategic divergence are common, making the COCO scale suited to capture the high-stakes nature of interpersonal conflict in entrepreneurial settings. Fifth, since conflict issues can be seen as potential stressors (Kozusznik & Euwema, 2020), the COCO scale also bridges conflict research with growing interest in founder well-being (Stephan et al., 2023), offering a pathway to understand how specific disagreements may contribute to burnout or team flourishing. Finally, by offering a validated, theoretically grounded measure, the COCO scale lays a foundation for future empirical research that can more precisely examine how different conflict issues influence co-founder interactions and venture outcomes.

Practical Implications

Focusing on concrete conflict-inciting issues also provides a foundation for developing practical recommendations and designing interventions tailored to the unique challenges of start-up top teams. The new knowledge generated could be useful for coaches, mentors, and other professionals (e.g., in start-up incubators or accelerators) in their interventions in start-up ventures.

On the one hand, identifying the most relevant areas start-up co-founders should handle with care and work on from the early moments of the creation of their start-up allows to support them in turning these into opportunities for team growth and in making space for constructive controversy that can improve team efficiency (see Tjosvold, 2008 for a review) and boost start-up strategic advantage (Chen et al., 2005). The knowledge of concrete heated topics among start-up co-founders can allow to build professional practical recommendations for managing conflict in start-ups they encounter, as well as best practices that can foster acceptance of the paradoxical or contradictory elements of conflict (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Clegg et al., 2002; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017) and encourage open and constructive dialogue on these topics.

On the other hand, identifying conflictive issues allows for improving situational awareness among start-up co-founders that helps to read situations and social context influencing behavior, and to choose effective and constructive strategies (Albrecht, 2007; Rahim et al., 2018). All this can help to address conflict-inducing topics in a safer environment when the tension levels

are still low. Especially, this new knowledge would help to make mild conflict issues evident and foster frequent minor conflicts of interest to gradually adjust the system and prevent a potentially disruptive accumulation of antagonisms among co-founders (Coser, 1956). It will allow for identifying key topics to ensure productive, positive, and challenging conflicts under conditions of positive interdependence (e.g., constructive controversy) and to prevent interpersonal tensions and power battles. Especially useful in this case would be the new tool developed in the present study that would allow to assess the general "conflict potential" (for both constructive and destructive conflicts) among start-up co-founders in order to offer them practical advice on how to stimulate constructive controversy and prevent destructive conflicts in each of the conflict-inciting areas.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The results of this study require cautious interpretation due to some limitations. First, in this research, we have employed self-report cross-sectional data that impedes making inferences about the causality of the relationships. Second, although we initially intended to assess three dimensions of commitment, the continuance commitment subscale showed low internal consistency and was therefore excluded from further analyses. As a result, our findings related to commitment focus only on affective and normative components, and future research would benefit from employing all three measures if commitment, including continuance commitment, to capture its potential role in long-term co-founder dynamics. Third, to measure cohesion, we employed a 4-item scale used by Besieux (2014). The initial internal consistency was relatively low ($\alpha = .59$) but improved significantly ($\alpha = .88$) after excluding one of the items. While these adjustments improved the psychometric properties of the scales, they also suggest that further validation is needed when using these measures in entrepreneurial team settings. Finally, while the sample size used for the exploratory factor analysis ($N = 116$) was modest, a simulation-based evaluation following the SENECA method (Lorenzo-Seva & Ferrando, 2024) demonstrated that this sample was sufficient to detect the underlying factor structure with acceptable accuracy. Although the median required sample size for high-precision recovery was 180, our simulation showed that successful recovery was possible with as few as 110 participants. These results suggest that, despite some limitations in estimation precision, our sample size was adequate for the exploratory aims of the study and yielded a replicable factor solution.

The present study also points to several promising avenues for future research. First, while the focus was on developing and validating the COCO scale for research purposes, future work could enhance its applicability in real-world settings by developing normative interpretation guidelines. Specifically, the creation of cut-off scores normative ranges (e.g., low, moderate, and high levels of conflict) would be particularly useful for start-up founder teams or such applied contexts as start-up incubators, where early identification of "high-risk" teams may inform timely interventions. To that end, we recommend that future studies aim to establish reference norms based on larger and more representative samples and provide clear, evidence-based guidelines for interpreting COCO scale scores.

Second, given the correlations identified among certain COCO dimensions (particularly between money and norms, and money and vision), future research could apply latent profile analysis to identify distinct profiles (cf. O'Neill et al., 2018) within start-up teams, distinguishing founding teams based on different configurations of conflict issues. Using the COCO scale in this way would allow researchers to explore how these conflict patterns influence start-up team

functioning and long-term venture success. Insights from such profiles could also inform tailored support strategies in accelerator and incubation programs.

Conclusions

To conclude, the new typology of conflict issues among start-up co-founders, along with the development of a corresponding measurement tool, advances knowledge in entrepreneurship and organizational behavior by improving our understanding of conflict and its correlates within the specific context of start-ups. This new knowledge, together with the newly developed COCO scale, can help to make start-up co-founders more aware of the conflict issues they can encounter with other co-founders of their start-up. This can help them to be prepared to manage them constructively to achieve high performance and high-quality team decision making (De Dreu & Beersma, 2005), which is key for effectiveness and innovation (Leaptrott, 2009), and survival of the start-up (de Wit et al., 2012; Dijkstra et al., 2009).

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