

## A Review on Generational Differences in the Workplace: Individual-Related and Organization-Related Variables

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### Abstract

Generational differences in the workplace have been a popular topic over the past three decades. Despite the attention concerning generational differences in the workplace, academician and practitioners are presently faced with confusing disarray of evidence of generation generated in a variety of contexts. Some studies have highlighted that each generation demonstrates different individual and organizational-related aspects in the workplace, while others argue that generations are more homogeneous with one another. Hence, this article reviews the past evidence concerning generational differences in a variety of individual and organizational-related variables among Matures, Baby Boomer, and Generation X and also Generation Y. Based on the review, we found that generations seem to show differences instead of similarity across individual and organizational-related variables. Past studies also heavily focused on work values and motivator variables compared to other variables. Besides, the review also found variations in finding across the different context of the study.

**Keywords:** *Generational Differences, Individual-related factors, Organizational-related factor, Workplace*

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### Introduction

Over the years, academicians and practitioners become interested in the best ways of managing different generations in the workplace. According to a generation, Mannheim (1952) can be defined as a group of individuals born within the same historical and socio-cultural context, who experience the same formative experiences and develop unifying commonalities as a result. There are several different generational cohorts exist in the workplace, and these include Matures, Baby Boomers, GenX, and GenY.

Understanding the differences and similarity across different generations is critically important for both academician and practitioner. Despite a recent explosion of research concerning generational differences in the workplace, scholars and practitioners are presently faced with confusing disarray of evidence generated in a variety of contexts (Lyons & Kuron, 2015).

Hence, this article reviews the past evidence concerning generational differences on individual and organizational-related variables among Matures, Baby Boomer, Gen X and also Gen Y specifically in workforce context. In this review, we make several contributions to the literature. First, the study provides general overviews of the existing studies based on two work-related constructs of the studies: individual and group and organization. We review the most researched variables on generational differences studies in workforce context. Second, we review and examine the findings in term the context of the research setting (i.e. sector and regions) involved in past studies. Third, we propose directions for future generation study, particularly in the workforce context in Malaysia.

### Literature Review

#### **Generational Groups in the Workplace**

Lyon and Kuron (2015) had conducted a review on generational differences in workplace and they have typically adopted a four-generation categorization popularised in practitioner literature: (i) Traditionalists, also referred to as Matures, Veterans or the Silent Generation; (ii) Baby Boomers; (iii) Gen X; and (iv) Gen Y, also known as Millennials, Generation Me and Nexters, among other names (Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Twenge, 2010).

Based on Lyon and Kuron (2015), there is also considerable variation among studies in the sets of generations with descriptions ranging from highly general (e.g., "younger vs older") to highly specific (e.g., "early-, middle- and late-Boomers"). In this present study, we did not specify the beginning birth year and end year for each generational group as most of past studies have different birth and end year. Pilcher (1994) argued that the precise boundaries chosen to demarcate the generations are not crucially important, as generational trends should reveal themselves even despite the "fuzziness" of the boundaries between generations.

Another systematic review on generational differences conducted by Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil (2017) categorized the work-related variables into two major groups which include Individual-related variables and Organizational-related Variables.

**Individual-related Variables**

Individual-group variables include (i) personality and emotional intelligence; (ii) work values and motivators; (iii) work attitudes and behaviours; (iv) teamwork, and (v) leadership. According to Kusluvan, Kusluvan, Ilhan, & Buyruk (2010), personality and emotional intelligence relate to characteristics of the person that account for consistent patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving, and the ability to perceive, understand and manage one’s own and others’ emotions accurately.

Meanwhile, work values and motivators categorization relates to unconscious needs, motivational orientations, and conscious values that an individual desires or maintains concerning particular job characteristics and work outcome (Kooij, De lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dikkers, 2011). In regards with work attitudes and work behaviours variables, it refers to a disposition toward various aspects of work including job/career satisfaction, organizational commitment, employee engagement, and turnover intention (Woodward, Vongswasdi, & More, 2015). On the other hand, according to Lyon and Kuron (2014), teamwork relates team preference and behaviours that lead to team outcomes while leadership refers to preferences for different types of leaders and indifferent leadership behaviours.

**Organizational-related Variables**

Based on Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil (2017), organizational-related variables include (i) Human Resource Management (HRM) Practices; (ii) Career pattern and behaviours, (iii) Organizational culture and climate; (iv) Communication and technology.

As stated by Kulsuvan et al. (2010), HRM practices refer to the design of formal systems in an organization to ensure the effective and efficient use of human talent to accomplish organizational goals. Meanwhile, career pattern and behaviour relate with various roles that individuals occupy and progress during their work lives, which include mobility, willingness to work overtime, compliance with work rules. (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Woodward et al., 2015).

Another construct under organization related variable is organization culture and climate which refers to shared values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and core values of the organization’s members, which influence not only the behavior of members but also the systems created; and the changeable perceptions, interpretation, and attributions by employees about the work environment (Kusluvan et al., 2010). Lastly, communication and technology refers to the use of technology and communication preferences (Woodward et al., 2015).

**Methodology**

This section explains the methodology used to perform the systematic review conducted in this study. According to Kitchenham (2004), a systematic review is a methodological method to classify, assess, and interpret existing empirical researches on a field of study. As shown in Figure 1, the selection process consisted of five stages based on Kitchenham (2004).

**Resources Searched**

In step one, we began with the literature search of relevant papers by using five key databases. SAGE, Emeralds, Taylor and Francis, Wiley and Springer were selected for data searches as they are among the most reputable database. In terms of search keywords, several combinations of keywords were used. For example "Generation Differences + Employees," "Generation Differences + Workplace + Employee ". The articles published from 2002 to 2018 were included in the search. At the first stage, there were 8853 related papers appeared on the search result of the included databases.

**Exclusion Criteria**

A systematic literature search in the fields of business, management, organizational behaviour studies were conducted. We excluded other unrelated fields. At the second stage, We exclude unrelated articles based on the title, leaving only 187 papers. The third

step was exclusion based on the abstracts. Papers that mainly focused on other contexts such as students, public people and consumers perspectives were excluded. There were 73 relevant papers in the workforce context.

At stage four, we excluded another 33 papers because they were conceptual papers, review papers and inaccessible papers. Finally, in the last step, we able to retrieve 40 papers, specifically focus on generational differences in workforce context.

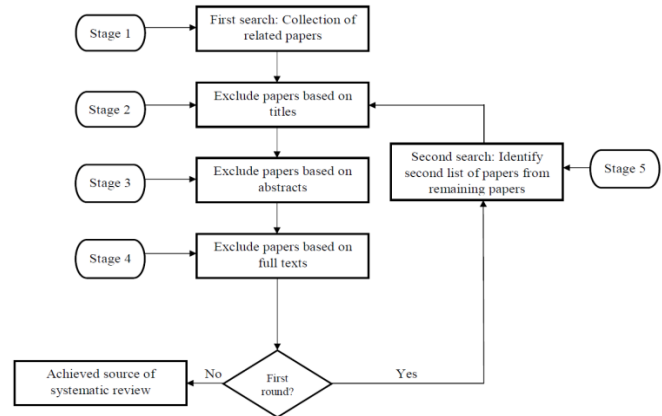


Figure 1: Stages of the study selection process

**Results**

Based on the literature review, we sorted out into several findings.

**Generational Group Comparison**

As mentioned earlier, there are four different generations in the workplace. Table 1 shows the studied generations over 16 years.

Table 1: Studied Generation by Year of Publication

| The studied generation              | Years     |           |           |           | N  | %    |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----|------|
|                                     | 2002-2005 | 2005-2010 | 2011-2015 | 2016-2018 |    |      |
| Matures, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y | -         | 1         | -         | 4         | 5  | 12.5 |
| Mature, Baby Boomer, Gen X          | -         | 1         | -         | -         | 1  | 2.5  |
| Baby Boomers, Gen X                 | 1         | 8         | 2         | -         | 11 | 27.5 |
| Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y          | -         | 6         | 9         | 6         | 21 | 52.5 |
| Gen X, Gen Y                        |           |           | 1         | 1         | 2  | 5    |
| Total                               | 1         | 16        | 12        | 11        | 40 | 100  |

Over 16 years time-span, most of the articles on generational differences in workforce context were published in the year 2005 to 2010. Additionally, based on Table 1, most past studies on generational differences has focused on comparing across three generations which are Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y (52.5%).

**Individual- and Organizational-related Variables**

Table 2 summarizes the focus area for this review studies. The areas of focus are divided into individual-related constructs and organizational-related constructs that are relevant to management. Evidently, based on Table 2, the majority of past studies concerning generational differences has heavily emphasis on individual-related variables (n=27) compared to organizational related variables (n=16).

Among individual-related variables, value/work values (ie., Chen & Choi, 2008; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Lyon & Duxbury, 2007; Smola & Sutton, 2002) and motivators (Andrare & Westover, 2018; Wong, Gardiner, Lang & Coulon , 2008; Yang & Guy, 2006) contributed the most. Beside work values and motivators, past studies also had focused on work attitudes and work behaviours (i.e., Davis,



Pawlowski and Houston, 2006; Le Vasseur, Wang, Mathews & Boland, 2009; Young, Sturts, Ross, & Kim 2013) and least focused on personality (Wong et al., 2008).

**Table 2: Studied Generation by Year of Publication**

| Individual-Related (n=27)                | Reference No.                    | Organizational-Related (n=16)      | Reference No.    |
|--|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Characteristic and Personality (n=2)     | 10, 18                           | Career pattern and behaviour (n=3) | 12,15,28         |
| Work values and Motivator (n=12)         | 1,6,9,11,23, 31,39,40 4,10,24,38 | Organizational Culture (n=2)       | 17,29            |
| Work attitudes and work behaviour (n=10) | 5,13,14,16, 19,22,26,30 ,35 ,37  | HRM Practices (n=6)                | 2,8,18,25,27, 32 |
| Leadership (n=3)                         | 3,7,12                           | Communication (n=2)                | 20,36            |
|  |                                  | Others (n=3)                       | 21,33,34         |

Note. "Reference no" refer to the numbering of the studies in Appendix A

Concerning on the work values and motivators, Table 3 shows evidences on generational differences. Based on Table 3, most of the past studies on work values and motivators found that there were significant differences across generations.

**Table 3: Finding on Generational Differences**

| Work values and Motivators   | Differences   | No differences   |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Intrinsic value              | (Cenanmo & Gardner, 2008; Chen & Choi,2008; Lyon & Duxbury, 2009; Rani & Samuel, 2016; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Yang, Yu, Wu , 2018) | (Cenanmo & Gardner, 2008; Smith, Halinski, Gover & Duxbury, 2018; To & Tam , 2014) |
| Extrinsic value              | (Lyon & Duxbury, 2009;Rani & Samuel, 2016; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Yang, Yu, Wu , 2018)   | (Cenanmo & Gardner, 2008; Smith et al, 2018; To & Tam, 2014)                       |
| Social/ Altruistic value     | (Chen & Choi,2008; Smola & Sutton, 2002)  | (Cenanmo & Gardner, 2008;Rani & Samuel, 2016)                                      |
| Prestige value               | (Cenanmo & Gardner, 2008; Rani & Samuel, 2016)  | -  |
| Intrinsic reward/ motivation | (Andrare & Westover 2018; To & Tam, 2014;Yang & Guy, 2006; )  | (Wong, Gardiner, Lang & Coulon,2008)   |
| Extrinsic reward/ motivation | (Andrare & Westover, 2018; Wong et al., 2008; To & Tam, 2014;Yang & Guy, 2006)  | -  |

Note. "(#,#)" refer to studies in Appendix A

For work attitudes and behaviours, this review revealed that majority of past studies found significant differences in work attitudes and behaviour (i.e., Cucina, Byle, Martin, Peyton & Gast, 2018; Sarraf, Abzari, Isfahani & Fathi, 2017; Young, Sturts, Ross, & Kim, 2013) compared to a non significant differences finding (i.e., Le Vasseur, Wang, Mathews & Boland, 2009).

Similarly, past studies related to personality discovered significant differences across generations (i.e., 2008; Wong et al., 2008). For leadership construct, a study conducted by D'Amato and Herzfeldt (2008) showed significant differences across generation. However, another study revealed non-significant differences between generations in the education sector (i.e., Yu & Miller, 2005). Nevertheless, Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, and Brown (2007) indicated that certain leadership attributes such as credible, listen well, farsighted, focused, dedicated, optimistic showed significant differences while trusted, encouraging, experience, dependable, candid and honest and trusting appeared to show a non-significant difference result.

Meanwhile, for organizational related variables, most of the studies focusing on HRM-related practices (i.e., Busch, Venkitachalam

& Richards,2008;Khilji, 2005; Moore, Grunberg & Krause,2015; Urick, 2016) and career pattern and behaviour (i.e., D'Amato & Herzfeldt, 2008; Sullivan, Forret, Carraher & Mainiero,2009). For example, HRM related to training (Moore, Grunberg & Krause,2015; Urick 2016) and career development and promotion (Benson & Brown,2011; Moore et al., 2015) shows significant differences across generations.

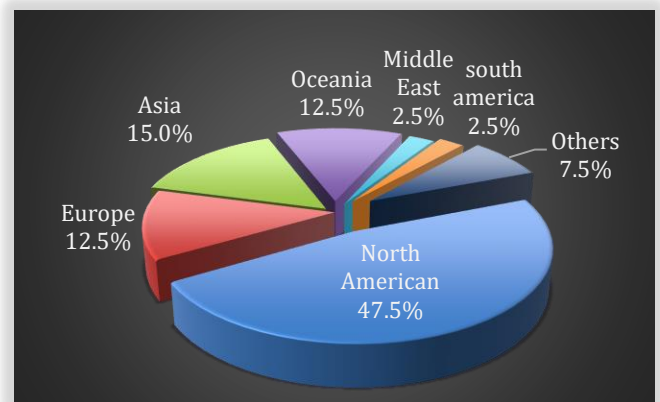
For career pattern and behaviour variables, several career constructs showed significant differences while others showed non-significant results (i.e., Sullivan, Forret, Carraher & Mainiero, 2009; Yi, Ribben & Cheng, 2015). Similarly, for communication and technology variables, Lester, Standifer Schultz & Windsor (2012) as well as Woodward and Vongswasdi (2017) revealed both significance and non significance differences on their constructs.

**Differences within similarity on the past findings**

Although most of the past studies have found significant differences, it is imperative to acknowledge that there are some differences within the similarity in the findings. Although they found significant differences in work values among different generations, the finding on the significant differences varies across different studies.

For example, Rani & Samuel (2016), as well as Yang et al. (2018), found a significant difference in intrinsic work values in which Gen Y value intrinsic more compared to Gen X and Baby Boomer. On contrary, Chen and Choi (2008) also found significant differences in intrinsic work values (i.e personal growth), however it was different with Rani and Samuel (2018) and Yang et al.'s (2018) study, in which Baby Boomer seems to values intrinsic more than Gen Y and Gen X. It does show differences within the similar findings, and the variation in the context of the study could be the reason why differences among generations vary from one study to another.

**Geographical context**



**Figure 2 : Percentage of the papers per region**

Based on figure 2, nearly half (47.5%) of the generational studies within the workforce context originated in North America (i.e, US, Canada), while the rest of studies deriving from Asia (15%) Europe (12.5%), Oceania (12.5%), Middle East (2.5%) and South America (2.5%). Several researchers also include more than one country (7.5%).

It was observed that generations differences also vary across different countries. A study done by Yi et al. (2015), they found that there was a statistically significant difference in perceived traits of an ideal manager between generations in the US and the Chinese. However, the results suggest that Americans demand and expect more from their managers than the Chinese. In addition, although both the American and the Chinese have statistically significant differences between generations in the likelihood to make career changes, the Chinese are more likely to make career moves than the Americans.

Other studies showed different findings across different countries. For instance, both studies Cennamo and Gardner (2008), as well as Rani and Samuel (2016), had focused on work values. Cennamo and



Gardner (2008) found that there is no significant differences were found on extrinsic and intrinsic among Baby Bommer, Gen X and Gen Y employees in Canada. In contrast, Rani and Samuel (2016) revealed significant differences in extrinsic and intrinsic among Baby Bommer, Gen X and Gen Y employees in India. Although both studies were conducted in various sector and had used the same measurement in their studies, they found contradicting results.

**Sector Contexts**

In this review, we also look into the various sector involved. Table 4 shows a breakdown of the frequency and percentage of the studies conducted in different sectors. We found that these past studies differ in terms of the types of sectors. Almost half of the studies (47.6%) were conducted in various sectors and followed by education sector (9.6%). Meanwhile, the rest of sectors are manufacturing (7.1%), hospitality (7.1%), banking and insurance (7.1%), public sector (7.1%). It was found that past studies least focus on healthcare (4.8%) and information technology (4.8%). Other sectors (4.85) refers to anonymous industry and industrial organization that had not been disclosed by researchers.

**Table 4** Frequency and percentage of the paper per sector

| Sector                 | n  | %     |
|------------------------|----|-------|
| Manufacturing          | 3  | 7.1   |
| Education              | 4  | 9.6   |
| Hospitality            | 3  | 7.1   |
| Information Technology | 2  | 4.8   |
| Banking and Insurance  | 3  | 7.1   |
| Healthcare             | 2  | 4.8   |
| Public sector          | 3  | 7.1   |
| Various sector         | 20 | 47.6  |
| Others                 | 2  | 4.8   |
| Total                  | 42 | 100.0 |

Besides the geographical factor, the result could also be different between sectors. For instance, Yu & Miller (2005) had done a study on different sectors. They examine work characteristic and leadership styles in manufacturing and education sector in Taiwan. They found that generational groups in the manufacturing industry have different work characteristics and require different leadership styles, while there were no differences in work characteristics and preferred leadership styles for generational groups in the education sector.

The reason for the difference between employees in the education and manufacturing industries may be due to the nature of the industry. It has been said that the industry culture and employee work characteristics and leadership styles in the education sector are very different from employees in the manufacturing industry (Yu & Miller, 2005).

**Discussion**

In this review, we found that past studies had heavily focused on the individual-related variables compare to organizational-related variables. Specifically, more attention was given to work values and motivators factors. Although most of the past studies have found the significant differences in both individual and organizational related variables, it is imperative to acknowledge that there are some differences within the similarity on the findings.

Moreover, this review revealed that the majority of past studies were conducted in western countries compared to non-western countries. Some studies showed different findings across different countries. This indicates that that national culture and the geographical area also have important influences on both individual and organizational –related variable across generations, and this requires further investigation.

In fact, to the best of our knowledge, little is known about Malaysian Gen Y’s work-related variables since most of the past studies were conducted in the western countries. The findings obtained from the Western context cannot be generalised to Malaysian Gen Y since Malaysian Gen Y experienced different life events than Gen Y’s in other countries.

In addition to that, most of the studies had heavily focused on various sectors instead of a specific sector, as the finding found to vary across different sectors (i.e., Yi et al., 2015). The review also highlighted a lack of research specific sector. Future researchers might want to examine the banking sector in Malaysia. This sector is considered as significant because the banking sector is one of the fastest-growing sectors and plays an essential role in the economic growth in Malaysia.

**Conclusion**

This study originated from an interest in examining the pattern of generational studies in a workforce context. To sum up, generations seem to shows differences instead of similarity across individual and organizational-related variables. Past studies also more heavily focus on value and motivators compared to other variables.

Generational differences in work values also have received extensive media coverage recently in major outlets such as "60 Minutes," Business Week, The Wall Street Journal, and Fortune. Managers face many challenges, and one of the most important will be hiring, retaining, and motivating these generations. Perhaps by focusing and understanding their work-related variables, it will influence them to show positive work attitudes towards organizations.

In order to elucidate the attitudes of the newest and youngest workforce, Gen Y, in the workplace, it is vital for future researcher first to examine whether both variables of Gen Y employees in Malaysia are different with their older counterparts. This is evident from the review, whereby we found inconsistent result between different research settings, i.e. countries, sectors.

Examining generational differences in Malaysia might help practitioners to enhance further their strategies in recruiting, motivating and retaining their multigenerational employees.

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