Relational age and leader–member exchange: mediating role of perceived trust

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on similarity-attraction hypothesis and generational gap literatures, this study aims to examine the impact of age difference in a leader–member dyad on leader–member exchange (LMX). The study hypothesized that relational age would impact the subordinates-reported LMX. However, given that leaders have structural power over subordinates and hence have mechanisms of interaction available to them, the age difference might not determine their perception of quality of LMX. The study also hypothesized that generation gap in values and beliefs leads to lack of trust, on the part of subordinates, which in turn might be the reason for poor quality of LMX.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 200 leader–member dyads from five organizations in the National Capital Region of India were used in this study. Data were collected via separate structured questionnaires for leaders and members, which comprised of standard scales of LMX and perceived trust, and demographics.

Findings – Hypotheses received substantial support from the data with a few exceptions. Only the loyalty dimension of perceived trust mediates the relationship between relational age and member perception of LMX.

Research limitations/implications – Results have implications for relational age and LMX interventions. However, the results are to be viewed in the light of members' perspective. While this is a common practice in LMX research, it would be interesting to explore leaders' trust and psychological reactions as well, for additional insights into leadership practice.

Originality/value – Limited work has been done to explore the impact of relational age on LMX, that too mediated by trust. An attempt has been made in this study to do so via leader–member dyads.

Keywords LMX, Relational age, Trust–loyalty, Trust–faith

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Inherent in the concept of leadership is the concept of followership. Understanding of leadership involves treating subordinates as active participants which provides rich insights into practical manifestation of leadership (Bhal and Ansari, 1996, 2000, 2007; Bhal et al., 2008). The leader–member exchange (LMX) theory has attempted a conceptualization of leadership that simultaneously blends both the leader and the member[1]. Dansereau et al. (1975) have defined LMX as a unique relationship shared between a supervisor and his/

her subordinate. Focus, hence, is on the leader–member dyad (Dansereau *et al.*, 1975). Researchers over the years have time and again made critical theoretical contributions to the underlying dynamics and the functional aspects of LMX.

Though attempts have been made to study the impact of demographic variables such as age and gender on LMX quality, there seems to be relatively limited research on the match between the demographic factors of the leader–member in a dyad. Tsui and O'Reilly (1989) defined relational demography as the "comparative demographic characteristics of the dyad or group members." Relational demographics can be categorized as visible and job-related (Pelled, 1996). Visible relational demographics include dimensions such as age, gender and tenure, which may not be important for the task at hand, but they do shape people, their behaviors and perceptions (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). In the context of LMX, it is more salient, given the dyadic nature of relationship (Truxillo and Burlacu, 2015). Although researchers have studied gender (Bhal *et al.*, 2007), the issue of age as a relational demographic and its influence on LMX has not been systematically explored (Walter and Scheibe, 2013). Generational cohorts are shown to have similar values, beliefs and political outlook; however, with generational differences, relational age is likely to be an important factor in understanding the quality of LMX in a dyad (Schaffer and Riordan, 2013).

Another important element that impacts the quality of the relationship within a dyad is perceived trust. Perceived trust is described as an employee's trust in his or her leader (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Ascribed to social exchange process and interpersonal relationship with the leader, it has a positive association with LMX. It is likely that age differences in leader–member dyads do not provide enough opportunity for trust to develop, thus, leading to poor LMX quality. In other words, it is possible that the relationship between relational age and LMX gets mediated by trust.

Thus, we contribute to the existing leadership literature by integrating three important constructs – relational age, perceived trust and LMX. We first assess the impact of relational age on the quality of LMX and then examine the mediating role of trust in this relationship.

Theory and hypotheses
Relational age and leader–member exchange
Past research (Tsui and O'Reilly, 1989; Tsui *et al.*, 1995; Williams and O'Reilly, 1998) has shown that relational demographics have a critical role in determining leaders' perception of their subordinates. Though researchers such as Epitropaki and Martin (1999) have emphasized the role of influence of relational age on LMX, limited work has been done to explore the effect of relational demographics on members' evaluation of their leaders. Further, a review of the literature (Lau *et al.*, 2008) suggests that not much work has been done to substantiate the effect of relational demographics on perceived trust within the leader–member dyads and the consequent relationship between the two. This further provides us impetus to explore this particular relationship.

Relational demographics can be understood in the context of similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971). It seems the cause of its impact is a mixture of intensity of attraction based on similarity in attitudes, experiences values, and communication between the interacting members of a team or dyad. In other words, people tend to be drawn and engaged to those who are much like them in terms of attitudes, personality traits and demographic characteristics (Baskett, 1973).

Theory and practice are replete with evidence on how generational cohorts perceive and value issues similarly, implying a gap in perceptions and beliefs across different age groups (Twenge, 2010). A generation is defined as an identifiable group that shares age and significant life events at critical developmental stages (Kupperschmidt, 2000). People of the

same generation are in similar phases of their lives. As a result, they are likely to have common life experiences, interests and attitudes. These common experiences result in establishing common values (Cogin, 2012; Pelled and Xin, 2000). Such similarities help in developing loyalty, trust and liking between the leader–member vertical dyad (Bhal and Ansari, 1996), consequently leading to high-quality LMX. LMX has been categorized as low quality and high quality. Low quality is the transactional exchange between leader and subordinate strictly based on formally decided goals and expected performance; thus, it is restricted to basic economic exchange wherein there is no expectation or effort to go beyond defined role of the members of the dyad (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, high-quality LMX is ascribed to mutual trust, obligation, liking, respect and contribution between the leader and member (Bhal and Ansari, 1996). Clearly, when employees establish common values, attitudes and interests, it is bound to result in high-quality exchange within a dyad.

However, on the contrary, generational differences may cause misunderstanding, miscommunication and mixed signals. When members of a dyad belong to different age categories, it is a challenge for them to effortlessly have interactive conversation (Josef Gellert and Schalk, 2011). For employees born between 1946 and 1964 (i.e. *Boomers*), the work ethos, values and perceptions of people and life are different from those born thereafter, i.e. generation X (GenX) and the millennials (GenY) (Smola and Sutton, 2002). Millennials are believed to be the first of their kind, such that it is born into a wired world ensuring that they are connected 24/7 (Ryan, 2000). The work values that define right and wrong vary from generation to generation. So, when the leader and the member are from the same generation, they have compatibility in technical skills, hard work, creativity and ambition (Rudolph and Zacher, 2015). When leaders and subordinates experience shared goals and aspirations, they are likely to exhibit higher levels of contribution, respect, liking loyalty and faith in each other (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012). This further facilitates role clarity, frequent and systematic communication, leading to high-quality LMX. It also induces social integration, frequent interaction and affiliation (Tsui *et al.*, 1992). Researchers have established that similarity in age is positively linked to communication (Zenger and Lawrence, 1989). Therefore, there is a high probability that similarity in age results in more positive exchange between the supervisor–subordinate dyads (Pelled and Xin, 2000) subsequently improving LMX quality. Thus, we posit:

> *H1.* Relational age is positively associated with LMX from the subordinate's perspective, such that the greater the age difference, the lower would be the quality of LMX.

Though we hypothesize that LMX from subordinate's perspective will be associated with relational age, the same may not be true from the leader's perspective. This can be attributed to the fact that leaders, because of their structural position, exercise legitimate authority, which is always linked to domination as a function of social positions or roles (Coleman, 2013). It is a consensual understanding wherein the leader must command and the subordinate must obey. For leaders, hence, the hierarchical position of authority is likely to render relational age as irrelevant. Therefore, we hypothesize

> *H2.* Relational age is not significantly related with LMX from leader's perspective.

Relational age and perceived trust
Several studies (Armstrong-Stassen and Lee, 2009; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Lancaster and Stillman, 2003; Riordan and Shore, 1997; Shore *et al.*, 2003) have pointed out that there are systematic differences in beliefs and values among people of different age cohorts. As

mentioned earlier, similarity in age seems to encourage individuals to feel a sense of trust, eventually leading to identification-based trust, which is explained as absolute empathy with the other individual's wants and intentions (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). Individual's perceptions of their dependence on one another in a group have an impact on their belief about the other person's trustworthiness (Robbins, 2016). It definitely makes them feel integral to the group, gives them a sense of social identity and fosters communication. Thus, it appears that when relative age difference within the dyad is narrow, it leads to higher levels of interaction, likeability, respect and hence, high trust in each other. Previous work on social identity claims that positive beliefs linked with similar group membership impacts cooperation and trust (Kramer, 1993). It is therefore interesting to look at the dynamics between relational age and perceived trust in the context of the self-categorization theory that states a person's self-evaluation is partially a function of his/her dyad/group membership (Chatman and Flynn, 2001). Hence, relational demographic (age) helps to form a social category wherein they classify themselves and others in groups. Brewer (1981) suggests that categorizing individuals into groups can lead them to perceive out-group members as less cooperative, honest and trustworthy than members of their own group. Thus, an individual's self-image and identity is not only based on this particular group, but this group also helps him/her differentiate self from other groups. It is safe to assume that such groups also generate higher levels of perceived trust. Individuals believe that others similar to them are easier to work with, communicate and trust, eventually ensuring a sense of credibility and stability (Poppo *et al.*, 2016). Stephan and Stephan (1985) are of the opinion that an individual who views him/herself different from others experiences anxiety while interacting with people, thus reducing the ability to develop any sort of liking or trust with dissimilar individuals. Some studies (Alagna *et al.*, 1982) have shown that when there are visible demographic differences (in this case, age), it leads to distrust and conflict. This is likely to further deteriorate the ability of members of a dyad to communicate effectively and frequently, leading to difference in attitudes such as perceived trust. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3. Relational age is negatively associated with perceived trust, such that the greater the age difference, the lower would be the perceived trust.

Perceived trust and leader–member exchange

LMX is an exchange-based theory wherein leaders give out rewards and resources to subordinates, and in exchange, subordinates apply their knowledge and attitudes to contribute meaningfully to their work group and organization (Bhal, 2006). Trust being an important component of social exchanges is crucial for subordinates to believe that their leaders' future actions will be beneficial (Gatling *et al.*, 2017). According to Brower *et al.* (2000), trust and LMX overlap in terms of three counts: (a) both require a certain amount of reciprocity, (b) both are based on perceptions of members of the dyad and (c) there is a possibility of differences in perceptions of the two parties (e.g. leader and member). Reciprocity or balanced understanding of relationships leads to trust which contributes to the good quality of relationship. Studies in the past have affirmed the positive impact of trust on LMX (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012; Pelled and Xin, 2000; Wat and Shaffer, 2005). Though trust initially is based on cognitive rational approach, as the relationship evolves, trust is formed on liking, mutual concern and respect (McAllister, 1995). Evidently, once there is trust within the dyad, it will lead to high-quality LMX. Hence, we hypothesize:

H4. Perceived trust is positively related to LMX.

Perceived trust as a mechanism of the relational age–leader–member exchange link
The dynamic interplay of relational age, perceived trust and LMX within the dyad is also a result of the difference in generations of employees at the workplace. There is empirical evidence (Twenge, 2010) for generational differences in work values, attitudes and belief systems, wherein a high age gap within a dyad leads to less interaction. This results in lower levels of trust, liking and loyalty – ultimately causing the relationship to be strictly transactional in nature. In fact, a study by Wong *et al*. (2008) highlights that difference in age groups results in varying behaviors and attitudes in the workplace. Hence, taking this further, we hypothesize:

> *H5.* Perceived trust mediates the relationship between relational age and member LMX, such that the influence of relational age on LMX becomes smaller (partial mediation) or non-significant (full mediation) after controlling for perceived trust.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, there is no research that has attempted to examine the role of perceived trust as a mediator between relational age and LMX. Thus, we bridge this gap in the existing literature by attempting to explore the role of trust as a mechanism in this setting.

Method
Research site, participants and procedure
Because our focus was on micro-level dyadic data, we did not expect significant differences across macro variables such as industry. Out of 15 organizations that were contacted in the National Capital Region (NCR) of New Delhi, five were selected randomly (railways, power, construction, hospitality and trading organizations) for the sample. Data were collected personally from randomly selected leaders and their subordinates at the middle/senior managerial positions.

A total of 419 completed responses were received, of which 400 were acceptable. A total of 200 subordinates and their 81 immediate supervisors, at an average of 2.47 subordinates per leader, comprised the sample for this study.

The leaders and members consisted of 16 and 23% females; and 84 and 77% males, respectively. The average age of leader and subordinates was 49.61 years (SD = 7.86) and 40.53 years (SD = 12.27), respectively. A total of 63% of leaders and 50% of members held postgraduate degrees. Leaders and subordinates showed a mean tenure of 4.67 years (SD = 4.53) and 4.22 years (SD = 6.60) in present position; 19.77 years (SD = 12.45) and 10.76 years (SD = 11.67) in present organization; and 27.18 years (SD = 8.59) and 16.97 years (SD = 12.22) in total work experience.

We equated age difference across leaders and members as indicator of generational differences using a *t*-test. Results showed that leaders' age (M = 49.5 years, SD = 7.8) was significantly higher than members' age (M = 41.3 years, SD = 12.13; $t_{(192)}$ = 8.45, p < 0.01).

Measures
Leader–member exchange. We assessed dyads with a 12-item four-dimensional (contribution, affect, loyalty, respect) LMX-MDM scale (Liden and Maslyn, 1998). However, we excluded loyalty and used only nine items as loyalty has been combined with faith measure to construct a trust scale (see below), which in turn is hypothesized to act as a mechanism in the model. Because we were interested in the global LMX construct, we combined the nine items of the scale to get a generic assessment of LMX. We asked the respondents to rate on a seven-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) how true

the statements were to their relationship with the immediate supervisor/subordinate. Sample items included, "I like my subordinate very much as a person" for the supervisors and "I like my leader very much as a person" for the subordinates.

Perceived trust. Podsakoff *et al.* (1990)'s trust scale conceptualized the construct of trust as faith in and loyalty toward leader. For our study, given the connotations of loyalty in LMX, we were interested in the two unique aspects of trust. Hence, we treated them as two different dimensions of trust–faith in leader (three items) and loyalty toward leader (two items). The items, rated on a seven-point scale, included "I have complete faith in the integrity of my leader" (faith) and "I have a strong sense of loyalty toward my leader" (loyalty).

Relational age. The relational scores were computed by squaring the difference between the leader's and member's age – a procedure used and recommended by Tsui and O'Reilly (1989).

Personal-demographics. Single-statement items were used to assess demographic variables.

Results

Goodness of measures

To examine the psychometric properties of the measures and collect some evidence against common method bias, we performed a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) by means of SPSS/Amos 21 statistical software. Four measures were used to assess the fit of structural models: the goodness of fit index (GFI), the adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI; Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1984), comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne and Cudeck, 1993). The model was evaluated using the process recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988).

To begin with, because the sample size for the two constructs of LMX ($N = 400$, from leaders and members) and trust ($N = 200$ only from members) was different, two CFA models were tested. The hypothesized one-factor model of LMX was compared with the three-dimensional model (contribution, affect, respect). The one-factor model provided significantly better fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 45.18$, $df = 11$, $p < 0.01$) to the data ($\chi^2 = 48.02$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.01$, GFI = 0.98, AGFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.09) as compared to the three-factor model ($\chi^2 = 93.20$, $df = 23$, $p < 0.01$, GFI = 0.96, AGFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.09). This provided us the confidence to proceed with LMX as a uni-dimensional construct for our study.

Next, we compared the hypothesized two-factor model of perceived trust ($N = 200$ members) with one factor. The two-factor model showed superior results ($\chi^2 = 3.11$, $df = 4$, $p > 0.05$, GFI = 0.99, AGFI = 0.98, CFI = 1.0, RMSEA = 0.00) as compared to one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 14.57$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.01$, GFI = 0.97, AGFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.10) [$\Delta\chi^2 = 11.46$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.01$].

Descriptive statistics, coefficients alpha and inter-correlations of study variables are contained in Table I. It is evident that reliabilities of all the variables are acceptable for research purposes ranging from 0.75 to 0.91 (Hair *et al.*, 1998). For all subsequent analyses, composite variables for each construct were formed. Zero-order correlations were all in the expected directions.

Finally, we compared the three-factor model (LMX member, trust–faith and trust–loyalty, as all these factors were taken from member perspective, and hence, vulnerable to common method variance) with one-factor model (with $N = 200$). The three-factor model showed superior fit ($\chi^2 = 119.37$, $df = 63$, $p < 0.01$, GFI = 0.93, AGFI = 0.88, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.07) as compared to one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 316.13$, $df = 62$, $p < 0.01$, GFI = 0.80,

AGFI = 0.67, CFI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.14) [$\Delta\chi^2$ = 196.76, df = 31, p < 0.01]. The superiority also lends evidence against common source variance for the data collected from members. In addition, we also conducted the common latent factor test for common method variance. The model fit values (χ^2 = 211.88, df = 73, p < 0.01, GFI = 0.86, AGFI = 0.80, CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.098) and variance of 37% were acceptable, which is less than the threshold value of 50% (Eichhorn, 2014).

Tests of hypotheses
To test *H1*, member LMX was regressed on relational age (age difference). For this relationship, leader and member age were taken as control variables. Relational age significantly (and negatively) predicted member LMX (β = −0.25, $t_{(171)}$ = −2.07, p < 0.05), explaining a total of 6% of the variance. Thus, *H1* received substantial support from the data – see Table II for regression results.

Table I shows a non-significant correlation between relational age and leader LMX, which is in line with *H2*. However, we further regressed leader LMX on relational age controlling for leader and member age. The results showed a non-significant effect of relational age on leader LMX (β = −0.18, $t(174)$ = −1.51, p > 0.05) though the overall model showed a significant result (R^2 = 0.08, $F(3, 171)$ = 4.88, p < 0.01). Our second hypothesis (*H2*, though null) also found support from the data – see Table III for regression results.

To test *H3*, trust–faith was regressed on relational age, controlling for leader and member age. The results (Table II) showed a non-significant effect of relational age on trust–faith (β = −0.16, $t(171)$ = −1.34, p < 0.18, R^2 = 0.03, $F(3, 171)$ = 1.84, p > 0.05). Similarly, trust–loyalty was regressed on relational age, with leader and member age as control

Factor	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
LMX-L	5.70	0.96	*0.92*				
LMX-M	6.06	0.76	0.17*	*0.88*			
Trust-F	6.05	1.03	0.16*	0.75**	*0.87*		
Trust-L	6.37	0.75	0.14	0.72**	0.76**	*0.81*	
Relational age (age difference)	–	–	0.12	−0.21**	−0.14	−0.17*	–

Notes: [a]N = 200. Diagonal entries in italics indicate coefficients alpha. LMX-L = LMX reported by leaders; LMX-M = LMX by members; Trust-F = faith; Trust-L = loyalty; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Table I.
Descriptive statistics, coefficients alpha and inter-correlations of study variables[a]

Independent/control Variables	LMX-member[a] (dependent variable) R^2 = 0.05 F = 3.31, p < 0.05		Trust–loyalty (dependent variable) R^2 = 0.04 F = 2.65, p < 0.05		Trust–faith (dependent variable) R^2 = 0.03 F = 1.84, p > 0.05	
	β[b]	t	β	t	β	t
Leader age	−0.05	−0.57	0.13	1.41	−0.07	−0.69
Member age	−0.12	−1.15	−0.17	−1.55	−0.09	−0.83
Relational age	−0.25	−2.07*	−0.32	−2.74**	−0.16	−1.34

Notes: [a]LMX-member is LMX reported by members; [b]β is standardized beta; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Table II.
Regression results for relational age as a predictor of member LMX, trust (loyalty) and trust (faith)

variables. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = 0.04$, $F(3, 171) = 2.65$, $p < 0.05$). Relational age significantly (and negatively) predicted the member's loyalty aspect of trust ($\beta = -0.32$, $t(171) = -2.74$, $p < 0.01$) (Table II). Thus, *H3* received limited support.

For *H4*, trust–loyalty along with leader age and member age was taken as independent variables for predicting LMX (member). The results (Table IV) showed a highly significant positive impact of trust–loyalty on member LMX ($\beta = 0.68$, $t(171) = 12.30$, $p < 0.01$; $R^2 = 0.49$, $F(3, 171) = 53.84$, $p < 0.001$).

In testing the mediation hypothesis (*H5*), we followed Baron and Kenny (1986) procedure, which requires four regression analyses. The impact of independent variable on dependent variable and mediator variable is to be significant. Impact of mediator on dependent variable is to be significant. Finally, when both the independent and mediator variables are together used as predictors of dependent variable, the impact of independent variable on dependent variable becomes smaller or non-significant.

For *H5*, the first and second conditions of relational age predicting faith dimension of trust were not significant, the mediation hypothesis (using faith dimension of trust as a mediator) does not get support from the data. For the second part of *H5*, the first two conditions are satisfied (see Table II), as our hypotheses *H1* and *H3* (the loyalty aspect of trust) find support from the data. The third condition (*H4*) of mediator (loyalty dimension) predicting the outcome (LMX member) also found support (Table IV). Finally, both relational age and loyalty aspect of trust were taken as independent variables (with leader and member age as control variables) to predict member's LMX.

The results (Table V) showed that trust (loyalty) has a highly positive relationship ($\beta = 0.67$, $t(170) = 11.94$, $p < 0.001$), and the effect of relational age became non-significant ($\beta = -0.03$, $t(171) = -0.29$, $p > 0.05$). The model indicators were reflected ($R^2 = 0.49$, $F(4, 170) =$

Independent/control variables	LMX-leader (dependent variable) $R^2 = 0.08$ $F = 4.88$, $p < 0.01$	
	β [a]	t
Leader age	0.17	1.82
Member age	−0.37	−3.48**
Relational age	−0.18	−1.51
Notes: [a]β is standardized beta; **$p < 0.01$		

Table III.
Regression results for relational age as a predictor of leader-LMX

Independent/control variables	LMX-member (dependent variable) $R^2 = 0.49$ $F = 53.84$, $p < 0.01$	
	β [a]	t
Leader age	−0.16	−2.86**
Member age	0.01	0.11
Trust–loyalty	0.68	12.30***
Notes: [a]β is standardized beta; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$		

Table IV.
Regression results for trust–loyalty as predictor of member LMX

40.19, $p < 0.001$). Because the effect of relational age became non-significant, *H5* received complete support.

Discussion

The intent of this study was to understand two causal aspects of LMX – relational age and its relationship with LMX; and comprehension of role of trust in mediating the relationship between relational age and LMX.

Relational age is shown to impact members' perspective of LMX such that the lesser the age gap, better the quality of LMX. However, it does not impact leaders' perspective of LMX. This indicates that the factors subordinates consider important for developing a relationship, may not be considered significant by the leaders. This is likely due to the leaders' hierarchical authoritative position. This increase in comfort, communication and trust likely leads to high-quality LMX. The fact that it affects the most micro-level dyadic relationship between leaders and members has implications. Our attempt to study both the leader's and the member's perspective throws light on the fact that it is important to note leader and member perceptions as they do vary and result in distinct outcomes.

Contrary to hypotheses, only the loyalty dimension of trust gets impacted by relational age. It is possible that faith as a construct has spiritual or transcendental dimension, which generally does not get manifested at work places and might be considered irrelevant. However, loyalty has more direct behavioral manifestations in workplaces and in leader–member relationships in particular. Importantly, our study shows that the age differences actually lead to poor quality LMX because of lack of trust in leader–member dyads. Researchers (Jennings and Stoker, 2004) have identified trust gaps across generations. Given the fact that generational values are changing faster now, and organizations have to deal with employees with big age (and hence generational) differences, issues of trust within dyads need to be contemplated. This is a critical finding as it supports our fundamental argument for this study. It establishes that age differences within a leader–member dyad influence the quality of their relationship by virtue of trust. Because researchers have rarely explored trust as a mediator in this context, this finding has the potential to be further investigated and empirically tested.

Although previous studies have observed the influence of relational demographics such as gender, age, education background and job tenure on LMX (Tsui and O'Reilly, 1989), barely studies have focused only on age-related effect. Thus, our study strengthens the existing literature on age-related influence on perceptions of trust and relationship quality. Furthermore, results from follower's perspective have been positive, leading to new insights on members' age-related perceptions.

Independent/control variables	LMX-member (dependent variable) $R^2 = 0.49$ $F = 40.19, p < 0.01$	
	β[a]	t
Leader age	−0.15	−2.04*
Member age	−0.01	−0.14
Trust–loyalty	0.67	11.94***
Relational age	−0.03	−0.29
Notes: [a]β is standardized beta; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.01$		

Table V.
Regression results
for relational age and
trust–loyalty as
predictors of member
LMX

Needless to say, the lack of exploration of variables such as perceived trust as a mediator in comprehending the dynamics between relational age and LMX is apparent. Therefore, our study tries to examine the inclusion of perceived trust as a mediator between relational age and LMX. The results look promising enough to be examined further by future researchers.

Implications

This paper contributes to understanding of LMX and its antecedents both for theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical implications

The emerging trends from our findings bring forth interesting insights that not only contribute to the extant relational age and LMX literature, but also make foray into exploring the role of perceived trust as a mediating mechanism. Our study affirms that relational age significantly influences LMX as a function of perceived trust. Similarity in age indeed fosters higher sense of loyalty and trust among employees. This study also attempts to bridge the gap in the existing LMX literature by examining employees' perceptions of the impact of perceived trust on team dynamics.

This work also highlights the significance of studying LMX from both leaders' and members' perspective. Many researchers have studied LMX, but only a few have collected dyadic data to explore LMX match (Gupta and Bhal, 2014). Future researchers can investigate team-based groups to delve deeper into the effect of relational age and perceived trust while functioning in a team. Furthermore, our work has potential to be empirically tested and validated in different contexts.

Managerial implications

The fact that age gap has led to poor LMX, because of lack of trust in dyads, can have consequences at the workplace, and hence, pointers for practitioners. This study helps practitioners to understand the critical impact of relational age and its role in creating interactional problems between supervisors and subordinates. It is crucial that corporations spruce up their human resource and team management policies to cater to inter-generational teams and their creation. After all, what good is a team of competent people that does not work well together! Development of a culture or climate of trust, hence, becomes much more significant in teams and organizations where age diversity is large. Furthermore, organizations need to administer trainings with respect to social skills and understanding diversity, so as to enable employees to appreciate and comprehend the age-related similarities and differences. Transparency and communication is key to foster higher relationship quality.

Further, our findings can be used for job placements and team formation. Increasingly, organizations are moving toward team-based structures which seek for complementary skills among team members. Hence, the relational age match between the team heads and team members is an important consideration in selection of teams.

Potential limitations and opportunities for future research

The implications of the study must be considered in light of its limitations. First, though, we did put a disclaimer on sampling and did not expect any significant variations in the results across samples, for the purpose of cross-validity, the study may be conducted in different contexts (samples) to be more valid. Second, like several researchers (Smola and Sutton,

2002; Twenge, 2010), we also assumed age difference to reflect generational differences, though a cross-sectional study; however, they may be studied through longitudinal studies as recommended by some researchers (Kowske *et al.*, 2010). Third, though we have looked at trust as a mediator, other attitudinal factors can be studied too. Fourth, researchers can further explore impact of relational age match on LMX congruence. This is a promising area of research and can do with development both in its conceptualization and empirical testing. Fifth, consistent with the work done by previous researchers (Brower *et al.*, 2000), we have mainly focused on members' perspective of attitudes, namely, trust. While this is common practice in LMX research, it would be interesting to look into leaders' attitudinal and psychological reactions for insights into leadership practice. Sixth, we used a uni-dimensional LMX, but it should be beneficial to see how this age difference might impact different dimensions of LMX. This would provide more granular understanding of relational age, LMX and trust. Finally, exploring the cognitive/affective processes intervening age difference and trust would provide insights into why trust gaps exist because of age difference.

Note

1. We have used the terms "leader" and supervisor"; and "member" and "subordinate" interchangeably.

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