"FROM A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW"

An exploration on the generational perceptions of different generation employees and the consequences of this.

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Table of contents

Abstract

Objective With the stream of the new Generation Y employees taking a prominent position in the workforce the divide between older generation employees and newer generation employees is becoming bigger and bigger. A popular claim is that generation Y is a completely different generation than the older generations that are present in the workforce and that this brings challenges within organizations. These challenges may get in the way of cooperation and decision-making across and between generations, which will hinder workplace performance. As generation Y is the fastest-growing segment in the workforce it is important to investigate how and if this generation differs from the older generations so strongly. A great amount of previous research on generations is cohort-based which focuses on characteristics of the whole generation that make generations different from each other. By using generational identity the goal of this research is to provide insights into generational identification within multi-generational organizations, how different generation employees perceive each other and contribute to an organization to optimize intergenerational coworking and therefore overall organization success.

Method By using a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews this study aims to get a deeper understanding of employees' perceptions of generational identity differences within the workforce and the contributions the different generations make. In total 18 employees from different marketing and communication organizations were interviewed. The one on one interviews were online. Using a multistep content-analytic procedure, the data then was analyzed in four rounds.

Results The results show that different generation employees do have both similar and different perceptions when identifying with the other group. The mentioned generational perceptions employees made, can be divided at the basis of three categories, namely 'experience of generations', 'mentality of generations' and 'non-generational factors'. Thereby, at work, perceptions in differences in 'experience of generations' seem to be more easily accepted than differences in 'mentality of generations'.

Conclusion Identification within generations is not only based on generational differences as cohort-based research suggests. This study shows that different generation employees' perceptions about each other are based on generational factors as well as non-generational factors. This confirms that generations are inter-related and multi-dimensional groups by having a deeper understanding of how different generation employees form perceptions about themselves and others through the lens of generational identification and gives more insight in the generational differences and the challenges they bring in multi-generational organizations.

1. Introduction

Generational diversity is a popular topic for articles, press, practitioner books, public speakers, managers, and so on (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Urick, 2012; Van Rossem, 2018). Since this generation, also called generation Y (born between 1981 and 2001; Dries, Pepermans & De Kerpel; 2008) set foot in the workforce, there are now four generations present in the workforce. Before the new generation Y, it were Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), the Babyboomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and the Silent Generation (Born between 1925 and 1945) that set foot in the workforce (Dries et al., 2008). The amount of generation Y employees grows each year, and thereby the divide between older employees and the new generation employees is becoming bigger and bigger. Differences between generations are ever-existing and lead to challenges within organizations' departments, teams, and the organization overall (e.g. conflicts within teams and lower involvement). Since Generation Y and the new Generation Z (born after 2001; Dries et al.; 2008) are the largest living generations in the world, interest in the effects of generational differences at the workplace is increasing. With the omnipresence of popular claims about the new generation Y, it seems like that newest generation is more different than other generations have been (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

Research confirms that generational differences at work appear to be a real phenomenon, if only in the perception of managers and employees (Anderson, Baur, Griffith, & Buckley, 2017). It is said that Generation Y employees live by different values and attitudes and thereby have different expectations about work than earlier generations have (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge, 2010). For example, Generation Y report a greater amount of job and organization changes because they are looking for meaningful and engaging work (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). Studies talk about Generation Y as an impatient generation with high expectations within their careers, which are often not matched by their abilities (Hills, 2002; Ng et al., 2010; Weeks, Weeks & Long, 2016). These are a few of the many claims that help to form the somewhat negative image of the youngest generation at work and of which is said to affect relationships among employees at work (Weeks et al., 2016). The increase in claims about the difficulties that organizations face regarding the new generations is one of the reasons why research in generational diversity has gained loads of attention in the last decade.

However, organizational challenges exist not only due to real existing differences between generations. Not every person growing up during a particular period is influenced in

the same way by those specific historical and social events (Alwin & McCammon, 2007). Employees' beliefs and viewpoints across generations play a big role in generational identification too (King, Finkelstein, Thomas & Corrington, 2019). Popular statements about generations may influence the way in which people at work form perceptions about each other, because it could lead to social categorization and generational stereotyping within organizations (Urick & Hollensbe, 2014). TV, radio, and magazines contribute to creating and maintaining stereotyped beliefs about the new generations as a cause for challenges in organizational life (Gilleard, 2004). Stereotypes and the implicit bias it fuels can lead to negative employee attitudes, disengagement, and dysfunctional behavior which in the end will lead to loss of productivity for the organization (Hogg, Van Knippenberg, Rast, 2012).

Therefore, although real generational differences do influence intergenerational behavior at work, the perceptions that live among us based on those popular claims about generations could be of influence too. If generational differences exist (or not), people may believe that these differences are present and real and base their behavior on them (Van Rossem, 2018). In the end, it may not be the real generational differences that influence intergenerational behavior at work, but the perceptions that live among us based on the popular claims about generations. Believing that generational differences are present and real may result in behavior based on that perception (Van Rossem, 2018). Given the increased and ever-increasing age diversity in organizations, one's membership in a generational group may increasingly impact their behavior towards other generational groups (Urick, 2012). For organizations and employers, this is a reason why it is needed to pay attention to generational perceptions within the workforce and how they are created, maintained, and play a role within organizational life.

Existing research about generational differences remains descriptive. Theoretical contributions have not been integrated empirically, because it mostly uses a non-theoretical, cohort-based approach examining differences between generational cohorts based on age or birthyear (Anderson, et al., 2017; Joshi, Dencker & Franz, 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Pînzaru, Vatamanescu, Mitan, Savulescu, Vitelar, Noaghea & Balan, 2016; Spiro, 2006; Twenge, 2010). This research views generation as a social phenomenon which aims to look further than birth cohort membership. With viewing generation as a social phenomenon, this research uses the concept of generational identity.

Generational identity is based on the experience of knowledge or belonging to a generational group or role (Joshi et al., 2010). How generational identity emerges can be explained by social identity theory. To make sense of themselves within a group, people seek

to classify and perceive similarities with a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When people perceive differences in theirs' and others' generational identity this may lead to social categorization and generational stereotyping (Urick & Hollensbe, 2014). If members of a generation feel dissimilarities between them and other cohorts, it is likely that they rely more on their in-group and may feel less likely to work collaboratively or communicate knowledge with those cohorts to achieve organizational goals (Riordan, 2000; Weeks et al., 2016). Furthermore, fostered by similarity and dissimilarity effects, this may result in prejudice and conflicts in multigenerational work situations (Urick & Hollensbe, 2014). Individuals in the same generational group are more likely to exchange positive sentiments and engage in constructive communication than group members would do across these generational groups. This generational identification may get in the way of cooperation and decision-making across and between generations, which will hinder workplace performance (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996).

Understanding generations as social identities allows researchers to discuss the emergence of generational in- and out-groups and how they form, as social identities are indispensable in the development of inter-group relations in and outside organizations (Hogg et al., 2012). Therefore, viewing generations as a source of identity would allow examining how people identify themselves with collective generational values, norms, beliefs, and memories rather than making the assumption of homogeneity based on birth year (Finkelstein, Gonnerman & Foxgrover, 2010; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Lyons, Urick, Kuron & Schweitzer, 2015). Looking at the perceptions that different generations have of different generation employees may attribute to develop a broader understanding of personal and social identification as a basis for organizational generational identity (Joshi et al., 2010, 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry, 2014; Urick & Hollensbe, 2014; Veingerl & Sarotar Zizek, 2017). Hence, the formation of intergenerational perceptions and identification is an interesting avenue for further inquiry to gain a better understanding of the dynamics across generations at work.

Little studies have researched how different generations in a work setting perceive each other (Urick, 2012; Van Rossem, 2018). In this study, the emphasis lies on perceptions about the younger generations that set foot in the workforce because of the differences they are said to bring with them. Understanding what employees think about different generations from the generational identity perspective is an important avenue, because the information they have about other generations may influence individual's behavior towards their colleagues, to the organization, as well as how they come to define themselves in relation to their organization.

By researching this from the perspective of newer and older generation employees and looking at their perceptions about the different generations, a broader understanding of generational identity and diversity at work can be provided. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to examine how different generations perceive each other in the workforce, and to explore how this may impact their behavior within the organization.

As mentioned before, there are clear implications ascribed to generational differences at work (e.g. team processes, organizational diversity, intergroup conflict, and knowledge transfer; Joshi et al., 2010). A deeper understanding of how different generation employees form perceptions about themselves and others through the lens of generational identification may broaden our knowledge of those generational differences and the implications they bring with. The field of generational workplace research will benefit from this, because this may improve our understanding of group processes and organizational cultures. If employees are more aware of one's own generational identity, understanding the differences between self and others, and learning to act in ways that are generationally sensitive, having different generations working together will contribute to reciprocal knowledge sharing within the organization. This may, in the end, lead to better succession management, communication, employee engagement, and conflict resolution for multi-generational organizations (Dencker, Joshi, & Martocchio, 2008). To get to this better understanding the following research question is formed:

How do employees perceive different generations at work, and what are the consequences of this?

This paper consists of five chapters. Chapter 2 further elaborates on the social identity perspective as the theoretical framework of this research. Chapter 3 clarifies the context of the interview study conducted in this research and describes the method. Chapter 4 describes the results of the study. Lastly, Chapter 5 clarifies the theoretical and practical implications of this research provides recommendations for future research and states the conclusion of this research.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter elaborates on the generational identity perspective and explains why this perspective helps to understand the influence of different perceptions of generations at work.

Furthermore, it clarifies which theoretical knowledge already exists and which knowledge gaps will be addressed in this study.

2.1. Social identity perspective on generations

The concept of generations is based on the idea that people of certain generations have developed different values and beliefs about life because of the period of time in which they grew up in as individuals (Veingerl & Sarotar Zizek, 2017). A great amount of the writing on generations has considered generation as a homogeneous cohort, which suggests that all individuals in one generation share the same work values, attitudes, and career expectations based on the period of time in which they grew up. Sharing common experiences such as education, peers, media, and popular culture in a certain period of time does shape collective memories of the formative years. These common value systems and behaviors may influence every aspect of a person's life, including how people behave in the workplace and these will endure throughout a generation's lifetime (Arsenault, 2004; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry, 2014; Schuman & Scott, 1989).

However, not every person that grows up during a particular period is influenced in the same way by those specific historical and social events (Alwin & McCammon, 2007). One's generation identity may vary by culture, region, age, gender, race, and education and is not strictly tied to membership of birth cohort (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry, 2014; Veingerl & Sarotar Zizek, 2017). To look beyond generations as just cohorts, this study uses the approach of viewing generations as a social phenomenon. This perspective views generations as inter-related and multi-dimensional social groups that take shape within the flow of history (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). In other words, except cohort-based factors, also contextual factors influencing one's generational identity will be taken into account. To get a better understanding of generations as social phenomena two approaches are outlined below, namely generation as a cultural field and generation as discourse.

Generations as a cultural field

Gilleard (2004) proposed viewing generation as a 'cultural field' which is distinct and temporally located, and within which individuals from a potential variety of overlapping birth cohorts participate as generational agents. It refers to the fact that people have movements or modes of thought and action which emerge at a specific point in history. These may have adherents from multiple birth cohorts but more likely are centered around a core of a certain age range. Generational prototypes (substitutive, more neutral verb for stereotype) will take

form and are continued because they represent shifts in thought and action that are conspicuous but not necessarily representative for the entire cohort. Not every person will be prototypical of this generation. Therefore, within this approach individuals are not treated as representatives of a certain generation, but rather as individuals with varying levels of engagement with different generational fields.

Generations as a discourse

At the workgroup level, generational identity is also influenced through interpersonal discourse. Discourse is a mental structure, as language, that people use to understand their place in time and society (Foster, 2013). Individuals use language schemes from the societal level (i.e., grand discourse) to inform theirs, which ultimately grows to encompass the language used in conversations (Fairhurst, 2011). With interpersonal discourse, meaning is created through the language (or "utterances") that enables understanding in an everyday conversation between two individuals (Baxter, 2011). Through interpersonal discourse, identities are created that give meaning to who a person is within the context of a relationship (Baxter, 2011). The language that is used to discuss generational issues provides important information about intergenerational dynamics between groups, in this case in the workforce. Purvis & Hunt (1993) state discourse is important, not because there is nothing outside it, but because it:

> *'is constitutive of social relations in that all knowledge, all talk, all argument takes place within a discursive context through which experience comes to have, not only meaning for its participants but shared and communicable meaning within social relations.' (1993: 492)*

Foster (2013) used the generation construct as a framework for describing people's behaviors and those of others as they recounted their 'working life stories'. In her research, she identified two themes in the narratives of respondents: generation as difference, which refers to the approach of generations as social phenomena and generation as a sociohistorical dynamic, which refers to the approach of generations as cohort-based identities. Foster (2013) asks about generation as a 'thought-distinction'. She draws the focus to how different ways of articulating, thinking about and understanding generation might produce different types of 'conduct' (e.g. behavior or actions). This approach does not deny or neglect generation as a

contingent social structure that may produce inequities, form identities and shape social relations. The generation's structure and effects depend very much on the dynamic idea of it, in overlapping scholarly and everyday discourses. As Foster (2013) argues:

> *"The concept of discourse, in a pragmatic study of generation as an idea, posits 'generation' as a vehicle for thought and action, a concept and a mental structure that provides people with, and limits them to, specific way(s) of understanding, speaking about, and acting in the world around them. This does not mean generation is merely a mental structure, but how we think, speak, write, and otherwise communicate the idea of generation has practical consequences that social science must examine. This means acknowledging that generation is often framed for a purpose and always, even in everyday talk, has meaningful effects."* (p. 198)

With viewing generation as a discourse, it can be asked 'What do people think it is, and what are the consequences of such thinking?' instead of asking 'What is a generation?' or 'What are the characteristics of the generation?'. Generation as discourse goes beyond cohort-based characteristics and leads to a deeper exploration within generational identity research.

2.2. Generational Identity

Generational identification is based on the experience of knowledge of belonging to a generational group or role, together with emotional attachment and value significance to him or her of this group membership (Joshi et al., 2010). Social identity theorists have argued that the composition of individuals in a particular context can increase or decrease the salience of any particular social group from which one might gain one's social identity (e.g., Abrams, Thomas, & Hogg, 1990). We belong to numerous social groups and not every group will be a relevant source of our identity in any given situation. Also, discourse plays a part. For generational identification to occur, members need to perceive the sense of belonging to a certain group as being important. This happens when an individual sees benefits in identifying with a certain generation. So, identifying with a generation is likely when individuals see or place themselves (or others) as a member of a certain group that is consistent with their view of who they are as a person. Two theories of identity that are useful in the understanding of generational identity are social identity theory and self-categorization.

Social identity theory

 Before differences among generations become clear, an individual must identify with this generation (Joshi, Dencker, Franz & Martocchio, 2010). How generational identity emerges can be explained by social identity theory, which explains how individuals make sense of themselves in social situations (Foster, 2013; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Urick & Hollensbe, 2014). Members of a generation have shared value systems based on the experiences they encountered in the same period of life. Because these shared value systems might be perceived as similar by members within generations they may help individuals with social and self-categorization (Urick, 2012). To make sense of themselves in social situations people seek to classify themselves and perceive identification or oneness with a group (Asforth & Mael, 1989). This classifying emerges by using social categories as explanations for attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of themselves and other people (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). It is a way of refining the self-concept and defining themselves relative to other people in that situation (Ashfort & Mael, 1989; Turner, Brown & Tajfel, 1979).

Joshi et al. (2010) have identified three aspects of generational identity. First, there is a cohort-based identity whereby individuals enter an experience (like working or going to college) at the same time. Second, they identified age-based generational identity whereby common experiences outside of work, roughly defined by birthyear can create an identity for individuals. The third is an incumbency-based generational identity where individuals define their identity based on experiences, skills, attitudes, and knowledge that result from occupying a particular role for a certain period of time. These three aspects all together contribute to the shaping of one's social identity.

When a person identifies with a specific group, they experience the feeling of belonging to that group, which is called the in-group (Turner et al., 1979). Groups they do not identify with are called the out-group (Turner et al., 1979). This differentiating between identification with in- and out-groups is a common social event, which also occurs without interaction or presence of groups (Turner et al., 1979). Individuals have multiple social identities that all contribute to "make sense of the self in a social world" (Turner et al., 1979). Differentiation between groups commonly happens based on traits one ascribes to a group. Commonly the in-group is rated higher on favorable traits that a person identifies with and the out-group is rated lower on unfavorable traits with which a person disidentifies. This is called in-group favoritism. Social identification leads to behavior that is congruent with the group identity that a person ascribes as the in-group and can contribute to stereotypical views of both the in-group and the out-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This might help to explain

barriers to communication between members of different generations. If members of a generation feel dissimilarities between them and other cohorts it is likely that they rely more on their in-group and may feel less likely to work collaboratively or communicate knowledge with those cohorts to achieve organizational goals. Thus, in-group favoritism may trigger discriminatory actions at work (Riordan, 2000; Weeks et al., 2016).

Self-categorization

Perceptions of one's own generation and other generations may lead to social categorization of others and the self (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). The process of self-categorization fulfills two basic human needs: inclusion and differentiation (Brickson & Brewer, 2001). To fulfill these needs people categorize themselves by forming a cognitive view about a certain group in terms of group prototypes. A prototype is then a fuzzy set of attributes (e.g. attitudes, behaviors) that stand for similarities to the ingroup and differences to the outgroup. When categorizing, people distinct prototypical attributes from people to depersonalize them and be able to assign themselves and others as members of a certain group (Weeks et al., 2016). The social categories that people carry in mind vary in importance and accessibility dependent on the situation (Hogg et al., 1995). The process of self-categorization that goes with group identification governs the transformation of the self-concept and behavior of the individual because he or she wants to embody/be one/be similar/adapt to the prototype in a particular situation. Thus, dependent on the situation individuals conform to group norms and values. The extent to which ingroup members share the same prototype of that group will generate convergence in the behavior among group members and differs per context (Hogg & Reid, 2006).

2.3. Stereotypes

The comparative component of prototype formation often leads to a prototype that is more extreme than the actual ingroup attributes (Hogg, 2012). When this happens the distance between in-group and out-group becomes bigger and the in-group prototype becomes polarized away from the out-group. Influence processes related to social identity may lead to convergence on polarization between groups resulting in social categorization that may generate stereotypes (Weeks et al., 2016). Also, Gardner and Macky (2012) noted that with inter-group comparison stereotypical perceptions are very important. They suggest that for example, older generations may behave to younger generations based on stereotyped perceptions. Which may inadvertently encourage behaviors of younger generations complicit

with these perceptions. Herein stereotypes are a means for forming self-fulfilling prophecies (Gardner & Macky, 2012).

Vorauer, Main & O'Connell (1998) suggest that the knowledge of stereotypes of an in-group invokes the concept of 'meta-stereotypes'. Meta-stereotypes are defined as the way a person thinks that out-group members stereotype his or her in-group (Vorauer et al., 1998). The way in which people think that other people may think about them may influence one's behavior. When an individual becomes overly focused on what other people think of them, they may respond by becoming defensive of the in-group by distancing themselves from the in-group or trying to change the negatively viewed aspect of themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). There is evidence that age-based meta-stereotypes are prevalent and seem to serve as self-fulfilling prophecies because it often leads to the fact that individuals believe that persons from other age groups view them more negatively than the other group perceives them (Finkelstein et al., 2012; Ryan, King, Finkelstein, 2015).

Stereotypes influence attributional processes (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996), which are often at play during performance appraisals. Furthermore, fostered by similarity and dissimilarity effects, individuals in the same generational group are more likely to exchange positive sentiments and engage in constructive communication than group members would do across these generational groups. This may get in the way of cooperation and decision-making across and between generations, which will hinder workplace performance. Older and younger workers believe that co-workers from other generations view them more negatively than they actually do (King et al, 2019). This leads to false perceptions about other generations and thus to inaccurate appreciations. These beliefs lead to a different treatment of one generation to the other. Also, inaccurate employees' beliefs about what others think about their age group can interfere with their work behavior and result in critical implications for workplace interaction. This can appear in interpersonal behaviors at work and avoidance behaviors, which would be disadvantageous for the functioning of the organizations' workplace.

Brown, Dacin, Pratt & Whetten (2006) have researched the concepts of individual and organizational perspectives within companies. They mention that it becomes key to understand from an individual perspective what individuals know or believe about an organization because these beliefs can influence the individuals' responses to the organization. Also, how people look at organizations can be affected by this. The manner in how people come to define themselves in relation to an organization is affected by the way people think about an organization. This is based on organizational identification which refers

to the degree to which employees define themselves as a member of the organization and to what extent they experience a sense of oneness with it, its values, brands, and methods (Ashfort & Mael, 1989; Schuh, Van Quaquebeke, Göritz, Xin, De Cremer & Van Dick 2016). This can also be applied to the way how different generations perceive each other in organizations, which has been represented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
Key Organizational Viewpoints

1. "How do you perceive your own generation?"
2. "How does the generation want to be perceived by other generations?"
3. "How does the generation believe they are perceived by other generations?"
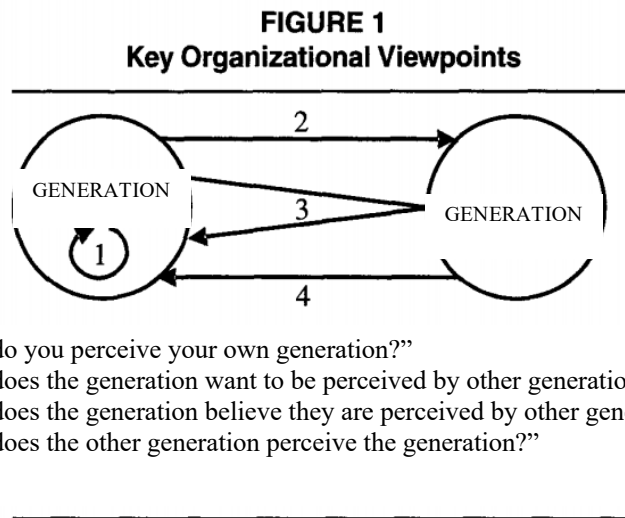4. "How does the other generation perceive the generation?"

Figure 1: Key Organizational viewpoints based on the model in Brown et al. (2006)

Generational identity theory explains how people make sense of themselves within generational groups, as generations are a way of identifying the self in regard to others and their behavior is based on it. Identifying with a generation is likely when individuals see or place themselves (or others) as a member of a certain group that is consistent with their view of who they are as a person. When generations perceive dissimilarities in the identification with other groups this may lead to dysfunctional behavior between generations. Therefore, the presence of different generations at work should bring challenges with them. Understanding how and if employees differ in perceptions about their own and others' generation through the lens of generational identification gives more insight in the generational differences and challenges they bring with in multi-generational organizations. To get these insights the following question is asked:

How do employees perceive different generations at work, and what are the consequences of this?

3. Method

To answer the proposed research questions, a qualitative method was chosen by means of interviews. Because the field of generational differences is complex within its context, semi-structured interviews were used to get in-depth insights. Semi-structured interviews enables to explore participants thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a particular topic (Hijmans & Wester, 2013), and probe questions for additional information (Hijmans & Wester, 2013).

3.1. Participants

A total of 18 participants from 9 organizations based in the Netherlands were selected using purposive random sampling (Patton, 1990). Within the beginning part of the sampling communication agencies were searched with Google search. The agencies that were found suitable were the companies which showed they had employees of different generations working. There was sent an email to a random sample of communication organizations in the Netherlands. A total of 36 companies were approached by e-mail, when there was not received a reply those agencies were given a phone call. The sampling resulted in the participation of 9 organizations. Participants had to meet the following selection criteria. First, there was aimed at employees only from communication- or marketing organizations, which limited the possibility of varied occupational group characteristics based on sector that might influence the ways in which employees view their older or younger colleagues. Second, participants had to have worked or work with older or younger colleagues, as the research is about the views and perceptions of older and younger colleagues have about each other and how they think they are perceived. Third, there is strived for a balance between males and females. At last, while the aim was to select participants from different age groups within the same participating organizations, this was only successful for three companies. The amount of companies with such multi-generational agencies that were willing to participate was just to small, the main reason for not participating was the absence of having (a greater amount of) time for the interviews. All of the invited participants agreed to take part in this study, participants were not rewarded for their participation.

Participants (10 women, 8 men) worked part-time or full-time and held at least an educational level of a four-year college degree. Participants were aged between 23 and 56 years (mean age = 38 years). Most participants were White (N = 16). There were interviewed two generational groups were being interviewed. 10 participants (7 women) were from Generation Y (born between 1981 and 2001). 8 participants (3 women) were from Generation X (born

between 1965 and 1980). The average tenure within an organization was 8 years, with a range from 1 year to 27 years. The participants all worked or had worked within the marketing-communication sector, including marketing organizations, communication organizations, or on communication departments of organizations. Employees represented job categories such as project manager, designer, account manager, and communication advisor.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Since few studies examine perceptions and stereotypes between generations on a qualitative level there were no validated scales or taxonomies to rely on. Also, because existing literature on generational stereotypes is mostly quantitative, and therefore generalizing explains why a qualitative approach is most appropriate. Interviews enabled us to get a deep understanding of how employees view and think they perceive their own and older and/or younger colleagues at work. When conducting the interviews a global pandemic led the Dutch government to formulate a policy in which citizens were advised to work from home as much as possible (Rijksoverheid, 2021). Because of this, the interviews were conducted through an online meeting in Microsoft Teams or Google Meet. Only one interview was conducted in real life. Interviews typically lasted 60 minutes. All of the interviews were audiotaped with permission. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous.

Each interview was started by asking the participant to describe his or her job, function, and organization. When participants could not relate to their present colleagues, they were allowed to refer to experiences with colleagues from previous jobs. Then the participant was asked to tell something about the team, the colleagues they work with, and to describe his or her position within the team. In this way, insight was gained in the person him- or herself at work and their position within the team so that the interviewer had a broader view of the context the participant worked in. Next, the interview was structured in 4 sections based on the model of Brown et al. (2006). The first section focused on the participants' views on the other generation (older, younger, or both, depending on their level of career age and generation). The participant was asked questions such as 'How do you think about the other (older or younger) colleagues?', 'What do you think they find important in work?', 'How is working with those colleagues?'. The second section focused on how the participants view their own generation. The participants were asked questions as 'How do you think about your own generation?', 'What do colleagues your age find important in work?' and 'How is working with your own generation?'. The third section was based on how the participant

thinks the other group views them, an example of a question asked is 'How do you think the other generation colleagues think about your generation?'. In the fourth section was explicitly asked for stereotyping as a phenomenon at the workplace. In this last section the participants were asked questions as 'Do you think stereotyping happens at your work?' and 'Do you think stereotyping influences your team?'.

3.3. Data analysis procedure

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, leading to 288 transcript pages. Using a multistep content-analytic procedure, the data is analyzed in four rounds. In the first round of analysis, all the comments which were assessed as relevant were extracted. This list of comments reflected the ways in which participants looked at their own generation colleagues, their other generation colleagues, and comments which were relatable or interesting otherwise. These comments were for example about region or culture, comparison with earlier times, hierarchy and characteristics of a person. In the next round of analysis, all the comments were grouped on overarching themes of comments (also called subcategories). Examples of these subcategories are 'technology', 'keeping fresh', 'enthusiasm', 'driven', 'flexible', and 'authority'. The third round of analysis aimed to group the comments in the same sections as the interview guide was built up, as shown in figure 1 and figure 2.
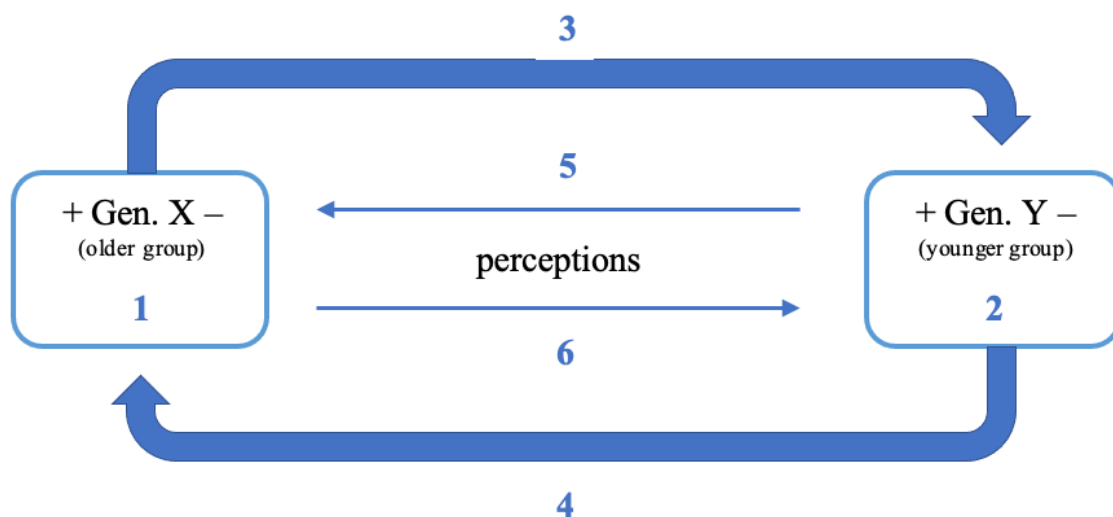

Figure 2: Key generational viewpoints (based on Brown et al. (2006)

This resulted in six tables. The first two tables consisted of comments based on how older/younger employees view themselves (1 and 2), the second two tables consisted of

comments how older/younger participants view the other (3 and 4) and the third two tables consisted of comments how the older/younger participants think the others view them (5 and 6). Thereby, the comments were labeled negative or positive and were categorized within the tables categorized based on figure 1 and figure 2. To see in which areas older and younger generations perceived the other generation differently, the last phase of the analysis looked at subjects where the two groups were ore were not in agreement about their work colleagues.

Lastly, overarching categories are extracted which resulted in three main categories that are distinguished, namely 'experience of generations', 'mentality of generations' and 'non-generational factors'. The overarching categories 'digital skills', 'work experience' and, 'life experience' all had to do with the knowledge gained through practice in doing something. These are ascribed under the first main category 'experience of generations'. The subcategories 'energy', 'flexibility', 'self-confidence' and, '(financial) wealth' were about the characteristic ways of thinking of a person or a group. These subcategories are about 'mentality of generations' which is the second main category that is distinguished. The overarching categories 'being young', 'inherence to time and generation', 'role within organization', 'character', 'life stage' and 'region' all were not directly related to generational factors, but also do play a role in forming perceptions about the self and the other. These subcategories are ascribed under 'non-generational factors'. All of the (sub)categories were then carefully defined in a codebook as can be seen in the figures of chapter 4. Since the purpose of the analysis was to look for common ideas and patterns in participants' responses (sub)categories represented by a single comment made by one participant were deleted from further analysis.

When talked about the younger group it is about participants from generation Y (born after 1980) till the age around 40. When talked about the older group it is about participants from Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), from the age around 40. The comments presented in the result section are based on a careful selection of the all the comments extracted from the interviews. Within the subcategories it is aimed to present comments from different participants. More explanation about the subcategories is given ==in the elucidations beneath the figures==.

No second coder was used. The analysis was done by one person, with the supervision of the first reader. The quotes presented in the Results section are illustrative of the 18 interviews.

4. Results

The semi-structured interviews yield two interesting results. First, differences within employees' perceptions of other generation colleagues based on generational factors, can be categorized in two categories, namely: 'experience of generations' and 'mentality of generations'. Comments regarding 'experience of generations' were for example about the urge to keep fresh for Generation X and the difference in having digital skills between the two generations. Comments regarding 'mentality of generations' were for example about differences in energy and flexibility between generations. Second, people within the same generation also form perceptions about another generation colleagues on factors that go beyond generational characteristics, namely: 'non-generational factors'. For example, personal characteristics and the inherence to time and generation also play a role in perceptions of different generation colleagues. In the next section, examples are given of the overarching topics the participants mentioned when asked to how they think of generational in- and out-groups within their organization.

4.1. Experience of generations

The first category is labeled 'experience of generations'. The term 'experience' refers to the knowledge, skills, or wisdom gained through practice in some activity. In the interviews, three subcategories regarded to 'experience of generations' can be distinguished, namely 'digital skills', 'work experience', and 'life experience'. An overview of the subcategories regarding 'experience of generations' that were mentioned in the semi-structured interviews sample is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of the analysis of different generation perceptions regarding 'experience of generations'

Category	Definition	Sample comments
Digital skills	Employee has a range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications and networks to access and manage information.	Gen. X: *'We are not digitally schooled, so we are less skilled at that point'* Gen. Y: *'We master that whole technique'* *'the older guard does not know much about it'*
Work experience	Employees' experience that is gained while working in specific fields of occupation.	Gen. X: *'They are more likely to agree on something coming from me'* Gen. Y: *'especially in the beginning I sometimes felt a bit like a puppy or a bit stupid, they all know so well'*

| **Life experience** | Employees' experience and knowledge gained through life. | Gen. X: *'you can work at a certain level'* |
| | | Gen. Y: *'With older colleagues, you feel more distance'* |

Digital skills

When looking at digital skills both groups agree on the fact that the younger generation has more digital skills than the older generation. The younger generation (Generation Y) mentioned several times that colleagues from the older generation (Generation X) were not as digitally skilled as they were. The younger participants experienced this when working with older colleagues in that they ask for help when using certain types of technology and when talking about certain tools that they do know about. One participant noted:

> *"If I think about my colleagues who know what online tools exist, that other colleague from that other generation knows less about it, you know, when we begin talking about some online tools, she is getting an earful."*

The older generation agrees on this by mentioning that they indeed are less skilled at this point because they are not digitally schooled which results in not knowing the techniques that well and needing more time when working with those technologies. They also note that the younger generation does have a certain level of knowledge in the digital world and thereby is more able to think creatively when it is about digital tools and applications. One participant mentioned that that is one of the reasons why they like to work with a younger participant:

> *"I love to work with my younger colleague because I know less about digital'*

What is not mentioned by the younger generation, but the older generation does mention is how younger colleagues do their job. The older generation mentioned several times that they find that members from a younger generation have more trouble with structure and depth, and are less able to concentrate. Thereby they mention that the use of digital technology makes them somewhat superficial within their work but also their communication. The fast and flashy character of the digital world is a reason for that regarding a participant:

> *"'yes, I think that is because a lot more information is coming your way, and also because of the communication devices that are available now, you are exposed to a lot more information at a much faster speed. So much more 'snacks' than in-depth stories, look at the difference between first Facebook and Snapchat now, everything in the media is much more volatile"*

Work experience

When looking at work experience both groups agree on the fact that an older employee automatically has gained more experience in work because of time. The factor work experience was also discussed by both groups. The older group mentioned that with gaining more experience in their work, the work became easier. They also told that a certain type of authority gets naturally involved with experience, because of the things they have already seen and done. The younger generation confirms this. The work experience from older colleagues results in a higher perceived credibility. This leads to the fact that a younger generation is more willing to listen to an older, more experienced colleague. This is not always a positive experience, when talking about working with an older colleague one participant mentioned:

> *"I often accept something from them more quickly. It is more difficult to make them understand when you do not agree, for example, or when you know that you are right."*

One person of the older, more experienced group fairly stated that she finds it difficult to define what to expect from a younger generation at work because of their lack of work experience. This is a fair statement of course because the younger generation does not (yet) have the work experience the older generation has. Both groups agreed on the fact that the younger generation could lean on the experience from the older generation and learn from them, but it works also the other way around, for example with digital skills:

> *"Working with older colleagues is nice, you can learn a lot from them through their experience. What I like, sometimes, we are working on a website or social media and the older generation does not know it that well than it is really nice that I can teach them something."*

In the end, the younger generations also noted that after sticking around some time and gaining some work experience, they felt more accepted and therefore better in their work. Because of the work experience, the older generation has gained along with their career, they mention that they have the capacity and ability to help their younger colleagues:

> *'I am happy when I see that the younger generation can take advantage of that older experienced generation that has been working for a longer period'.*

There is a downside of experience, the older and younger groups both mentioned that the older colleagues were more likely to stick to a certain pattern. Having a lot of work experience results in behavior based on earlier experience which is talked about as habits and patterns. When the younger generation does not experience that positively, they refer to that as rustiness or sturdiness:

> '*they are stuck in a certain way of thinking, some really rusted or stuck*'.

Life experience

When looking at life experience both generations agree on the fact that being in a different stage of life brings differences between different generations that are also experienced within work. The knowledge and experience people gained in life is an explanation both groups mention when asking how they think about colleagues of their own generation and the other generation. Both groups state that working with the own in-group is nice because you understand each other and are in the same phase of life:

> "*Well, I think you do can say that if you are from the same generation that you speak the same language. But you are also busy with the same things, so that is also very logical*"

The groups also agree on the fact that there is or that they do feel a small threshold/gap between the generations. The younger generation is busy with other things in life and are more careful with what they say when older colleagues are around. Both groups mentioned that it is nice to have a mixed group of colleagues because you can talk about different subjects. Participants do say that having some colleagues of the own generation is pleasant because you are in the same stage of life. Having not only colleagues of an older generation within the organization is perceived more positively because you have other things to talk about when taking a break:

> "*'We had quite a bit of rejuvenation in the team and that was really nice. I was by far the youngest at first, and that was nice, but if it is only about children during the break, then you are a bit of "oh I am not there yet".*"

Furthermore, the groups talk about a certain kind of distance between older and younger colleagues. Younger colleagues feel more distance in their relationship with older colleagues. The older generation mentions that younger generation colleagues behave differently when being among their own generation colleagues:

> '*when older people are around, they are a bit more careful, young people do not just blurt out everything if the elderly sit near them. They are a bit looser among each other*'

Interestingly, something that is not mentioned often but though remarkable is that the older and younger generations have a different view on relationships at work regarding the interviews. The older generation sees their colleagues in the context of just colleagues by saying explicitly that they are not friends. The younger generation refers to colleagues not only as such but also as friends:

> "*Or that you take someone aside every now and then to ask how they are and yes, I think you also build up a friendship with colleagues more quickly then. That is nicest when possible, that you are not just colleagues, I think* "

4.2. Mentality of generations

The second category that is extracted from the interviews is called 'mentality of generations'. The term 'mentality' can be described as the characteristic way of thinking of a person or a group. Within the interviews the participants often talked about the difference in energy or drive between the groups, think about 'freshness' for the energy of the younger group, and sturdiness for the older group. Four subcategories are distinguished, namely: 'energy', 'self-confidence', 'flexibility' and, '(financial) wealth'. An overview of the subcategories regarding 'mentality of generations' that were mentioned in the semi-structured interviews sample is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of the analysis of different generation perceptions regarding 'mentality of generations'

Category	Definition	Sample comments
Energy	Employee has an innate, biologically determined urge, strength, or vitality to attain a goal or satisfy a need.	Gen. X: *'young people have fresh ideas and search in solutions instead of problems'*

		Gen. Y: *'when you are young, you want to make the most of it and go for* it'
Self-confidence	A feeling of trust in one's abilities, qualities, and judgement.	Gen. X: *'they are more self-confident than my generation'*
		Gen. Y: *'I think that we stand up for ourselves more now'*
Flexibility	Employees' willingness and ability to adapt to change, particularly regarding how and when work is done.	Gen. X: *'young people are less sturdy, they are more flexible and come with new ideas'*
		Gen. Y: *'In terms of working hours it becomes less, most of my colleagues work 4 days instead of 5'*
(Financial) wealth	Employees desire to be wealthy	Gen. X: *'I think that is kind of a Generation Y thing, they have to have it all together, everything has to be perfect'*
		Gen. Y: *'our generation wants a lot, they feel a kind of pressure, that you have to want everything and look everywhere'*

Energy

When looking at the energy a generation brings, both groups agree on the fact that a younger generation employee brings positive energy and motivation. When the younger group (Generation Y) was asked how they viewed themselves and fellow peers as employees they mentioned that they found themselves driven, enthusiastic and energetic. The older group (Generation X) agrees on that by using words as 'enthusiastic', 'motivated', and 'curious'. The younger group has this drive because they want to make most of their career and because work one of the biggest parts of their life, one younger participant mentioned:

> *"Yes, I do have the idea that we may be a bit more driven. Especially the colleagues who may not have children yet. There lies a bit of a line I think, when they have children, they have a different priority. We are almost working all the time and of course, you don't have much else with Corona anyway. But otherwise. Yes, I do think that makes people willing to invest more in work compared to people who have a whole family at home"*

The older group also mentions that they like to work with younger colleagues because they think in possibilities, and they give them new ideas and energy. It keeps them fresh:

> *"the younger generations bring new energy to me and then I get new ideas. They keep me young for a bit"*

Such drive is mentioned along with different attitudes depending on which group mentions it. When talked about negative behavior such drive can lead to striveness or competitiveness and an urge to prove. An example from a younger participant;

''some young colleagues are so competitive, that they then get ahead of themselves'.

However, there is a downside; one older participant mentioned that such energy and enthusiasm can lead to making mistakes because they are too enthusiastic and therefore not listening that well. What also is remarkable, is that the older generation referred to 'the importance of doing meaningful things' when talking about values that the younger generation possess. They mention that they think the younger generation chooses the organization they are willing to work in differently, the younger group has not mentioned such values within the interviews:

"they choose their job differently in terms of employment, it is a bit about meaning' and 'the younger generation is concerned with significance and meaningfulness', 'you have the luxury to say 'I do something I can earn my money with, but also what I enjoy and what has meaning to me', 'they want to work less and less for polluting companies."

Confidence

The second subcategory that can be distinguished within the category mentality is 'confidence'. Both groups mentioned aspects that regard to this term. The older group refers to this by saying that the younger group shows more character than they did when they started their jobs. They intended this to show that when they started at the bottom, they were more willing to accept that:

"It is nice that you passed your studies, but then it all starts/that is just the beginning, I was happy to start at the bottom"

Also, the younger generation finds themselves more self-confident. A factor why young people can be that confident is education, one participant said about herself:

"when having a meeting with a customer I can say to myself; "they ask for our help because they do not know, we are trained for this"."

However, that confidence also has a downside, the younger generation has a certain urge to prove themselves and have to be the best at something. A younger participant mentioned:

> *"Sometimes I think "ha no, I am good at this, I do not want others to get involved, it has to be my thing" that is not completely healthy, but it is reality."*

This can also be confirmed with quotes from the older participants. Older participants find that you have to earn your respect in a way. Such a big show of self-confidence can be undermining for an older generation. Which they do not take positively, in some situations it may even seem more like arrogance than self-confidence:

> *"The pitfall of self-confidence is that get overly chipper/get ahead of yourself, that is the counterpart, but you cannot say; 'make sure you know the balance', because if you do not know the difference between being self-confident and arrogance..."*

Another topic that is broached often by the older generation is that they find the younger generation rather spoiled. Just one of the young participants mentioned that she thought that the older generation would find her generation spoiled. None of the other younger participants mentioned such. Quotes from the older generations were in line with what this participant mentioned:

> *"your generation (generation of interviewer) is used to a luxury life, with all ease and prosperity, you have it pretty good."*

Another example of this is the older group talking about a certain kind of arrogance when talking about younger colleagues, for example:

> *'students come in with such an air, 'I know this and this and this and I am a designer now', no, that is not how it goes/works'.*

One participant of the younger generation mentioned *'I think we stand up for ourselves mor*e' in a positive way. She did not mention that an older generation could receive such an attitude in a negative way. *'You have to earn your respect'* says one of the older participants.

Flexibility

Flexibility is also a term that is mentioned by the two groups. The older and the younger groups both think that the younger group is more flexible in their working hours. One comment of the older generation:

> *'a permanent contract does not say much to me, I think the younger generation will experience that even less'.*

The older generation adds another layer to flexibility, namely character, a younger generation should have less trouble with switching tasks and choosing priorities. The younger generation talked about the older generation as less flexible because of the previous experience they possess. An older participant confirms this:

> *'they have more ease in how they switch in tasks'.*

(Financial) wealth

When asking about things that a younger generation finds important in life the older generation mentions that they think the younger generation is pressured by the 'evidence-culture' that prevails. This is also mentioned by younger participants, for example:

> *'our generation wants a lot, they feel a kind of pressure, that you have to want everything and look everywhere'.*

The older generation, just as the younger generation, feels that there is a kind of pressure on it. The older participant confirms this by saying:

> *'I do notice that with my younger colleague, she finds growth very important, but also financial growth'..*

When talking about money and work values the older generation has several different mentions/suggestions, a common topic that is mentioned about the younger generation is that they place less value on money, for example:

> *'money is less of a motive'* and *'they do want to make money, but other things are also important'.*

About this topic the opinions are divided with the younger generations, some do find money very important, but overall it was stated that enjoying work was more important than earning a lot of money. Another participant (31yo) mentioned:

> *'if I stayed with my previous job I probably earned more, but I rather enjoy my work than earn more'*. Another participant (25yo) mentioned *'I want to work hard now and earn money, and if I can/may ever have children I can take a day less'*.

4.3. Non-generational factors

Interestingly, several participants addressed the influence of non-generational factors that provide differences in perceptions between generations, such as gender, race, and region even though the interview questions focused on generation-related experiences and perceptions. These examples served the understanding of the phenomenon differently in that they were examples of how participants felt judged other than on age or generation (Alwin & McCammon, 2007; Biggs, 2007; Hogg et al.; Joshi et al., 2010; King et al., 2019; Kitch, 2003). We will discuss these comments in this section. Six subcategories are distinguished, namely; 'being young', 'inherence to time and generation', 'role within the organization', 'character', 'life stage' and 'region'. An overview of the subcategories regarding 'non-generational factors' influencing different generation perspectives that were mentioned in the semi-structured interviews is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of the analysis of different generation perceptions regarding 'non-generational factors'

Category	Definition	Sample comments
Being young	Employee mentions that he/she finds themselves still young minded.	Gen. X: *'I am a bit older, but I do think I am still doing well in keeping track'*
Inherence to time and generation	Because of changes in time or world, people change too.	Gen. X: *'Every youth, every generation is young and wants to change something at a certain point, they want to change anyway, those differences have already been prompted, that is simply the case.'*
Role within organization	Employees' role or function based on the experience he or she has gained through his or her working life.	Gen. X: *'I think that is very much due to your own attitude. Of course, those roles are shifting over the years"-" but it is, that is a lot of fun. I actually really enjoy also joining their world'* Gen. Y: *'That lives not so much here, but that is more due to our organizational culture"*

Character	Personal traits of an employee	Gen. X: *'It is different for everyone, how they work, everyone has their own approach'.*
Life stage	The different phases of life that all individuals pass through in a (normal) lifetime.	*Gen. X: 'It has always been like this, when I had no children I looked at older people that way too, it's just a different stage of life'*
Region	An area of a country, especially one that has definable characteristics.	Gen. X: *'I do think it is important to bring a kind of view from the west to the things I am involved in, that not only Twente is part of it' – 'It is good to have local perspectives, but it is not good to have local perspectives only.'*
		Gen. Y: *'In our region there is not such a 'cowboypolicy', no, they do not throw with money like that over here. Everything stayed normal here, to say so. Yes, that sounds a bit peasant maybe, but things are still just normal over here.'*

Being young

Participants of the older group (Generation X) mentioned several times that they still found themselves quite young. The somewhat older participant had to press it. By mentioning this, they deny the fact that they are older and want to emphasize they still go with the flow and want to be on the same level as the younger generation (Generation Y). So they deny the fact that generational differences lead to differences between colleagues:

> *'I think I am there still a bit'* and *'actually, we are like children in a playground'*

It is inherent to time/generation

The fact that there do exist differences between generations should not only be ascribed to generation. The participants (mostly the older) also refer to inherence to time and inherence to the phenomenon generation. Because of change in time, the world changes, and thus the people living in it change too. So a generation born and raised in a certain time period would behave differently than a generation that is born and raised in another period of time. One participant noted that is a reason why younger people would think differently:

> *'yes but that is inherent to this time, it is all different, fleeting, automated, the passion may be the same but there are other means, the method is different now, so'*

Another participant quoted that it is just typical for a generation to want change:

'Those, what we now call 'the older generation', they already did that within their bandwidth, so I guess, let me put it that way. I think that this is typical of a younger generation'

Role within organization

Role or function is also a factor why differences between older and younger colleagues are experienced. When asked about how it is to work with colleagues of different generations also function is an explanation. At one point age is not as relevant anymore but is it about the experience you gained and what you are doing with it. With having more experience most of the time getting another higher function comes along. So said one older participant:

'Yes, it differs. But I do not know if that has to do with generation, I think it is a bit like, with us, the elderly have also been in service the longest, so it may have to do more with experience than with age'

They also mention a certain kind of hierarchy. Hierarchy is about a certain ranking to relative status or authority. This hierarchy comes naturally/automatically with experience, because that experience leads to a higher function and a higher function leads to a certain kind of authority. Those roles shift over the years because of gaining experience, so a certain kind of authority is inherent with the gaining of experience.

'So I'm not as much concerned with whether I'm working with a younger generation or with someone older because hierarchy is not an issue with us - of course, there is a hierarchy, you know. Some people have more to cope towards a customer, but it is mainly about the role you have'

If employees experience big differences it should be the organizational culture that provides that. When hierarchy is not (or less) there or when older colleagues do not show of that much, people experience very little or less difference among colleagues, which is talked about as a positive factor with the participants.

'With us, there is very little hierarchy in the company anyway, so I think everyone is equal to each other. And that's why you notice that I think there is very little difference between old and young " - "I can imagine that it may be very different at other companies. Maybe some of my colleagues say something else, but I don't see it that way'

Character

Almost all participants mentioned character traits or personality as a factor of differences between colleagues, old or young. For example, when asked about how they experience working with older or younger colleagues they answered with:

> *'Maybe older people approach differently, but not different from me, I think, it depends more on character, I have 3 colleagues who are older, but they are all very different'*

An interesting quote is:

> *"I think you can attach generalities to the generation and recognize it, but within that, I think it is very much about personal traits"*

Life stage

Also, the phase you are in life is an example of why different generations experience differences between generations. Life stages refer to the different phases of life that all individuals pass through in a normal lifetime. These are the interests, actions, and behaviors that are common and uniform throughout the human race. Such as adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life and old age. Some participants referred to having children as a different phase, one older participant:

> *'Sometimes I think, you just wait and see, for example, I have two children, always worked 28-32 hours, and then you hear them say 'that nagging about children', then I think 'yes, you know, I have always worked those hours, with all those sleepless nights and I was present in the morning', 'Has always been like this, when I had no children I looked at older people that way too, it's just a different stage of life'*

One younger participant on the other hand:

> *'you notice, for example with the Friday drinks that those with children are the first to leave and the young people without children are left, that is logical, we do not have to pick up children from the daycare, or make sure they get food '-' when we get home half an hour later, it doesn't matter'.*

Others referred to the different interests and values you develop during life;

> *'What I find important in my work, meaning/meaningfulness, but I cannot say that has always been the case in my working life, as you get older, you have more peace and quiet, you start to think, what do I really think is important'*

Region

Participants, old as well as young, also mentioned region as an influencing factor in the perception of differences between colleagues. Region refers to an area of a country that has a particular characteristic or something that it is known for. One participant mentioned that there is a difference in the Eastern and Western organizational spheres, in which the area he lives and works in, the East of the country, was talked about more positively:

> '*There is an Eastern and a Western sphere in organizations, and that Western sphere is indeed more dominant and more demanding, per definition.*'

Employees from the East of the Netherlands and also working in that area of the Netherlands do have a certain kind of image of Western companies and also of employees coming from that area, one participant mentioned:

> '*Here, in Twente, is just a very different mentality than in the West of the country. I will not say that if you are from the West of our country, that you do not fit in here, but on your first day you cannot enter our organization and say 'Well, here I am, and I will tell you how it should go'.*'

Employees that have their origin in the East of the Netherlands, mentioned they liked working at their company, because their colleagues were from the same area:

> '*Yes, good, fine, it are people from around here, so they do have a certain mentality' – 'I also have experience in working with other companies, where you often work with clients in the West of the Netherlands. You notice that there is just a difference, it is not a big deal, but it is different' – 'here it is, as something has to be done, then we do it and go for it and you want to help each other*'

Participants that do not have their roots in the East of the country mention that there is a difference in how people are within areas in the Netherlands. Examples that are mentioned are that people from the East are somewhat sturdy, sometimes even cold and afraid of change. One participant mentioned that she perceived differences in one's point of view when a person is from another area of the Netherlands:

'I do not notice it that much in age, I do notice it more in a certain point of view whether you come from the city or from a village, or that you, I differ it between the south and the east of the Netherlands, that people here are very sober'

5. Discussion

This chapter describes the theoretical and practical implications of this research. Consequently, the limitations of this research with recommendations for future research are discussed. Lastly the conclusion of this study in stated.

Implications

The way in which different generation colleagues think about and perceive each other is an important influencing factor within intergenerational relationships at organizations. (King et al., 2019; Van Rossem, 2018). With a qualitative exploration on the perceptions that different generations have about each other, this research aimed to contribute to literature on generational identification at work. Consequently, the results confirm formerly identified relevance of a social identity perspective for intergenerational research in organizational life (Foster, 2013; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Urick & Hollensbe, 2014). Previous research regarding intergenerational 'working' has mainly focused on the quantitative, measurable traits of a generation (Anderson et al., 2017; Joshi et al., 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Pînzaru et al., 2016; Spiro, 2006; Twenge, 2010). By looking beyond cohort-based generational characteristics this research complements generational conceptualization in organizational teamwork and organizational identity development. The current study joins the research line of generational identification with social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and self-categorization (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1985) by examining the specific ways in which younger and older colleagues see each other and themselves from their own perspectives. When employees base their behavior on such perceptions, this could lead to social categorization and stereotyping. This may lead to dysfunctional behavior, which may get in the way of cooperation and decision-making within the workplace (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; Hogg et al., 2012; Urick & Hollensbe, 2014).

First, this study shows that employees do perceive differences between different generation employees at work. This confirms earlier research which argues that different generations at work perceive each other differently (Anderson et al., 2017; Finkelstein, et al., 2010; King et al., 2019; Lyons et al., 2015; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge, 2010). These differences are perceived in the experience that different generations have and the mentality

of different generation employees. Differences in the experience of generations may for example lead to a dissimilar feeling of authority and a feeling of distance between different generation employees. Differences in the mentality of generations may lead to perceived dissimilarities in given effort, energy, and, flexibility. When talking about the experience of generations both of the groups mentioned that having (or not) the experience is just the way it is and therefore easier accepted. When groups perceived differences in the mentality of generations this was harder to accept. It could be a possibility that experience is more easier accepted because experience is gained through the years, which means that people do not have that much influence on it. Mentality, on the other hand, is a factor that people are more likely to think is changeable, because it is a personal characteristic, and therefore less easier accepted when it is a differentiating factor between generations. As read in Chapter 4.3., employees also perceive differences between different generation employees that are not directly related to generational factors. Therefore, identification with other generation employees happens also based on non-generational factors. This confirms earlier research that suggest that different generation employees perceive each other differently, because one's generational identification varies for example by the character of a person or the region a person comes from (Arsenault, 2004; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry, 2014; Veingerl & Sarotar Zizek, 2017). For further research, it would be helpful to investigate further how generational prototypes emerge and what influence they have on different generation employees and a multi-generational organization.

Sometimes generations agree on perceived differences. The results show that employees of generational groups prescribe traits to themselves corresponding with traits the other generational group ascribes to them. For example, both groups mentioned that the younger generation brings enthusiasm, fresh ideas, and digital knowledge to an organization. The older generation contributes to an organization by giving structure and experience on an organizational level. Similar to Gilleard (2004), Foster (2013) and Lyons & Kuron (2014) the experience of themselves and older or younger colleagues is an important factor within forming perceptions about each other. Both groups did agree on this by commenting that they both find that the older generation is less digitally skilled than younger generation. When the group ascribed differentiating traits to the other groups it happened mostly in comparison with the own group. When this was done the other group was sketched as an out-group in which traits indeed were prototyped more heavily (Hogg, 2012; Hogg & Reid, 2006). For example, when the younger group talked about themselves as flexible, the other, older group were ascribed traits as sturdy and non-flexible.

Sometimes generations differenced in perceptions about each other. An example of this is that the groups did have different perceptions about values and norms of the other group and friendships at work. The younger group mentioned they like to form friendships with their colleagues, the older group does not aim for friendship with colleagues. Some generalities could be attributed to the fact of being from a certain generation ((Anderson et al., 2017; Joshi et al., 2011; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Pînzaru et al., 2016; Spiro, 2006; Twenge, 2010). Other factors, such as, experience, role, function, hierarchy, and life phase, play a role too in perceiving differences between older and younger generations at work (Arsenault, 2004; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry, 2014; Veingerl & Sarotar Zizek, 2017). Within these factors, coming from a generation could be a reinforcing factor, but it is not said that differences between young and old can be fully ascribed to generational traits. Therefore, the present study demonstrates that to move forward in generational identity research, it is important to investigate social and generational identity in the perceptions of employees.

This study gained insights in how different generation employees perceive each other at work and which factors within these perceptions play a great part. By viewing generations as a social construct, it is confirmed that people do perceive differences between generational characteristics, but that not generational characteristics alone have an influence on the perceptions of different generation colleagues (Veingerl & Sarotar Zizek, 2017). The richness of seeing generations as discourse and as a cultural field complements the research on generational identity at work (Foster, 2013; Gilleard, 2004). By asking how different generations view themselves and different generations at work, more knowledge is gained about how employees act and contribute within a multi-generational organization. This qualitative approach leads to a realistic evaluation of intergenerational relationships within organizational life. Knowing in which areas employees do experience differences between generations gives more direction to what the underlying factors of inter-generational conflicts are at work and thereby brings us one step closer to a better understanding of the multi-generational workforce and the challenges it brings.

To conclude, this qualitative inquiry shows an exploration of how perceptions are formed about other generational groups and considered as real. This gives a better understanding in the underlying dynamics of intergenerational relationships at work. Having this knowledge may help managers and employers improve their multi-generational employee management. By viewing members of generations as social individuals who also have their

own personal strengths and characteristics besides their generational traits, organizations can pull the best contribution out of those different generations. If employers are able to make their employees more aware of one's own generational identity, by understanding the differences between self and others and learn how to behave in situations that are sensitive for certain generations (i.e. experience and mentality). This will contribute to reciprocal knowledge sharing within the organization, which is important for team-success because generations can help each other to a higher level. In the end, this will lead to a better employee management, communication and conflict-management for multi-generational organizations.

Limitations

Although this research contributed to the empirical knowledge within generational identity research, several limitations should be noted. These findings are based on a small number of participants (n = 18). Although theoretically data saturation can be achieved with 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006), it is not stated that the perceptions identified within this study are the only perceptions that exist within intergenerational relationships at work. I look forward to seeing similar studies conducted with other samples so that findings can be compare and extended. Further, when talking about younger generation colleagues also interns were taken into account. Interns have less work experience which could have influenced the findings of this study. Thereby, it might be a possibility that interns do have a different attitude within and towards an organization because of their short-term position. Young colleagues with a permanent contract could therefore be different in taking their position within an organization. For future research it is recommended to get more insights into how interns and permanent employees see their position in an organization and act towards that to make conclusions more reliable.

This study aimed to investigate stereotyped perceptions. At the end of the interviews, the participants were directly asked if they found they stereotyped. Almost all of the participants noted they did not. As Weeks et al. (2016) and Gardner & Macky (2012) discussed, social categorization may generate stereotyped views. With inter-group comparison, stereotypical perceptions are very important and may inadvertently encourage behaviors of older and younger generations complicit with these perceptions. Herein stereotypes are a means for creating self-fulfilling prophecies. Stereotyping might have a great impact on the perceptions between different generations. By the hard denial on the question if the participant stereotyped, it can be said that participants inadvertently did

stereotype. This could be a very nuanced finding of stereotyped perceptions within the field of generational identification. This study focused on perceptions different generations experienced between generations. To examine stereotyping, a possible inquiry for further research could be to focus on the consequences of formed generational perceptions, instead of only examining generational perceptions. By questioning 'What are the consequences of viewing older generations as experienced and younger generations as flexible?' and 'Which effect does that have on the behavior of different generation employees?', research can be taken a step further and look at the consequences of those different generational perceptions.

Also, although the sampling aimed to recruit members of all four generations, this research resulted in having only two generations present in the sample. It could be a possibility that within the focus marketing communication organizations the divide in generations is not that big because the digital nature of it. As Generation Y already says they are not as capable with technology as Generation X, it is even less likely earlier generations have great capability with technology, which could be a reason why not all four generations are represented in the sample. As mentioned, technology plays a big role within the execution of tasks in marketing-communication organizations. Therefore, the category 'technology' does not have to stand out as a result when doing such research in another sector. Another limitation in this study is that cultural differences were not considered, although several employees from different cultural backgrounds participated. Therefore the generalizability of the results may be lower, because most of the participants lived in the east of the Netherlands. Future research should consider to take other sectors and cultures in account, because generational perceptions at work could differ between sectors and regions or cultures. This would lead to a higher generisability of given results.

Despite these limitations, this research serves as a valuable addition for future research into generational identity research within organizations. In particular, as this research focused primarily on employees' perceptions and the ways in which (how) employees of different generations contribute to an/their organization it contributes to the knowledge about how differences between generations at work occur and how to use those to get to the most optimal functioning of/within an organization. Ultimately, this increases our understanding of why the generational identity approach is a valuable approach within generational research and contributes to practical implications for managers in how to increase the functioning of a multi-generational organization.

Conclusion

Taken together, this study confirms that generations are inter-related and multi-dimensional social groups by finding that, within generational identification, generational factors as well as non-generational factors play a role when forming perceptions at work. Within generational factors 'experience of generations' (i.e., digital skills, work experience, and life experience) and 'mentality of generations' (i.e., energy, self-confidence, flexibility, and (financial) wealth) are of influence on different generation perceptions. However, also non-generational factors are of influence within generational identification (i.e., being young, inherence to time/generation, role within organization, character, life stage, and region). Different perceptions generations have about each other may lead to dissimilarities between different generation employees, which in turn may lead to challenges within multi-generational organizations. The outcomes of this study provide more insight in how different generation employees form perceptions about themselves and other through the lens of generational identification and gives more insight in the generational differences and challenges they bring within multi-generational organizations. With this knowledge, employers can make their employees more aware of one's generational identity and create a better understanding of the dynamics between different generation employees. This will contribute to reciprocal knowledge sharing within the organization, which is important for team-success, communication and the overall functioning of a multi-generational organization.

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APPENDIX A: STUDY

Interview guide (Dutch)

This appendix contains the interview guide for the semi-structured interviews. The exact questions that were posed to the respondents were dependent on their generation.

Interview guide

Introductie:
Goedemorgen/-middag, ik zal mij eerst even voorstellen. Mijn naam is Valerie en op dit moment ben ik bezig met mijn eindonderzoek voor de Master. In mijn onderzoek kijk ik naar generatieverschillen op de werkvloer. Ik spreek hiervoor met verschillende generaties binnen jullie branche om te kijken hoe dat samen gaat.

Heel erg bedankt dat je deel wilt nemen aan dit interview! Heb je voordat we beginnen aan dit interview nog vragen?

Antwoord respondent

Oke, dan zou ik graag nog even een paar dingen benadrukken voordat we gaan beginnen. Dit interview is geheel anoniem, in mijn onderzoeksverslag gebruik ik geen namen, dus jouw antwoorden kunnen niet naar jou toe worden herleid. Is dat goed?

Antwoord respondent

Mooi. Vind je het ook goed dat ik dit interview opneem? Dan kan ik namelijk nu goed naar jou luisteren en hoef ik niet tussendoor alles mee te typen. Ik zal de opname met niemand delen; ik gebruik het enkel om ons gesprek later uit te kunnen typen. Is dit goed?

Antwoord respondent

Dan kunnen we beginnen met het interview! Als je tussendoor vragen hebt of een opmerking mag je mij natuurlijk onderbreken, bijvoorbeeld als je de vraag niet begrijpt of liever geen antwoord op de vraag geeft.

ALGEMEEN

1. Eerst zou ik graag een beeld willen vormen van jou als persoon en als werknemer.
   - Zou je me wat meer over jezelf kunnen vertellen?
   - En over de organisatie?

   Vertel, wat is jouw rol binnen de organisatie?
   a. Wat vind je belangrijk in je werk?
   b. Wie zijn belangrijk in je werk, met wie werk je samen?
2. Welke groep is het meest belangrijk?
3. In hoeverre voel je dat je deel uit maakt van de groepen/teams waarvan je vertelt dat ze belangrijk zijn?

   Wanneer men het niet heeft over zijn/haar team, organisatie of generatie, vraag hierover;
4. Je hebt het niet gehad over leeftijdsverschillen? Waarom niet?

   OF; In hoeverre vind je dat je deel uitmaakt van de groep, wat zijn overeenkomsten, wat zijn verschillen?

IDENTIFICATIE GEBASSEERD OP HOE DE JONGERE GENERATIE HEN ZIET

5. Hoe denk jij dat jongere generaties jullie zien?
6. Hoe is samenwerken met jongere generaties?
7. Denk je dat jongere generaties op een bepaalde manier naar jullie kijken?
8. Denk je dat jongere generaties op een andere manier met jullie omgaan? Samenwerken?
9. Denk je dat er een andere werksfeer is met jongere mensen omdat zij misschien anders naar jullie kijken?

IDENTIFICATIE GEBASEERD OP HOE DE OUDERE GENERATIE HEN ZIET

10. Hoe denk jij dat oudere generaties jullie zien?
11. Hoe is samenwerken met oudere generaties?
12. Denk je dat oudere generaties op een bepaalde manier naar jullie kijken?
13. Denk je dat oudere generaties op een andere manier met jullie omgaan? Samenwerken?
14. Denk je dat er een andere werksfeer is met oudere mensen omdat zij miss anders naar jullie kijken?

IDENTIFICATIE GEBASEERD OP HOE ZIJ DENKEN DAT DE PERCEPTIE VAN DE ANDERE GENERATIE IS (THOUGHT VIEW)

Hoe denk jij over oudere/jongere werknemers?

15. Wat vind jij van samenwerken met oudere/jongere generaties?
    a. Hoe denk je dat andere leeftijdsgenoten naar jullie jongere/oudere collega's kijken?
16. Was dat eerder anders? Samenwerken met oudere/jongere generaties?

Waardoor komt dat denk je?

17. Is er verschil met vroeger (hoe men werknemers benaderd)? Hoe werden collega's vroeger ontvangen? En nu?

18. Hoe werd jij ontvangen bijvoorbeeld? Gaat dat nog steeds zo?

   Hoe is het nu voor een werknemer om een bedrijf binnen te stappen?

19. Hoe denk je dat jongere/oudere werknemers in het werkleven staan?

   a. Wat vind je daarvan?

STEREOTYPERING

20. Denk jij dat er generatieverschillen zijn op werk? Wat denk jij van generatieverschillen op werk?

   a. Waardoor komt dit?

21. Denk je dat het hebben van bepaalde percepties over generaties de manier van gedrag en/of samenwerken beïnvloeden?

   Waarom?

22. Denk jij dat anderen bepaalde percepties hebben van generatieverschillen onder collega's?

   Ja/nee, waarom denk je dat dat zo is?

23. Is werken met verschillende leeftijdsgroepen daardoor anders?

   Waarom dan? En hoe is dat dan?

24. Denk jij dat werkelijke verschillen in leeftijd de organisatie beïnvloeden?

25. Denk jij dat bepaalde percepties/beelden/stereotyperingen van leeftijdsgroepen de organisatie beïnvloeden?

26. Denk jij dat andere generaties bepaalde stereotyperende ideeën hebben over generaties?

   a. Waardoor komt dat denk je?

Slotvraag

27. Heb je er ooit over nagedacht dat percepties/stereotyperingen gebaseerd op leeftijd een organisatie kan beïnvloeden?