

DOES DEMOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY MATTER? NARRATIVE EVIDENCE FROM MALAYSIAN QUALITY CIRCLES.

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Abstract: *Demographic diversity has received considerable scholarly attention, yet its influence on team dynamics remains inconclusive. This study aims to explore how demographic diversity, particularly age and gender, influences team dynamics by providing narrative evidence from Quality Circles (QCs) in Malaysian organizations. An exploratory qualitative approach was employed, involving semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 21 members from eight QCs across three organizations representing the oil and gas, automobile manufacturing, and public education sectors. Data were examined using qualitative content analysis to identify emerging themes concerning the perceived influence of demographic diversity on team interactions and participation safety climate. The findings revealed contrasting perspectives. Regarding age diversity, respondents from five teams perceived age composition as influential, suggesting that age similarity facilitates interpersonal comfort and open communication, while age differences encourage innovative ideas through the combination of younger members' fresh perspectives and senior members' experience. Conversely, respondents from three teams perceived age differences as irrelevant to team dynamics. Regarding gender diversity, respondents from six teams indicated that gender similarity promotes comfortable discussions and interpersonal interactions, whereas respondents from two teams perceived gender composition as having no meaningful influence*

on team collaboration. Overall, the findings suggest that demographic diversity does not necessarily enhance or hinder team dynamics, as its perceived influence varies across teams.

Keywords: *Demographic Diversity; Age Diversity; Gender Diversity; Team Dynamics; Participation Safety Climate.*

Introduction

Demographic diversity has become an important consideration in understanding team functioning and innovation, particularly as organizations increasingly rely on employees from different age groups and gender backgrounds to accomplish collective tasks. Differences in age and gender may provide teams with diverse knowledge, experiences, and perspectives that encourage information sharing, critical discussion, and innovative problem-solving (Cox & Blake, 1991; Pelled, 1996; Schneid et al., 2016). However, demographic diversity may also create interpersonal tensions, communication barriers, and social divisions that hinder team collaboration (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004; Joshi & Roh, 2009). Despite extensive research, findings concerning the relationship between demographic diversity and team outcomes remain inconsistent (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Hülshager et al., 2009). More recent research suggests that diversity can generate both beneficial and disruptive effects, depending on the nature of team interactions and the conditions under which members collaborate (Vedres & Vásárhelyi, 2023; van Knippenberg, 2024). These mixed findings highlight the importance of understanding how demographic differences shape team dynamics rather than assuming that diversity directly enhances or undermines team effectiveness.

Although previous studies have contributed significantly to understanding demographic diversity, much of the existing research has focused on examining statistical relationships between diversity and team outcomes. Such approaches are valuable for identifying patterns and testing theoretical relationships but may provide limited insight into how team members experience and manage demographic differences during everyday interactions. Van Knippenberg et al. (2004) emphasized the importance of understanding the underlying social categorization and information elaboration processes through which diversity influences team outcomes. Accordingly, an exploratory qualitative approach offers an opportunity to examine these processes through participants' experiences and interpretations. Eisenhardt (1989) highlighted the value of exploratory research in developing theoretical insights from empirical observations, while Edmondson and McManus (2007) emphasized the suitability of qualitative methods for investigating organizational processes that require further theoretical understanding. By examining participants' narratives, researchers can gain deeper insights into how demographic diversity facilitates or constrains communication, interpersonal relationships, collective reflection, and collaborative problem-solving within teams.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore how demographic diversity, particularly age and gender, contributes to team dynamics by providing narrative evidence from members of Quality Circles (QCs) in Malaysian organizations. Specifically, the study explores how differences in age and gender influence interpersonal interactions, communication, knowledge sharing, conflict, and collective problem-solving. This study seeks to capture team members' experiences and perspectives on the positive and negative implications of demographic diversity. Rather than testing predetermined causal relationships, the study focuses on identifying and interpreting the processes through which demographic differences shape team interactions. In doing so, it seeks to complement existing quantitative evidence by offering

contextualized narrative insights into the role of demographic diversity in team functioning and innovation.

Literature Review

Demographic diversity refers to differences among team members in characteristics such as age and gender (Jackson et al., 1995), which are commonly classified as visible demographic attributes (Hicks-Clarke & Iles, 2000). Despite extensive scholarly attention, the relationship between demographic diversity and team innovation remains inconclusive (Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Webber & Donahue, 2001; Jehn & Bezrukova, 2004; Stewart, 2006; Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Hülshager et al., 2009; Østergaard et al., 2011). Age and gender diversity have received increasing attention in organizational research (Grund & Westergaard-Nielsen, 2008; De Meulenaere et al., 2016; Mothe & Nguyen-Thi, 2021), partly due to population aging and extended retirement policies (Nagarajan et al., 2019). Recent meta-analytic evidence further suggests that the effects of demographic diversity on team performance depend on contextual factors, particularly task complexity and creativity requirements (Wallrich et al., 2024).

From an information and decision-making perspective, age diversity may enhance team dynamics by bringing together different knowledge, experiences, and perspectives that support critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation (Cox & Blake, 1991; Pelled, 1996; Schneid et al., 2016). Recent studies also suggest that generational diversity can stimulate cognitive conflict and innovation under supportive team conditions (Wang & Duan, 2025), while Wojan and Lambert (2025) reported positive associations between diversity and innovation. However, age diversity does not necessarily encourage communication among team members (Zenger & Lawrence, 1989). Social categorization theory suggests that individuals tend to interact more comfortably with similar others, potentially creating interpersonal barriers, reducing team cohesion, and weakening team performance (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004; Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005; Joshi & Roh, 2009). Thus, age diversity may promote team reflexivity and innovation when members effectively exchange and critically evaluate different perspectives but may hinder team functioning when age-related differences create social divisions.

Similarly, gender diversity may have both positive and negative implications for team dynamics. Earlier studies suggest that gender differences may contribute to affective conflict, interpersonal disagreements, distrust, and frustration, potentially undermining team cohesion and collaborative problem-solving (Alagna et al., 1982; Wagner et al., 1984; Pelled, 1996; Van der Vegt & Janssen, 2003). Conversely, gender diversity may enrich team discussions by introducing different viewpoints, experiences, and approaches to problem-solving. Joshi and Roh (2009) emphasized that the effects of diversity depend on organizational and team contexts, while Vedres and Vásárhelyi (2023) found that inclusion helps unlock the creative potential of gender-diverse teams. Likewise, van Knippenberg (2024) highlighted that diversity can generate both beneficial and disruptive effects depending on team interactions and information exchange. Overall, the literature suggests that demographic diversity, particularly age and gender, does not automatically improve or undermine team effectiveness. Rather, its contribution to team innovation depends on whether team dynamics facilitate constructive communication, knowledge integration, and collective reflection or reinforce interpersonal conflict and social divisions.

Research Method

The research context of this study comprises parallel teams in Malaysian organizations, specifically Quality Circles (QCs). Parallel teams are defined as teams that operate alongside the formal organizational structure and are primarily established to undertake problem-solving and improvement-oriented activities (Cohen & Bailey, 1997). QCs represent a form of parallel team consisting of employees from the same or different organizational units who collaborate to identify problems, develop solutions, and improve organizational processes. Given the predominance of quantitative approaches employing closed-ended questionnaires in previous research, a qualitative approach was adopted to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation and to minimize potential researcher bias associated with predetermined response categories (Randall & Gibson, 1990). The study employed purposive sampling to identify QC members with relevant team experience. The Malaysia Productivity Corporation (MPC), which organizes the annual QC conference in Malaysia, was contacted to facilitate the identification of suitable teams. Based on MPC's recommendations, eight QCs from three organizations representing different sectors were selected. All participating teams had been operating for more than one year, ensuring that their members possessed sufficient experience to provide meaningful insights into team processes and dynamics (Pereira & Osburn, 2007). Following MPC's recommendations, the QC coordinators of the three organizations were formally contacted via email, followed by telephone discussions to explain the research objectives and arrange interview sessions. Participation by the organizations and individual team members was entirely voluntary.

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 21 members from the eight participating QCs. Team leaders assisted in identifying members who were willing to participate, and interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times to minimize disruption to participants' work responsibilities. Before each interview, participants were informed of the research objectives, and permission was obtained to digitally record the discussions. The interview questions were designed to explore if age and gender diversity are important in their team dynamics. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The translated transcripts were imported into QSR NVivo for qualitative data analysis. Given the exploratory nature of the study, content analysis was employed to identify emerging themes and examine potential relationships among the constructs (Berg, 2001). Each transcript was systematically examined sentence by sentence to identify recurring themes and generate relevant keywords through an inductive coding process.

Findings

Table 1 presents the background characteristics of the eight QCs selected for the interviews, representing three companies from different sectors: oil and gas, automobile manufacturing, and public education services. Specifically, two teams (A and B) were drawn from the oil and gas sector, three teams (C, D, and E) from automobile manufacturing, and three teams (F, G, and H) from public education services. The team sizes ranged from four to nine members, reflecting variations in team composition across the participating organizations. In terms of team tenure, the teams had been operating for periods ranging from less than two years to six years, indicating different levels of experience working together. A total of 21 team members were interviewed, with two to three participants representing each team. The inclusion of teams from diverse organizational sectors, with varying team sizes and operational experience, provided an opportunity to explore team members' perspectives and experiences across different organizational contexts.

Table 1: Background of the Interviewed QC

Company	1		2			3		
Nature of business	Oil & Gas		Automobile manufacturing			Public education service		
Team	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Team size	8 TM	7 TM	8 TM	8 TM	8 TM	4 TM	6 TM	9 TM
Years of team in operation	<2 years	3 years	2 years	4 years	4 years	6 years	4 years	6 years
Number of team members interviewed	2 TM	3 TM	3 TM	2 TM	3 TM	3 TM	2 TM	3 TM

TM: Team Member

Although 21 team members from eight Quality Circles participated in the interviews, the presentation of qualitative findings was organized at the team level, with selected participant narratives used to illustrate the emerging themes. Rather than presenting individual accounts from all interviewees, the study prioritized narratives that provided particularly clear, relevant, and information-rich evidence of the relationships under investigation. Nevertheless, all 21 interview transcripts were included in the qualitative analysis to ensure that the identification and interpretation of themes reflected the broader dataset. Selected quotations were attributed to their respective Quality Circles, while variations and contrasting perspectives among team members were considered in interpreting the findings. This approach enabled a concise presentation of narrative evidence while maintaining the analytical depth and contextual richness of the qualitative data.

Narrative Evidence Related to Age diversity

Qualitative analysis of the interview data revealed two distinct perspectives regarding the influence of age diversity on team climate. The first stream of team members affirmed its impact on participation safety, whereas the second stream considered age composition entirely irrelevant to their collaborative dynamics.

In the first stream, respondents in five teams (A, B, C, E, and G) age of team members are important. On one hand, age homogeneity is perceived as factor that enhances psychological safety climate, noting that similar generational background facilitated interpersonal comfort and smoother idea generation. On the other hand, age heterogeneity is perceived as a factor that stimulates innovative ideas in their team.

For example, Team A said that *"...it makes me feel easy to befriend. So far... there has been no problem in the discussion process..."*).

Team G emphasised that younger individuals were associated with innovative ideas: *"...youngsters, they can give their fresh ideas and share among the team. The senior employees have an advantage in the sense of their wide experiences but might have lack of knowledge on new materials..."*.

In the second stream, members from three Teams (D, F, and H) do not agree that age variance is a meaningful factor in team dynamics

In team D, they said "...whether we are youngsters or elderly, it's not important..."

In Team F "...age is nothing..."

In Team H "...age gap does not make any difference..."

Table 2: Summary of Narrative Evidence on the Influence of Age Diversity on Team Dynamics

Emerging theme	Teams	Key findings	Illustrative narrative evidence
Age similarity promotes psychological safety	A, B, C, E, G	Similar age backgrounds may enhance interpersonal comfort, communication, and willingness to participate in discussions.	Team A: "...it makes me feel easy to befriend. So far... there has been no problem in the discussion process..."
Age differences encourage innovative ideas	A, B, C, E, G	Younger members contribute fresh ideas, while senior members provide experience and practical knowledge, potentially enriching team discussions.	Team G: "...youngsters, they can give their fresh ideas... The senior employees have an advantage in the sense of their wide experiences..."
Age differences have no perceived influence	D, F, H	Members perceive age differences as irrelevant to team interactions and collaborative activities.	Team D: "...whether we are youngsters or elderly, it's not important..." Team F: "...age is nothing..." Team H: "...age gap does not make any difference..."

As presented in Table 2, the narrative evidence revealed contrasting perceptions of the influence of age diversity on team dynamics. Members from five Quality Circles (A, B, C, E, and G) perceived age composition as relevant to team interactions. Age similarity was associated with greater interpersonal comfort and ease of communication, whereas age differences were perceived as beneficial for generating innovative ideas through the combination of younger members' fresh perspectives and senior members' accumulated experience. In contrast, respondents from three teams (D, F, and H) perceived age differences as having little or no influence on their collaborative activities. These findings suggest that the influence of age diversity on team dynamics is not uniform but varies according to team members' experiences and perceptions.

Narrative Evidences Related to Gender diversity

Regarding gender diversity, interview narratives revealed two distinct streams of perspectives concerning its influence on team collaboration: one group of participants emphasized that gender composition actively shapes participation safety climate, whereas another maintained that gender differences have no bearing on team climate. Respondents across six teams (Teams A, B, D, F, G, and H) indicated that gender homogeneity fosters a more comfortable environment for open discussion.

For instance, a member from Team F highlighted how same-gender dynamics reduce interpersonal conflict during idea generation:

"...I don't mind having female team members, but I feel more comfortable having discussions with the same male members. It's easier to talk to someone of the same sex. Ladies sometimes are too fussy..."

In contrast, only participants from two Teams C and E do not hint at any link between gender diversity and team climate, asserting that gender diversity neither hinders nor enhances psychological safety climate in a team.

As a respondent from Team C explained: *"...working with the opposite gender does not affect anything in this group; it is the same as working with the same gender..."*

Team E highlighted that *"...gender diversity is not important for us..."*.

For gender diversity, the findings reveal two distinct themes across the eight Quality Circles: six teams (A, B, D, F, G, and H) perceived gender similarity as contributing to a more comfortable discussion environment, while two teams (C and E) considered gender differences irrelevant to team collaboration. The following is the summary table of the interview responses across all 8 Quality Circles.

Table 3: Summary of Narrative Evidence on the Influence of Gender Diversity on Team Dynamics.

Emerging theme	Teams	Key findings	Illustrative narrative evidence
Gender similarity promotes interpersonal comfort	A, B, D, F, G, H	Participants perceived same-gender composition as facilitating more comfortable and open discussions. One participant also associated it with fewer interpersonal tensions.	Team F: <i>"...I don't mind having female team members, but I feel more comfortable having discussions with the same male members. It's easier to talk to someone of the same sex. Ladies sometimes are too fussy..."</i>
Gender differences perceived as irrelevant	C, E	Participants perceived gender composition as neither improving nor undermining team climate or collaboration.	Team C: <i>"...working with the opposite gender does not affect anything in this group; it is the same as working with the same gender..."</i> Team E: <i>"...gender diversity is not important for us..."</i>

Conclusions

Across both demographic dimensions, the narrative evidence demonstrate that a clear majority of Quality Circle teams view demographic homogeneity—age and gender—as a foundational antecedent to a psychologically safe participation climate. Rather than treating biodemographic traits as passive background variables, participants predominantly reported that age and gender alignment creates an implicit "comfort zone" that lowers interpersonal risk during problem-

solving and idea generation. This consensus suggests that in frontline worker teams, surface-level similarities act as an immediate socio-emotional bridge, accelerating peer rapport and mitigating status-conscious hesitation.

This reliance on shared backgrounds acts as a buffer against social friction and the fear of judgment during problem-solving. When members share demographic traits, they expect similar communication styles and shared experiences, making it easier to speak up without fear of rejection. Consequently, demographic similarity helps reduce power distance, preventing members from holding back opinions and allowing teams to review mistakes, challenge routines, and suggest improvements with less interpersonal conflict.

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