

Age Discrimination among a Multi-Generational Workforce (MGW) and Inclusion as a Mitigating Measure

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Abstract

Widespread Age discrimination is reported within an age-wise-diverse Multi-generational workforce (MGW) in organisations, that adversely affect people and organisations. Inadequate knowledge, expertise, and capabilities necessary to take preventive Age inclusive measures continue to challenge practising managers and organisations. Discrimination and Inclusion are predominantly dedicated to protected attributes such as race, colour, language, religion, country of origin, and sexual preferences (LGBTQ), leaving Age discrimination and Age inclusion inadequately studied, and therefore, exposing a void in empirical and theoretical knowledge. Based on this lacuna, the current study aims to explore 'Age discrimination amongst an MGW and Inclusion as a mitigating measure.' Given the study's exploratory nature, an interpretivist philosophy and inductive approach employing 20 interactive in-depth- one-on-one – interviews were adopted. Data collected were analysed through thematic analysis, allowing new themes to emerge in line with the inductive approach. Findings reveal that Age discrimination within an MGW is mainly due to work-related-generational-competency /incompetency and Inclusion is experienced through the individual factors of 'Uniqueness' and 'Belongingness' and the organisational factor 'Conducive Climate.' The paper concludes by emphasising the study's theoretical and managerial contributions, along with directions for future research.

Keywords: Multi-generational workforce (MGW), Age discrimination, Age inclusion.

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Introduction

Widespread Age discrimination exists amongst a Multi-generational Workforce (MGW) in organisations due to multiple generations with unique and distinct characteristics working alongside one another. These conditions generate age-based bias, friction and conflicts, leading to Age discrimination (Burnes et al., 2019; Carlsson et al., 2017; Chasteen et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2018; Gursoy et al., 2013; Lancaster et al., 2002; Ng, 2021; SHRM, 2019; Zemke et al., 2000). On the other hand, though Inclusion is the generally accepted remedy for all types of discrimination, Age inclusion is generally ignored, and is grossly neglected in the organisational context, where inconsistencies, ambiguity, and a lack of tools for implementation and measurement are widespread (Chasteen et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 2011; Roberson et al., 2017; Shore et al., 2011). Thus, managers and organisations are confronted with the dual challenge of building a competitively advantageous MGW by harnessing/combining generational competencies (Baran & Kłos, 2014; Kossek et al., 2017), and preventing Age discrimination by building Age inclusive workplaces (Boheim et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2020). However, practising managers and organisations are faced with a dearth of knowledge and expertise in addressing the said issues successfully (Gordon, 2018; Roberson et al., 2017).

Existing literature on Diversity, Discrimination and Inclusion predominantly covers protected attributes such as race, colour, language, religion, etc...leaving Age discrimination and Age inclusion understudied (Chang et al., 2020; Shore et al., 2009). In addition, while all the said attributes are generally static throughout one's lifetime, age changes with time, interacting with all contextual elements along the timeline, making Age discrimination dynamic (Finkelstein, 2015; Fisher et al., 2017). Further, Age discrimination does not have a specific underpinning theory but is generally explained through social theories. Similarly, Inclusion does not have a universally agreed-upon definition nor an underpinning theory that describes it comprehensively (Jansen et al., 2014; Shore et al., 2011). Hence, the current study addresses a multifaceted, dynamic theoretical void in the Age discrimination/Age inclusion literature.

It is noteworthy that Discrimination and Inclusion are both social concerns, and are primarily studied under the social context, leaving the organisational context, particularly the context of Age discrimination and Age Inclusion in an MGW critically neglected. Thus, the few existing theories and knowledge do not adequately cover the phenomena; nor have they been tested in an organisational context (Chasteen et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2017; Jansen et al., 2011; Roberson et al., 2017; Shore et al., 2011).

Moreover, the few extant studies concentrate predominantly on the Western world, ignoring, for the most part, non-Western contexts. Thus, the lacuna in the literature related to Age discrimination and Inclusion prompts the research questions: 'How does Age discrimination manifest within an MGW in organisations?' and 'What is the role of inclusion within an age-diverse workforce in organisations?'

In seeking answers to these research questions, the study suggests a conceptual model that depicts MGW, Age discrimination and Inclusion and the relationships among these constructs. An MGW consists of several distinct generations producing age-based conflicts leading to Age discrimination. The MGW is supported by generational theories, which hold that a generation is an identifiable group of people who occupy a 'location in history' (Manheim, 1952), and who are shaped by the shared experiences of momentous life events during their formative age, thus possessing similar attitudes and preferences (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Age discrimination is supported by the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1985); Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner, 1987); and the Theory of Faultlines by Lau and Murnighan (1998, 2005). These together explain the intra-group/inter-group relationships and subgroup formation within an MGW that produce Age discrimination. The study conceptualises Inclusion to have the individual components, 'Uniqueness' and 'Belongingness' supported by the Optimal Distinct Theory (ODT) (Brewer, 1991), and the organisational component 'Conducive Climate' supported by the Diversity Climate (Cox, 1994) and the Age Diversity Climate (Boehm et al., 2014). Employees experiencing uniqueness and belonging(ness) in a conducive climate of Age inclusion mitigates Age bias and Age discrimination generated by an MGW, while Inclusion negatively impacts the relationship between an MGW and Age discrimination.

The study contributes to the existing scanty Age discrimination and Age inclusion literature in multiple ways. Firstly, the study sheds light on the manifestation of Age discrimination within an MGW. Secondly, the study conceptualises Inclusion to contain individual and organisational components, and supports this conceptualisation by combining three theories and empirically validating the same, thus successfully addressing Inclusion in an organisational context. Thirdly, the study contributes by empirically clarifying generational diversity instigated age-based discrimination, and the role of Inclusion initiatives. Fourthly, the findings reveal several emergent factors related to Age discrimination and Inclusion. Finally, the study provides insights for practising managers, and directions for future research on preventing Age discrimination and building Age inclusive workplaces.

The rest of this paper is structured to explain the literature reviewed on MGW, Age discrimination and Inclusion, bringing together the Age Diversity Climate (Boehm et al., 2014), Diversity Climate (Cox, 1994) and the Optimal Distinct Theory (ODT) (Brewer, 1991) to explore and uncover new insights. The next segment explains the concept indicator model with the propositions and the supporting literature. Thereafter, the methodology, data analysis and discussion of findings are described in detail. The paper concludes with the theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature review

Multi-Generational Workforce

A globally ageing population is on the rise due to increased life expectancy and reduced birth rates (Population prospects: 2019 Revision, United Nations). As the number of younger people joining the workforce reduces, older people continue to work beyond the retirement age, extending the retirement ceiling and giving rise to an age diversified workforce comprising multiple generations. Thus, the phenomenon of MGW comes into existence in organisations. The Generational Theories explain a 'generation' as an identifiable group of people who possess a 'common location' in the historical process, and who are conditioned by a particular range of experiences that makes them think and behave in a similar manner (Manheim, 1952). Kopperschmidt (2000) describes a 'generation' as a distinct group of individuals who share birth years, age, location in history and momentous life events at critical developmental stages of their life. Thus a generation is a group of individuals born within a range of years, and shaped by the confluence of socio-cultural-economic-political-historical experiences of that particular time period experienced during their adolescent years, making them disposed towards possessing and demonstrating shared beliefs, values, perceptions, ideologies, attitudes, preferences and behavioural outcomes. Generational characteristics and behaviours often become solidified, unique and distinct, setting the generations apart. The multiple generations identified are Veterans (1925-1945), Baby Boomers (1945-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Generation Y (1981-1995), Generation Z (1996- 2011), and Generation Alpha (2011-2025), (Baily, 2009; Cilliers, 2017; Eversole et al., 2012; Gor & Lee, 2018; Murray et al., 2011; Twenge et al., 2010). This study considers the Baby Boomer generation, Gen. X, Y, and Z, as being currently in the workforce.

The literature identifies three main attributes that are shared amongst members of each generation, that mold and hold them together. Firstly, “Generational (Collective) Identity” is the demonstration of attachment among members within a particular generation based on perceived similarities in beliefs, values, characteristics, and behaviours as they draw a sense of self-worth from them, and go on to define themselves in relation to them (Ashforth et al., 2008; Haslam, 2004). Secondly, “collective memories” are another significant aspect of a generation, and are explained as a way in which people who had experienced momentous life-events in similar ways recollect them in a similar manner. Consequently, this group is predisposed to forming values, attitudes, expectations, and similar behaviours. Schuman and Scott (1989) describe collective memories as the intersection of personal and national history that forms vivid memories connecting one to the times one has lived through. Thirdly, “Generational Culture/Symbols” are explained by Strauss and Howe (1991) as societal subcultures with values that mirror the socio-cultural-economic-political-historical environment that prevailed during a generation’s adolescent years. As such, ideologies, preferences, aspirations, lifestyle/career choices, and other behavioural outcomes all reflect the culture of the said era. Holdbrook and Schindler (1989, 1994) posit that recollection of the cultural symbols and pop culture of a specific era has a significant impact on generational diversity, as individuals (around the age of 23) are inclined towards the socialization of music, film stars (around age 14) and clothes (young adults). Hence, it is established that solidarity and bonding are built through shared cultural symbols such as music, fashion, and technology (Bryant, 2005; McMullin et al., 2007). Shared generational characteristics and behaviours, as well as shared ‘Generational Identity’, ‘Collective Memories’ and ‘Culture and Cultural Symbols’ all promote solidarity and bonding within each generation.

Age discrimination

Generational biases, prejudices and stereotypes lead to discrimination. Bias is the subjective perceptions that are often baseless, and constitute a common terminology encompassing prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination. While stereotypes form the cognitive bias, prejudice is the emotional or attitudinal outcome, and discrimination is the behavioural outcome (Fiske, 2000, 2004; Nelson, 2009). Prejudice is how people perceive, feel about, evaluate, and their intended (negative) behaviour towards a person /group. Prejudice is defined by Allport (1954) as “an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole, or an individual because he/she is a member of that group” (p. 9).

Psychologists have assumed that like other attitudes, prejudice subjectively organises people's environment, and orients them to objects and people within it. Prejudice includes cognitive, affective and behavioural components, where the cognitive element involves evaluative beliefs based on the characteristics of persons/groups. The affective element deals with the emotions generated with regard to persons/groups, and the behavioural aspect is the discriminative behavioural tendency. Stereotypes influence how individuals perceive and process information (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996), and relate to group members, and these are transmitted through socialisation, media, language, and discourse. The term stereotype was coined by Lippmann in 1922, who described it as a typical picture that comes to mind when reminded about a particular person/community (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016). Stereotypes are also known to ascribe attributes and behaviours, and create emotional responses such as anger, disgust, etc... that harm people and their groups, systematically influencing perceptions, interpretations and judgments promoting discrimination.

The literature on Age discrimination is broadly segmented into two: Ageism and Age discrimination. Ageism is defined by Robert Butler (1968) as the "systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against older people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplished with skin colour and gender" (p. 243). Since "Ageism" generally focuses on discrimination against older people, and discrimination against younger people is studied under the term 'Reverse ageism.' Discrimination is an unfair, unjustifiable and negative behaviour against individuals or groups that includes actions, judgments and decisions against these individuals/groups. According to Corell et al. (2010), discrimination is negative behaviours aimed at group members, not because they deserve it or they had discriminated against/offended the perpetrator, but, simply because they belong to the discriminated group. Davidio et al. (2010) define discrimination as a behaviour that creates, sustains, and reinforces disadvantage for certain individuals/groups at the expense of certain other individuals/groups. Discrimination harms the physical and mental wellbeing of the victims (Marchiando et al., 2017), particularly damaging their social identity and affecting their dignity and self-worth. McConnachie (2014) states that treating people differently harms their fundamental dignity as human beings. As such, age discrimination affects the dignity of individuals, belittling their self-worth, and causing loss of professional identity.

Age-discrimination in the workplace focuses on outcomes such as recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, training and development, and career opportunities. As per recruitment and selection, generally, younger applicants are preferred over older

applicants (Lossbroek et al., 2021; Finkelstein et al., 2015), and lower performance ratings are generally awarded to employees who are older than the age norm for their career-stage, as for employees who are older than their work group (Cleveland & Shore, 1992; Ng, 2021). According to Rupp et al. (2006); Ewens et al. (2014); and Chasteen et al. (2021), older employees receive more severe penalties for poor performance than their younger counterparts. Training and development opportunities are commonly denied for older workers as they are often neglected/omitted (Oude Mulders et al., 2014; Maurer & Rafuse, 2001), especially employees who are older than their teammates (Chasteen et al. 2021; Cleveland & Shore, 1992; Ewens et al. 2014) or managers (Shore et al., 2003). Similarly, age-based discrimination is found when promoting an employee as his/her age increases (Cox & Nkomo, 1992; Chasteen et al. 2021; Ewens et al. 2014), and older employees are discriminated against in career progression as well.

Discrimination does not have a theory dedicated to it, and is generally explained by social theories. This study chooses the Social Identity Theory (SIT), Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) and the Theory of Faultlines to examine Age discrimination. The Social Identity Theory (SIT) holds that individuals classify themselves and others into various social groups, such as organisational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Social identity enables individuals to be part of groups, experiencing a sense of belongingness in the social context. The theory posits personal identity, group identity, relative comparison and degree/strength of identification as key ingredients. The Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987) is a conceptual expansion of SIT as both share the same roots. The SCT explains individuals as forming cognitive images of self and others, categorising individuals into social groups based on certain salient characteristics. As per this study on generational diversity in an MGW, the SIT explains that employees, apart from being aware of their individualised identities, will also assume the identity of the generation they belong to. As per the SCT, employees categorise themselves and others into different generational groups, and define themselves in terms of the particular generational groups they belong to. Faultlines can be explained as theoretical lines that split a larger group into subgroups based on members' demographic features. The Theory of Faultlines, proposed by Lau and Murnighan (1998) holds that faultlines are hypothetical dividing lines that split a group into relatively homogenous subgroups based on group members' demographic alignment along one or more attributes. As per this study, age-based generational faultlines emerge, splitting and segregating the workforce in organisations.

Inclusion

Since Inclusion is a multifaceted concept, it has been given multiple definitions by scholars. This study endorses the definition based on the fairness perspective, which defines Inclusion as equality, justice, and full participation at both group and individual levels, so that members of different groups not only have equal access to opportunities, decision-making, and positions of power, but are also actively sought out because of their differences (Holvino et al., 2004). The extent to which employees are enabled to take part and contribute, as well as the removal of obstacles to the full participation and contribution of employees in organisations, is another view of Inclusion held by Miller (1998) and Roberson (2006). This study conceptualises Inclusion to consist of individual components, identified as 'Uniqueness' and 'Belongingness' and an organisational component identified as 'Conducive Climate.' The individual components 'Uniqueness' and 'Belongingness' are derived from the Optimal Distinct Theory (ODT) (Brewer, 1991), which explains the contradicting "human need for validation (similarity) to others and the need for uniqueness (individuality)" (p. 477). Brewer argues that individuals seek to balance the two contradicting needs by striving to maintain an optimal level of uniqueness and Inclusion in the groups to which they belong. The organisational component 'Conducive Climate' is derived from synthesising Diversity climate (Cox, 1994) and Age Diversity climate (Boehm et al., 2014). While Diversity climate stresses on the individual and an inter-group bias/conflict free environment supported by appropriate policies, practices and structural processes, Age Diversity climate emphasises employees' collective perception of fair and non-discriminatory policies, practices, procedures and rewards towards all age groups.

Propositions and concept indicator model

Multi-generational workforce (MGW) and Age discrimination

A 'generation' refers to a group of individuals fashioned by similar early-life experiences, resulting in a collective persona who follow similar life courses distinctly identifiable as per the Generational Cohort Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Mannheim (1947) explains that generational cohorts demark different groups based on their "positioning" in history. This study endorses the views of Kopperschmidt (2000), which hold that by a "generation" one may identify a group of people who shares birth years, age, location and significant life events that offered similar experiences in life during their formative years, leading to similar attitudes and preferences. Thus, a generation is a

group of individuals sharing birth years, and molded by experiencing a confluence of socio-cultural-political-economic-historical events during their pre-adolescent years. Such a generation would share similar beliefs, values, attitudes, perceptions, preferences, characteristics and behaviours that are both unique and distinct, that set each generation apart from one another. An MGW would consist of several such distinct generations working alongside one another in organisations.

Generations also share common elements such as a 'generational identity', 'culture/cultural symbols' and 'collective memories' that help members bond and experience solidarity within a generation. Significant macro-level socio-political-economic-cultural events experienced during pre-adult years form a generational identity that demonstrates distinct sets of beliefs, values, preferences, and behaviours that are set and lifelong (Inglehart 2000; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Generational culture is demonstrated when a generation assumes certain cultural characteristics collectively, taking on the cultural representation of that era. Some of the commonly identified generational culture icons and cultural symbols are music, film stars, fashion, clothing and technology (Eyerman & Turner, 1998; Holdbrook & Schindler, 1989; 1994). "Collective memories," according to Lippmann and Aldrich (2016), are shared accounts of the common past that are shaped by historical events that mold the perceptions of a particular generation. Momentous life events shared collectively, and experienced and recollected in a similar manner are also defined as 'collective memories' (Holdbrook & Schneider, 1994). These memories make individuals predisposed to forming values, attitudes, expectations and behaviours that are similar (Schuman & Scott, 1989). As a result, emotional attachment, bonding and solidarity all produce closely bonded generational groups that emerge within the workforce. The Social Identity theory (SIT) explains generational in-group coherence as making individuals classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organisational membership, religious affiliation, gender and age cohort (Tajfel & Turner, 1985).

In an MGW, each generational group with its unique and distinct set of characteristics and behaviours comes together in the workplace, and creates age-based bias and conflicts leading to Age discrimination (Burnes et al., 2019; Carlsson et al., 2017; Chasteen et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2018; Gursoy et al., 2013; Lancaster et al., 2002; Ng, 2021; SHRM, 2019; Zemke et al., 2000). Applying the Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987) to the context of an MGW, it can be surmised that employees categorise themselves and others into different generational groups, and define themselves in terms of those particular generational groups, creating in-group/out-

group comparisons. The practice of in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination amongst the diverse generational groups leads to Age discrimination. In addition, the Theory of Faultlines (Lau & Murnighan, 1998) holds that within a large group such as an MGW, generationally based subgroups may emerge, splitting up the larger MGW into individual generational groups.

Thus, the MGW forms the independent variable of the conceptual framework of this research study, where generational theories (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Mannheim, 1947; Strauss & Howe, 1991) support this choice. Dynamics of intra-generational bonding and solidarity within the generational group (in-group) are supported by the SIT, dynamics of inter-generational conflicts (in-group - out-group) are supported by the SCT, while the Theory of Faultlines explains the formation of generational groups within the MGW, faultlines that split the workforce. Taken as a whole, inter/intra group dynamics and the formation of faultlines within an MGW leads to Age discrimination, which is the dependent variable of the study. Thus, the study presents its first proposition

P₁: A Multi-generational workforce (MGW) produces Age discrimination.

Inclusion and age discrimination

Inclusion is conceptualized by this study to comprise an individual component and an organisational component. This stance is supported by Ferdman and Davidson (2008), as they hold that the prerequisites for creating an inclusive workplace centre around accommodating individual differences, needs, and perceptions (Burnes et al., 2019) while creating a suitable environment with structures, systems, and processes (Carter et al., 2019; De Meulenaere et al., 2016) are based on value and fairness. The individual component is derived from the Optimal Distinct Theory (ODT) (Brewer, 1991; Shore et al., 2011), and consists of 'Uniqueness and Belongingness.' The ODT (Brewer, 1991: p. 477) explains the contradicting "human needs for validation (similarity) to others, and the need for uniqueness (individuality)." Brewer argued that individuals seek to balance the two contradicting needs by striving to maintain an optimal level of uniqueness and Inclusion in the groups to which they belong. Shore et al. (2011) explain that belongingness and uniqueness mean 'the degree to which individuals experience treatment from the group that satisfies their need for belongingness and uniqueness' (p. 1265). In order to fulfill the fundamental human need for belongingness (lasting interpersonal relationships), individuals seek social identities and acceptance within groups. In-group acceptance and connections with fellow members prevent isolation.

Within groups, individuals get to enjoy loyalty, cooperation, and trust which lead to a sense of security (Brewer et al., 2007). On the other hand, if group members are perceived to be too similar/alike to the point of being interchangeable, then the need for uniqueness (a distinctive and differentiated sense of self) arises. When this need is activated, individuals will strive to define themselves by comparing themselves within their group (e.g., I am different from others) in order to distinguish themselves.

The study conceptualises 'conducive climate' as the organisational factor of Inclusion supported by the concepts of Diversity climate (Cox, 1994) and Age Diversity climate (Boehm et al., 2014). Gelfand and colleagues (2005, p. 104) defined Diversity climate as "employees' shared perceptions of the policies, practices, and procedures that implicitly and explicitly communicate the extent to which fostering and maintaining diversity and eliminating discrimination is a priority in the organisation." Based on this definition, Boehm et al. (2014) point out that an age-diversity climate is a specific form of a more general diversity climate, and define it as organisational members' shared perceptions of the fair and non-discriminatory treatment of employees of all age groups with regard to all relevant organisational practices, policies, procedures, and rewards.

Taken together, the study adequately addresses Age inclusion by bringing the ODT, Diversity climate and Age Diversity climate together to form the theoretical base of the inquiry. Hence, the researcher argues that individual age biases within the MGW leading to Age discrimination may be impacted by Inclusion, as the latter acts against all forms of bias and discrimination by addressing individual needs of Inclusion and organisational needs of a fair and non-discriminatory environment. Thus the study presents the second proposition:

P₍₂₎: Inclusion inversely moderates the relationship between MGW and Age discrimination.

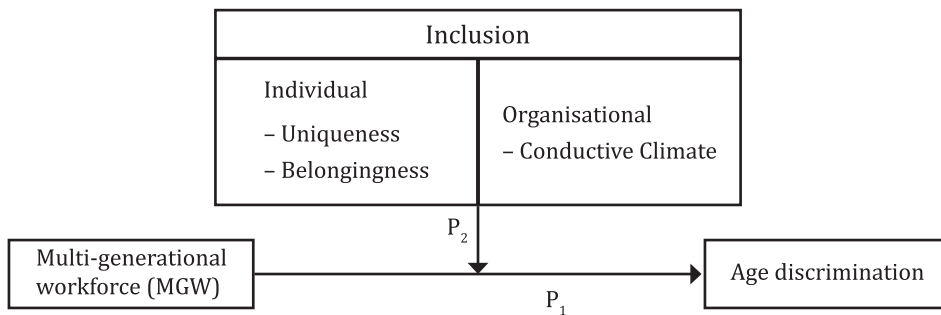


Figure 1: Concept indicator model

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the study, as per Saunders et al. (2009), a qualitative methodology under an interpretivist philosophy was adopted to create new meanings, interpretations and understandings through people. Thus, the lived experiences, interpretations and perceptions of people were captured by interactive-in-depth-one-on-one interviews. In line with the interpretivist philosophy and qualitative methodological choice, an inductive approach to theory development was selected. An inductive approach enables a researcher to derive concepts and themes leading to models through interpreting raw data captured from people. Saunders et al. (2009) recommend inductive research as it seeks out patterns that lead to the development of explanations/theories based on them. As per Denzin and Lincoln (2011), a research strategy is the methodological linkage that connects the research philosophy to the data collection and analysis methods. In this process, the research strategy also links all other choices the researcher makes in terms of the approach to theory development (induction). As per Creswell (2007), interactive-in-depth-one-on-one interviews were adopted by the study as it is the primary data collection tool of interpretivist qualitative research. An interview guide was developed and utilised for reference and for ensuring consistency, direction and focus. The interview guide also guarantees due coverage of all elements, and ensures that the interview is rooted in the research questions. The researcher phrased the questions in different ways to capture responses from multiple angles in order to draw rich and complete responses. A convenience sampling strategy was adopted as it facilitates trust, rapport, access, availability and feedback. A total of 20 individuals engaged in managerial work in the private sector representing the four generations (Boomer, Gen. X, Y & Z) were chosen as a sample. All data were subsequently,

systematically organised, documented and archived in a computerised database with a back-up copy for easy retrieval and safe retention.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out as per the seven steps prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2013). These are transcription, familiarisation, coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and writing up the finalised analysis. Transcriptions, field notes and audio recordings were all cross-checked to ensure that all data captured were coded appropriately. An excel worksheet was used in compiling the initial coding, secondary coding, categories and themes linking the constructs. A 'complete coding' method was adopted, resulting in 280 initial codes, which were collated to arrive at 46 categories which formed the 8 themes. These themes were based on the 'central organising concept' which links the themes to the codes anchoring them in the raw data. This was ensured by appropriately naming the themes that reflected the codes and raw data.

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured by adhering to the criteria prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which are credibility, dependability, conformability, transferability and authenticity. In addition, as another precautionary measure, the content analysed was reported accurately, a step which is upheld by trustworthiness evaluation studies of qualitative researchers (Emden et al., 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Further, the data gathered were transcribed within the day to ensure accuracy. In addition, validation was carried out by the participants themselves as the transcribed data were given to them to comment on, add or to modify. Triangulation was carried out by re-addressing key outcomes with several other participants, as recommended by Denzin (2012) and Denzin and Lincoln (2011). These researchers posit that in a study governed by an Interpretivist philosophy, triangulation adds depth, breadth, complexity, and richness to the research. Interviews were also audio-recorded using two devices to capture and retain the originality of the content as per the actual words and language used by participants.

Discussion

The purpose of the study is to explore Age discrimination manifesting among an MGW, and the mitigating inclusive measures. The study was conducted in response to the critical dual challenge faced by managers and organisations, firstly, in battling increasing Age discrimination, and secondly, in building Age inclusive organisations that nurture an age diverse workforce, identified to be a competitive advantage. Existing literature on Diversity, Discrimination and Inclusion all predominantly cover protected attributes such as race, colour, language, religion, etc., neglecting Age discrimination and Age inclusion, which do not have underpinning theories that describe them comprehensively. This has created a noticeable theoretical void. Furthermore, as Discrimination and Inclusion are both social concerns, studies conducted in the organisational context are scarce as no theory has been developed, implemented, tested or measured in an organisational context. Hence, in response to the multi-faceted void in the literature, and the lack of relevant expertise in organisations, this qualitative study, guided by interpretivism and an Inductive approach to theory development through data captured from interactive-in-depth-one-on-one-interviews, was conducted.

The main findings of the study revealed that in an organisational context, age-based bias is due to work-related-competency/incompetency of diverse generations that leads to Age discrimination within an MGW. Respondent Kris, a 38-year-old female representing Gen. Y, working as a Senior Manager- Operations of a diversified group of companies, who is also accountable for the group's import/export operations, shares her detailed perceptions about each generation ; ...

"As for Boomers, they prefer and still hold on to the old ways of getting stagnated and stagnating the team. Even though the company provides regular training, they learn very slowly, don't absorb much and don't practise what was taught in the training sessions. They are not comfortable with the e-mail, internet based communication systems and frequently miss information/communication... Generation X provide direction and leadership to the organisation. Although they are not tech-savvy most of them learn and utilise technology to give required output. They may also make use of the younger generations' tech know-how and get the work done.... Generation Y are excellent team players helping, sharing knowledge and information and building others. They are the most efficient generation... opportunistic money minded and pleasure seeking and Generation Z do not concentrate on the procedure to comply with or pay attention to detail.

*Getting job done and leaving soon is a priority. However, highly tech-savvy.
Fast and smart in finding ways to get things done “*

The quote explains the different capabilities, experiences and actual performance. The excerpt elaborates on the different generational skill sets, attitudes and experiences. Thus, taken together the “skills, attitudes and experiences” translate into diverse generational competency/incompetency.

As per Inclusion, the individual factors ‘Uniqueness’ and ‘Belongingness,’ and the organisational factor, ‘Conducive Climate,’ as well as the inversely moderating influence of Inclusion on the relationship between an MGW and age discrimination, are all confirmed by the findings and supported by the literature. Finally, the findings revealed three emerging factors and relationships that complimented the existing factors and the relationships among them. Firstly, ‘Age-prototype-matching’ emerged as a second factor influencing Age discrimination, along with the relationship that states that Age-prototype-matching produces Age discrimination. Confirmation of this finding is in accordance with the literature (Perry et al., 1996; Perry & Finkelstein, 1999). Secondly, ‘institutionalised bias and ‘non-supportive/inadequate infrastructure,’ emerged as organisational factors leading to age discrimination. The findings are supported by the respective theories, the Institutional Theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; UN, 2017) and the Climate Theories (Boehm et al., 2014; Cox, 1994).

A 64year old male Boomer, Marketing Manager of a leading advertising firm points out;

“I have passed the retirement age, still they want me to continue because I am adding value. I contribute to the organisation by doing my job well. I serve the company with by caliber, experience and relationships and connections I bring business. I am also able to pass on knowledge, expertise and advice to guide them. I also train them. It is an opportunity given to me by the organisation and I use it to benefit the young. These are value addition to the organisation... .. There should be unbiased hiring and retention based on performance/output/capabilities not age. Then they should take care of them, fairly compensated. Then there should be organisational systems to support work, capture and assess performance/value addition and to reward accordingly and keep people happy”.

This reveals firstly, the appreciative comments that indicate his feelings on being valued, allowing to contribute and being recognised and rewarded for same despite his age that is past the retirement ceiling. This amounts to being included and not subjected to the Institutionalised Bias of forced retirement upon reaching the prescribed retirement age by the organisation. Secondly, the respondent emphasises the need for an appropriate inclusive systems that are Age inclusive and supportive (opposed to non-supportive/ Inadequate Infrastructure). Accordingly, the inverse moderating role of Inclusion on the relationships between institutionalised bias and Age discrimination and non-supportive/inadequate infrastructure and Age discrimination was also found. Finally, taken as a whole, the role of Inclusion as a mitigating agent produces an emergent causal relationship with age discrimination.

The study findings on the relationship between an MGW and Age discrimination reveal that generational diversity is identified, acknowledged and confirmed by employees in organisations. Another male Gen X, respondent AGM, Finance of a tea exporting company explains;

“I work in a team of all ages. Boomers have experience and tacit knowledge and they expect respect. Workwise dealing with them is difficult as they are set in their ways, rigid, conservative, and averse to risk, not tech savvy and youngsters working with them get frustrated. They do not take criticism/ feedback positively. Generation X are easy to work with. Team oriented, accessible, casual, easy to approach, innovative, hard dedicated workers but can be judgmental and critical of the younger people. Generation Y are flexible, tech savvy, find smart and easy ways to work, quick to understand and more global. They are aggressive and go-getters. Qualified and experienced in modern organisational practices. Generation Z is responsive, agile, smart, tech savvy, multi-tasking, advanced in communication devices, connected world-wide. They lose focus as they are tech distracted, demand personal free time to pursue other interests.”

This clearly identifies the diverse positive and negative work-related generational characteristics that are unique and distinct by generations and their impact on individual and team/group and organisational performance that are biased. Further, a Gen Y female recruitment consultant shares her views acknowledging and confirming the work-related-competency based Age discrimination as;

As a recruitment consultant, I don't short list older generations generally for executive jobs. They don't fit in and are not adoptable. For management positions I don't consider younger people. I know it is discrimination but it is looked at as a criterion by the organisation. May be its bias

On the whole the findings confirm firstly, that the diverse characteristics identified are unique and distinct, and are consistent with the literature. Secondly, findings on positive and negative generational characteristics, based on work-related-competency and behavioural outcomes, established age bias and age discrimination amongst the MGW. The Generational Theories (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Mannheim, 1952) that support these findings posit that diverse generations bring diverse competencies to an organisation. Accordingly, the relationship which states that an MGW creates Age discrimination is confirmed by the findings, and is in accordance with generational theories and previous scholarly works (Baily, 2009; Burnes et al., 2019; Carlsson et al., 2017; Chasteen et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2018; Gursoy et al., 2013; Lancaster et al., 2002; Ng, 2021; SHRM, 2019; Zemke et al., 2000).

Considering the impact of Inclusion, the findings reveal that experiencing uniqueness, an individual factor of Inclusion, creates opportunities for employees' contribution, and the necessity to be a part of strategic decision making, and other critical organisational processes supports the achievement of personal/educational/professional/career/financial goals and recognition /appreciation /rewards .

A Gen. X lady, Head of Branch, of a financial company describes her experience;

"They develop self and others. Motivate staff by sharing positive feedback. Help people to fulfill their dreams. Several have built homes, bought vehicles, and have expensive holidays. They have achieved financial prosperity. I am not the boss but lead them. Everyone is respected and treated well... ...We are very competitive and won the regional prize. Won the 'Million Dollar Round Table' competition 7 times. We are committed to win again. Closely work as a team. We get recognition and support from HQ... ...I was given the latest hybrid car. Children are studying overseas. I am grateful to the company. I am motivated to win the Best Branch trophy this year".

As such, the findings confirm that experiencing feelings of uniqueness is part of individuals' experience of Inclusion. 'Belongingness' is also confirmed by the findings to be a part of experiencing Inclusion. Findings reveal that 'belongingness' is expressed

as the feeling of being an integral part of the present personal/family life goals and dreams, experiencing long service and job/financial security which is tied to the future of the organisation, enjoying feelings of being cared for, and experiencing organisational support in achieving personal well-being. Considered collectively, the individual factors of Inclusion, Uniqueness and Belongingness are confirmed by the findings, and supported by the literature (Brewer, 1991; Shore et al., 2011). Under the organizational factor 'Conducive Climate,' findings reveal that expressions of respect, a threat-free environment, fairness/non-discriminatory actions, and all such elements that ensure emotional/physical wellbeing when working for an organisation, are supported by the literature (Burnes et al., 2019; Dwertmann et al., 2016; Ferdman & Davidson, 2002; Ferdman & Deane, 2013; Holvino et al., 2004).

"A Gen Y female recruitment consultant goes on to elaborate about the performance supportive climate she enjoys at work as; Culture is the base for inclusion to happen...Appropriate systems in place such as, compensation, learning & development, evaluations, targets and goals, etc. Transparency and communication, etc... all strengthen free and fair culture. On an individual basis I am recognized for my output and given the autonomy of working online from home. It makes me feel good. Working from home facilitates personal/family life needs and I feel grateful to the company. I also see the caring and understanding ways in which my needs were accommodated. If not for this arrangement I would have left, losing my job. They kept me demonstrating that I am valued and wanted. It's a touching feeling of belongingness."

Thus, findings confirm that respondents need a supportive performance environment that enables them to perform their job role successfully and contribute fully. Scholarly works point out in support of the above findings that removal of all obstacles is necessary, and to enable full participation and contribution (Roberson, 2006), everyone needs to be allowed to participate and contribute fully (Miller, 1998). In other words, the literature emphasises that Inclusion is vital.

Thus, considering the role of Inclusion, the findings reveal that Inclusion mitigates/eradicates age-based bias as uniqueness and belongingness are two features that bring feelings of Inclusion to all individuals in all age groups.

A successful lady Boomer in the financial sector says;

"I can adopt to situations/people, as people look up to me to live like me. I am a happy vibrant positive personality. I have a clientele of more than 600 organisations and I serve more than 12,000 individuals. I am a very successful person and I earn good money and the company board knows it. They appreciate and recognise me... ..I enjoy what I do. I serve people selflessly, giving advice and guidance to manage their wealth. My job satisfaction is to see them prosper and succeed. As they are happy I am happy. I give a win-win option to my clients that makes them and me happy. The organisation facilitates our success."

Thus, Inclusion through providing experiences of 'Uniqueness and Belongingness' mitigates Age discrimination. This result is also supported by previous studies (Brewer, 1991; Shore et al., 2011). Secondly, through a conducive climate, Inclusion enables and ensures fair and non-discriminative policies, practices and procedures through a supportive organisational environment to enhance performance and wellbeing. This is supported by the literature as well (Boehm et al., 2014; Carter et al., 2019; Cox, 1994; De Meulenaere et al., 2016; Ferdman & Davidson, 2002; Ferdman & Deane, 2013; Holvino et al., 2004). Therefore, the current study's findings confirm that Inclusion inversely impacts the relationship between an MGW and Age discrimination.

Theoretical contribution

The existing literature on both Discrimination and Inclusion covers primarily protected attributes such as race, colour, ethnicity, etc... in the social context. However, it neglects Age discrimination and Age inclusion in general, and in the organisational context in particular, with reference to MGW, establishing a multi-faceted void in the literature. As such, this study first contributes to the limited literature on Age Discrimination and Age inclusion, linking them to age diversity in the organisational context within an MGW. Secondly, since Inclusion is a complex and context-specific phenomenon, it does not have a universally agreed upon definition or underpinning theories that describe it comprehensively. Therefore, the study conceptualises Inclusion in terms of individual and organisational perspectives linked to an age diversity-based MGW, within an organisational context, (as opposed to a societal context). Thus, the study presents a second theoretical contribution, as it brings the individual factors 'uniqueness' and 'belongingness' as per the Optimal Distinct Theory (ODT), (Brewer, 1998), and the

organisational factor 'conducive climate' supported by Diversity climate (Cox, 1994) and Age Diversity climate (Boehm et al., 2014), together to address Age inclusion in a diverse MGW in an organisation. Thirdly, the study also contributes through emergent themes such as the additional individual factor 'Age-prototype-matching', and the organisational factors, namely, 'institutionalised biased actions' and 'non-supportive/inadequate infrastructure' that produce Age discrimination.

Managerial implications

The study discusses three managerial implications in accordance with the findings. Firstly, given the increasing trend towards diversity in the workforce, awareness creation related to expected behaviours and undesirable behaviours need to be internalised by employees at the outset. In other words, employees need to be sensitised to age-related issues. To this end, organisations need to ensure that the right tone is set, from the very beginning, as correct values should be internalised and reinforced at the induction/orientation programme-level, and during other such subsequent programmes. The best practices of inclusive workplaces worldwide could also be benchmarked by managers. Secondly, the study highlights that the lack of work related competencies cause bias and age discrimination. This could be explained in terms of the fact that each generation brings its own set of competencies into the organisation, and that these competencies may not necessarily be compatible. In this regard, successfully administered cross-mentoring can curb issues linked to work-related-generational incompetency.

Thirdly, as per the findings, a true sense of experiencing uniqueness and belongingness is linked to the three following fundamental needs: (i) organisational support for performance and personal-educational-professional career advancement, and for the fulfilment of social self-esteem needs; (ii) the futuristic needs of long serving and being a part of the organisation's future; and (iii) work-life balance and wellbeing. Therefore, employees' personal/career advancement programmes, succession planning and grooming programmes targeting needs (i) and (ii) are important. Finally, it is the responsibility of practising managers to ensure a conducive organisational climate that is supportive of performance and wellbeing. Since such a climate includes infrastructure, systems, processes and procedures, along with supportive policies and practices, technology becomes a critical factor facilitating the same. This is also confirmed by the findings, as participants have identified technology-driven workplaces to provide a fair, bias-free, transparent and an equal platform for all age groups. It is also managers'

responsibility to get to know each employee's needs in terms of the above three areas, and to fine-tune their responses accordingly.

Social implications

The globally aging population and the resulting age diversity have generated severe economic implications such as underutilisation of the workforce, increased social security costs, and tensions over resource consumption. While underutilisation of employees occurs for many reasons, the significant contribution to underutilisation comes from the loss of older individuals due to mandatory retirement. This forms a dual disadvantage: removing the productive value/wealth-creating process, and converting it into social security burdens decreases the national GDP. This study also addresses issues such as 'institutional bias instigated by industries, society and the state through discriminative labour legislations. In addition, the competition for resources such as employment, housing, healthcare, entertainment and others creates resource and opportunity-based tensions in society. Individual well-being based on financial independence is related to self-worth, dignity, while identity affects self, family, and social standing, with socio-cultural implications for all age groups. As human cultures generally respect the elderly, living up to such respect by being worthy, and continuing to hold and maintain socially/culturally accepted and valued roles/positions exerts pressure on older people, especially in terms of financial independence/security, since the younger generations also compete for the same.

On a positive note, this study encourages organisations, civil societies, world bodies such as the UN, ILO, OECD, World Economic Forum, and governments to recognise and work towards eliminating Age discrimination through Inclusive interventions. These interventions are justified by the need for a sustainable measure that yields financial, psychological, and socio-cultural benefits. As a futuristic effort in this direction, this study directly promotes creating Age inclusive workplaces that prohibit/prevent all forms of Age discrimination, and building an Age diverse workforce which can be the ultimate competitive advantage for an organisation.

Limitations and directions for future research

The researcher, notes that a longitudinal study might have brought forth more valuable insights regarding changes in the variables with time, as well as before/after impacts of the inclusive measures taken, factors which the study has not addressed due to time constraints. Life-cycle changes prompted by employee attributes and behavioural changes, other performance, social, and behavioural changes, the effect of time on expectations, and changes in perceptions of work-life balance and well-being would be areas of interest for future research. Scholarly critics have also pointed to the pressing need for longitudinal studies.

The researchers' inability (given the guarantee of confidentiality) to cross-check and verify the alleged incidents/offenders' points of view or the response of a responsible higher authority is another key limitation. Hence, feedback providing insights into other variables that may come into play was unavailable in this study. Such insights would have shed light on the measures that need to be taken by organisations to prevent individuals from inflicting, and falling victim to age discrimination. Therefore, accessing data on efforts to be inclusive, and their impacts from within organisations was restricted as well. The ability to enter organisations freely, and question their practices related to Age discrimination and Inclusion was not an option for the researcher, given the sensitive nature of these constructs.

The fact that age-based-work-related competencies are the root cause of age discrimination within an MGW is one of the study's key findings. As such, it would be a worthwhile endeavour to research the effects of cross-mentoring on diverse age groups. It would add more value if these studies were longitudinal, as the effect of cross-mentoring could be studied over time. Secondly, credible longitudinal studies on all age groups, capturing changes in careers and lives due to bias, discrimination and inclusive efforts would be of particular value. Such studies could also take into account the impact of interventions such as technology, inclusive learning and development, as well as social and legal changes in age awareness/age inclusive efforts and organisational responses. Special attention may be given to the gender component as well. A third direction focusing on Inclusion could be a fine-tuned study on individual psychological elements such as personality, individuality, collectivity, and adaptability that could come into play along with uniqueness and belongingness. Fourthly, the additional emergent factors, 'Age-prototype-matching, institutionalised biased actions' and 'non-supportive/inadequate infrastructure,' were found to produce Age discrimination. The

current research suggests that these areas be researched more comprehensively to gain further insights.

Conclusion

The study is aimed at exploring the manifestations of Age discrimination within an MGW, and the role of inclusive measures in its mitigating. The study was guided by an Interpretivist philosophy, following a qualitative inductive approach using interactive-in-depth-one-on-one interviews for data collection. Data analysis was carried out through Thematic analysis following the steps prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2013). While the study contributes towards filling the identified void in the literature, the researcher also share insights with practising managers working in private sector organisations. The study's limitations are also discussed to inspire future explorations that will furnish additional insights and novel understandings. Finally, in the face of increased age diversity and widespread age discrimination, added to the critical need for inclusive workplaces nurturing innovative and productive MGWs, this study emerges as a timely and worthwhile endeavour.

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