WORK STYLE, COMMUNICATION, AND THE MANAGEMENT OF INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN SELANGOR STATE-OWNED ORGANISATION

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Abstract: The growing age diversity in Malaysian workplaces presents both opportunities and challenges for organisations. While this diversity can enhance innovation and knowledge exchange, it also creates the potential for intergenerational conflict arising from differing values, work styles, communication preferences, and attitudes toward technology. This study investigates the sources and causes of intergenerational conflict in a Selangor state-owned organisation and examines how variations in work and communication style contribute to generational tensions. Using a qualitative case study approach, semi-structured and in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine employees from different generational cohorts and organisational levels. The findings reveal that intergenerational conflict primarily emerges from mismatched work styles particularly differing expectations about pace, structure, and autonomy as well as contrasting communication preferences between digitally oriented younger staff and senior employees who favour formal and face-to-face interaction. The study further shows that leadership practices and organisational culture significantly shape whether these differences escalate into conflict or become opportunities for learning and collaboration. The research provides practical insights for organisational leaders and policymakers to address generational conflict, promote inclusive workplace strategies, and leverage the strengths of a multigenerational workforce.

Keywords: Human resource management, Intergenerational conflicts, Selangor state-owned organisation, Organisational behaviour, Ageing nation

1. Introduction

Workforce diversity in terms of age composition is increasing globally, driven by demographic change, longer life expectancy, and policies that extend working lives (United Nations, 2019; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023). In Malaysia, this trend is evident in state-owned organisations where stable employment structures and tenure-based career progression attract employees from across the generational spectrum. The Minimum Retirement Age Act 2012, which extended the retirement age from 55 to 60, has reinforced this trend, leading to workplaces where Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997 onwards) work side by side (Minimum Retirement Age Act 2012, Act 753). International studies have documented the prevalence and consequences of intergenerational conflict (Appelbaum et al., 2022; Cismaru & Iunius, 2019), but Malaysian state-owned organisations remain underexplored (Azhar & Omar, 2025). These organisations operate within a unique mix of bureaucratic traditions and

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market-driven objectives, where generational differences are amplified by contrasting expectations about hierarchy, technology use, and work–life balance (Sharifah, 2024).

Differences in work style are a common flashpoint. Older cohorts, shaped by pre-digital work environments, tend to prefer structured processes, defined roles, and collective decision-making, whereas Millennials and Generation Z often favour flexibility, autonomy, and rapid, technology-driven execution (Singh et al., 2020). Such contrasts can create perceptions of inefficiency or lack of commitment, depending on the perspective (Rahim et al., 2022). Communication style is another area of divergence. Baby Boomers and Generation X typically prefer face-to-face exchanges and formal correspondence, while younger generations lean toward instant messaging, collaborative platforms, and informal interaction (Gao, 2023; Guérin-Marion et al., 2018). Without conscious adaptation, these differences risk misinterpretation and eroded trust (Han, 2021; Johnson, 2019).

Although intergenerational differences in work values, communication styles, and technological adaptation have been widely discussed in international literature, empirical evidence from Malaysian state-owned organisations remains limited. Existing Malaysian studies focus predominantly on the private sector or general workforce attitudes, offering little insight into organisations with long-tenure structures, hierarchical cultures, and public accountability obligations. These institutional characteristics make state-owned organisations uniquely susceptible to generational frictions, yet little is known about how such tensions manifest in day-to-day organisational practice. Most studies also examine generational traits in isolation rather than exploring how work style and communication differences interact to produce conflict. Furthermore, while global literature increasingly emphasises conflict management mechanisms, there is a lack of context-specific understanding of how Malaysian organisational culture, leadership norms, and communication expectations shape intergenerational conflict management. This study addresses these gaps by providing an in-depth, contextually grounded analysis of intergenerational conflict within a Selangor state-owned organisation.

2. Problem Statement

Malaysia's demographic transition heightens the urgency of addressing intergenerational conflict. By 2030, 15% of the population will be aged 60 or above (World Bank Group, 2023), increasing the proportion of older workers in the labour force (Pfordten, 2023). In organisations like state-owned organisations, where turnover is relatively low, these demographic realities demand proactive approaches to harnessing generational strengths while minimising friction. While generational diversity can strengthen innovation, problem-solving, and knowledge transfer (Teclaw et al., 2022), it also introduces challenges, particularly in the form of intergenerational conflict. Such conflict arises when differences in values, work styles, and communication preferences create misunderstanding or reduce cooperation (Ng & Parry, 2023; Lowe et al., 2020).

In state-owned organisations where operational efficiency must align with public accountability, mismanaged generational tensions risk undermining service delivery and strategic goals. Recent findings from TalentCorp Malaysia (2021) and preliminary insights from Malaysian human resource (HR) professionals reveal that intergenerational conflict is a significant organisational challenge, particularly regarding communication gaps and differing work expectations. This study explores the role of work styles and communication in managing intergenerational conflict within a Selangor state-owned organisation. By analysing differences in work styles, communication preferences, and related factors such as personality traits, the research aims to provide practical insights for managers, policymakers, and human resource practitioners seeking to transform generational diversity into organisational advantage.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Overview of Intergenerational Conflict

Intergenerational conflict refers to tension arising from differences between distinct age cohorts in the workplace, often related to values, communication, work styles, and attitudes toward change (Appelbaum et al., 2022). In contemporary organisations, multiple generations: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z often work together, each shaped by unique socio-economic and technological contexts (Cismaru & Iunius, 2019; Mannheim, 1952). These differences can lead to misunderstandings, reduced cooperation, and diminished morale if not managed proactively (Ng & Parry, 2023). In Malaysian workplaces, generational diversity has been amplified by demographic changes, increased life expectancy, and policies such as the Minimum Retirement Age Act 2012 (Minimum Retirement Age Act 2012 (Act 753); UNDP, 2023). State-owned organisations face a distinct challenge: they must reconcile the demands of commercial competitiveness with the constraints of bureaucratic procedures, making the management of generational differences even more critical (Azhar et al., 2021).

3.2 Generational Differences in Work Styles

Work styles represent individuals' preferred approaches to structuring, executing, and evaluating work-related tasks. They are shaped not only by personal traits but also by socio-historical influences, education systems, and technological exposure (Singh et al., 2020). Scholars often categorise work styles across generational cohorts, recognising that formative experiences leave lasting imprints on workplace behaviour (Mannheim, 1952; Urick, 2020). Baby Boomers (1946–1964), who began their careers in an era of economic growth and bureaucratic expansion, often value loyalty, long-term career stability, and structured processes. They tend to emphasise thorough planning, teamwork, and collective decision-making. For this generation, adherence to established rules and respect for hierarchy symbolise professionalism and reliability (Rasolofomanana et al., 2019). Generation X (1965–1980) entered the workforce during periods of economic volatility and the rise of globalisation. Their work style blends pragmatism with adaptability; they appreciate independence but are accustomed to organisational bureaucracy. Compared with Baby

Boomers, they are more open to flexible work arrangements but still value structured decision-making and accountability (Nguyen & Lester, 2023).

Millennials (1981–1996) are strongly influenced by the rapid digitalisation of work and global interconnectedness. They prefer autonomy, innovation, and continuous feedback rather than rigid performance appraisals. Multitasking, collaborative teamwork, and the use of digital platforms to streamline processes are common features of their style (Magano et al., 2020). However, they are sometimes perceived by older colleagues as impatient or lacking resilience, particularly when faced with traditional hierarchical processes (Kramb, 2020). Generation Z (1997 onwards), the most digitally native group, often embodies a fast-paced and efficiency-driven approach. Their reliance on technology for almost every work process contributes to expectations of immediacy, transparency, and agility. Many members of this generation are entering state-owned organisations with strong preferences for flat hierarchies and flexible project management systems, which may conflict with institutional traditions of bureaucracy and procedure (Rahim et al., 2022).

Research indicates that mismatches in work styles can generate tension in areas such as task delegation, deadline management, and accountability. For example, Baby Boomers may view younger generations' preference for rapid execution as a lack of thoroughness, while Millennials and Gen Z may perceive senior colleagues as resistant to change (Singh et al., 2020; Nguyen & Lester, 2023). Within Malaysian state-owned organisations, these tensions are magnified by the need to comply with procedural guidelines, audit requirements, and ministerial oversight, which naturally favour the more methodical approaches of older cohorts.

3.3 Communication Preferences and Challenges

Communication is a central mechanism through which intergenerational differences manifest. Research has shown that communication preferences are not merely technical but are tied to deeper cultural meanings of respect, authority, and collaboration (Johnson, 2019). Baby Boomers and Generation X often prefer formal communication channels such as memos, face-to-face meetings, and official correspondence. For them, these modes reflect clarity, respect, and accountability (Gao, 2023). In contrast, Millennials and Generation Z typically embrace instant messaging, collaborative platforms, and informal exchanges. They view these as efficient, egalitarian, and reflective of modern workplace realities (Han, 2021).

The divergence creates challenges. Short and informal digital communication may be perceived by older employees as disrespectful or careless, while younger employees may find lengthy meetings redundant and inefficient. Pawlak et al. (2022) highlight that mismatched communication preferences often slow decision-making, cause duplication of work, or result in mistrust. Theoretical frameworks help to explain these dynamics. Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) suggests that different communication channels vary in their ability to convey nuanced information. Baby Boomers often prefer "richer" media such as face-to-face dialogue to reduce ambiguity, whereas younger employees are comfortable using "leaner" media such as texts or emails for efficiency. Additionally, Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 2015) illustrates how individuals adjust their communication styles—

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converging to align with others or diverging to assert identity. Generational groups may intentionally or unintentionally diverge, reinforcing perceptions of difference.

In Malaysian state-owned organisations, where hierarchical relationships and cultural norms of respect are significant, communication misalignment can have amplified consequences. A casual message to a superior may be interpreted as disrespectful, while insisting on formal communication for all matters may frustrate younger employees who value speed. Therefore, multi-channel strategies that integrate formal and informal modes appear essential for bridging generational divides.

3.4 Generational Diversity in Malaysian State-Owned Organisations

State-owned organisations in Malaysia represent a unique employment context, combining elements of bureaucracy, corporate governance, and public accountability. They typically retain employees for decades, resulting in a workforce with both long-tenured staff holding deep institutional memory and younger recruits introducing contemporary practices (Azhar et al., 2021). Generational diversity within these organisations is shaped by broader Malaysian socio-cultural values, such as collectivism, deference to authority, and emphasis on harmony (Omar et al., 2021). These cultural norms influence how generational differences are perceived and expressed. For example, younger employees may avoid directly challenging seniors even when they disagree, leading to latent rather than overt conflict.

Reports by TalentCorp Malaysia (2021) and the Malaysian Employers Federation (2022) indicate that communication gaps and differing work expectations between generations are among the most pressing HR challenges. Unlike private firms, where turnover may reduce long-term conflict, state-owned organisations experience relatively low attrition, increasing the need for sustained generational integration strategies. Leadership plays a pivotal role in mediating these dynamics. Inclusive leadership characterised by empathy, adaptability, and openness to multiple communication channels has been shown to reduce intergenerational tensions and enhance collaboration (Macovei & Martinescu-Bădălan, 2022). Conversely, transactional leadership styles that emphasise rigid hierarchies may exacerbate generational silos and hinder knowledge transfer (Kramb, 2020).

3.5 Variability in Empirical Findings

Empirical findings on intergenerational conflict vary significantly due to differences in methodology, cultural context, and organisational setting. Survey-based studies often reveal perceived differences but risk oversimplifying generational identities, treating them as fixed categories rather than dynamic constructs (Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2022). Qualitative approaches, such as interviews and ethnography, provide richer insights into lived experiences, but their findings are context-specific and difficult to generalise (Magano et al., 2020). Cultural context also shapes results. In Western contexts, conflict often revolves around issues of autonomy, work–life balance, and innovation (Kramb, 2020). In Asian settings, including Malaysia, conflict is more frequently associated with hierarchical relationships, respect, and collective harmony (Omar et al., 2021). This explains why intergenerational tensions may be expressed subtly in Malaysia, through silence or

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withdrawal, rather than overt confrontation. Furthermore, some studies suggest that intergenerational conflict is overstated. Bento and Garotti (2023) argue that differences within generations (e.g., gender, socioeconomic background) can be as significant as those between generations. This highlights the importance of avoiding stereotypes and recognising intersectionality in studying workplace diversity.

3.6 Summary of Key Insights

The literature consistently shows that intergenerational conflict stems from differences in work styles and communication preferences, shaped by socio-historical contexts and cultural norms. Yet, these differences are not inherently negative. When managed effectively, they create opportunities for innovation, resilience, and organisational learning (Urick, 2020). For Malaysian state-owned organisations, the challenge lies in balancing structure with flexibility. Policies that integrate younger employees' need for autonomy with older employees' preference for methodical processes can reduce tension. Similarly, adopting multi-channel communication strategies ensures inclusivity and prevents misunderstanding. Leadership development that emphasises empathy, adaptability, and conflict resolution skills appear particularly crucial in this context. This review highlights the need for context-sensitive research to inform practice. Malaysian organisations must recognise that models developed in Western contexts cannot be uncritically applied; instead, local cultural dynamics and institutional features must guide strategy.

4. Theoretical Lens

This study draws upon three interrelated theoretical perspectives to frame intergenerational conflict. Mannheim's Generational Theory (1952) argued that cohorts shaped by similar socio-historical events develop distinct worldviews and behaviours. Applying this to the workplace, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z differ not simply by age but by the formative contexts comprising economic, political, and technological that shaped them. According to Conflict Theory (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973), conflict is understood as an inevitable aspect of social interaction arising from differences in values and resource allocation. Intergenerational conflict can thus be seen not as a pathology but as a normal organisational process that, if managed, can stimulate change and innovation.

In the perspectives of organisational behaviour, concepts such as Communication Accommodation Theory and Media Richness Theory provide micro-level explanations of how communication preferences contribute to conflict. Meanwhile, theories of inclusive and transformational leadership explain how managers can mediate differences to build trust and cohesion (Giles et al., 2015; Daft & Lengel, 1986). Together, these perspectives enable a refined understanding of intergenerational conflict as a product of historical context, communication practices, and leadership interventions. They also highlight opportunities for reframing generational diversity as a source of strength rather than division.

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5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

Given the complex, context-dependent nature of intergenerational conflict, this study adopted a qualitative, instrumental single-case study design. The approach enabled an in-depth exploration of how work styles and communication contribute to conflict in a real organisational setting, focusing on a Selangor state-owned organisation. Qualitative case studies are well-suited for examining dynamic social processes where variables cannot be easily separated from their environment (Yin, 2018). The instrumental design allowed the case to be used not only to understand the phenomenon in its own context but also to generate insights applicable to similar organisational settings (Stake, 1995). The study followed Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) emphasis on interpretive understanding, capturing participants' lived experiences in their own words, while integrating Eisenhardt's (1989) emphasis on empirical grounding for theory building.

5.2 Profile of the Case Organisation

Established in 1994, the Selangor state-owned organisation manages the assets and investments of the Selangor State Government and represents the state in business ventures beyond the government's direct jurisdiction. The organisation has a dual mandate: to promote and support state development initiatives while fulfilling corporate social responsibility obligations to the public. Its diversified portfolio is organised into two primary clusters: the Commercial cluster comprising 11 companies engaged in revenue-generating business activities, and the strategic cluster focusing on development and service functions aligned with state policy objectives. This organisational structure necessitates collaboration across units with differing operational goals, making it a pertinent context for studying intergenerational dynamics.

5.3 Population and Sampling

The study population comprised employees across the Selangor state-owned organisation's commercial and strategic clusters. Purposive sampling was used to select participants representing different generational cohorts, job roles, and tenure lengths, ensuring a range of perspectives on workplace interactions. Nine informants participated in the study: five in managerial roles, two in executive roles, and two in clerical or administrative positions. Seven participants were male and two were female, with ages ranging from 26 to 60 years.

5.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was undertaken between November 2024 and April 2025 through semi-structured and in-depth face-to-face interviews. This method was selected because it enables participants to articulate complex experiences of work styles, communication patterns, and conflict management in their own words, thereby capturing nuanced insights that would not surface through structured questionnaires alone (Kallio et al., 2016). Semi-structured

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interviews are particularly appropriate for exploring intergenerational dynamics, as they allow for both comparability across cases and flexibility in following emergent lines of inquiry. Interview sessions were arranged at venues chosen by participants, with most conducted in their offices and some in neutral settings such as restaurants or cafes. Allowing participants to select familiar environments was important to reducing power asymmetries and creating a more open atmosphere conducive to trust (Elwood & Martin, 2000). The setting also reflected cultural sensitivities within Selangor's organisational context, where hierarchical relationships and respect for authority may otherwise inhibit candid discussion.

The interview guide was developed following Castillo-Montoya's (2016) four-phase model for designing aligned qualitative instruments, which emphasises linkage between research questions, interview prompts, and conceptual underpinnings. Questions explored participants' experiences of work styles, preferred communication modes, and approaches to resolving interpersonal or intergenerational tensions. Although the guide ensured consistency across interviews, the conversational format allowed for flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe emerging issues, clarify ambiguous responses, and follow leads that arose spontaneously. Interviews were primarily conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, reflecting participants' linguistic preferences, but respondents were free to alternate between Bahasa Malaysia and English depending on the topic. This bilingual approach ensured inclusivity and enabled participants to express themselves in the language most appropriate to their experiences. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. The principal investigator undertook the translation of transcripts into English, paying particular attention to semantic accuracy and cultural nuance. Translation was not treated as a neutral exercise but as a form of interpretive work, requiring reflexive awareness of how linguistic choices might shape meaning (Temple & Young, 2004).

5.5 Data Analysis

The dataset was analysed using thematic analysis, guided by the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected because of its flexibility and its suitability for examining patterned meanings across a diverse set of experiences without being bound to a single theoretical orientation. The process began with repeated reading of transcripts to ensure immersion in the data. Initial coding was conducted manually, allowing the researcher to remain close to participants' narratives. Subsequent analysis employed NVivo 15 software, which facilitated systematic coding, organisation of categories, and the development of thematic maps to visualise relationships among emergent concepts. NVivo also enhanced transparency by providing a structured record of coding decisions, which could be revisited during later phases of analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019).

An inductive approach was adopted, ensuring that themes emerged organically from participants' accounts rather than being imposed from pre-existing theories. Nevertheless, the interpretive process was informed by sensitising concepts drawn from organisational communication and conflict management literature, which provided a lens for recognising relevant patterns. Reflexivity was central to the analysis: the researcher maintained a journal to record analytic decisions, moments of uncertainty, and reflections on positionality (Silverman, 2021). This practice enhanced credibility and provided an audit trail of

interpretive choices, aligning with recommendations for methodological transparency in qualitative inquiry (Nowell et al., 2017).

5.6 Trustworthiness and Rigor

Given the interpretive nature of qualitative research, trustworthiness was addressed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and prolonged engagement with participants over several months. Member checking was undertaken by sharing preliminary thematic interpretations with selected participants, enabling them to confirm, refine, or contest emerging findings.

Transferability was supported by providing rich, "thick" description of the organisational setting and the demographic diversity of participants. Such contextual detail allows readers to assess the applicability of findings to other state-owned organisations in Malaysia or similar socio-cultural contexts. Dependability was addressed by maintaining an audit trail documenting methodological choices, coding frameworks, and changes made during the analytic process. This record strengthens the internal coherence of the study and allows future researchers to follow the logic of inquiry. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing. The researcher explicitly considered how personal experiences and assumptions might shape interpretation, thereby limiting undue researcher bias. These strategies collectively enhance the robustness of the findings, positioning them as trustworthy insights into the management of intergenerational conflict in a state-owned Malaysian organisation.

6. Findings and Discussion

This section presents and analyses the findings of the case study on intergenerational conflict within a Selangor state-owned organisation, focusing on the interplay between work styles and communication preferences of employees. The discussion integrates empirical observations with relevant theories to explain how these dynamics contribute to conflict and how they can be managed to promote workplace harmony.

6.1 Intergenerational Conflict as a Growing Workplace Challenge

The majority of participants (five out of nine) viewed intergenerational conflict as a serious workplace issue requiring deliberate organisational attention. Three participants considered it a manageable challenge that could be addressed informally, while one attributed workplace tensions more to individual differences than to generational divides. Interestingly, older participants (aged 50 and above) were more likely to perceive generational conflict as a significant organisational problem, reflecting a heightened sensitivity to shifting work norms accumulated across decades of tenure.
One senior manager explained:

"In the past, we had one way of working, everyone followed procedures. Now, younger colleagues want to try new ways, sometimes without considering the consequences. It creates misunderstanding, especially when deadlines are tight."

This aligns with Lowe et al. (2020), who observed that long-serving employees often feel unsettled when younger cohorts challenge established cultural norms. The Malaysian context intensifies this challenge. As the nation approaches aged status by 2030 (World Bank Group, 2023), organisations are increasingly characterised by an unprecedented mix of younger digital-native employees alongside older colleagues shaped by pre-digital systems.

The coexistence of these perspectives creates opportunities for synergy but also exposes frictions in values, expectations, and behaviours. Ng and Parry (2023) highlight that in Asia, cultural traditions of hierarchy and respect can make open confrontation less acceptable, yet perceived disrespect can escalate tensions if generational differences are ignored. For state-owned organisations that balance bureaucratic accountability with pressures to modernise, unmanaged conflict risks undermining both efficiency and morale.

6.2 Work Style Differences Across Generations

Theme 1: Differences Rooted in Era and Exposure

Eight of the nine informants emphasised that work styles were largely shaped by the eras in which employees grew up. Senior employees described themselves as "old school," preferring structured, methodical approaches and consensus-building.
A senior executive explained:

"For us, the more is the merrier. We believe in discussion before making decisions. Younger colleagues sometimes see this as a waste of time, but for us it is how we avoid mistakes."

This divergence reflects Mannheim's (1952) theory of generational consciousness, which posits that socio-historical experiences shape behavioural tendencies. In Malaysia, Baby Boomers and Generation X were socialised into bureaucratic, hierarchical environments, while Millennials and Generation Z grew up in an era of globalisation, instant communication, and rapid technological change. Singh et al. (2020) similarly note that younger cohorts favour autonomy and rapid execution, often interpreting structured approval processes as unnecessary delays.

Theme 2: Different Pace and Urgency

Younger participants frequently expressed frustration with what they viewed as excessive procedures. One millennial employee remarked:

"Sometimes we know the solution and we can do it quickly, but we still need three signatures before moving. That slows us down."

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In contrast, older participants emphasised the risks of rushing. A senior participant observed:

"The young ones want to finish things quickly, but sometimes they overlook details that can create bigger problems later."

These findings echo Kramb (2020), who noted that millennial teams often prioritise speed but may neglect longer-term considerations. Within the Selangor state-owned organisation, such differences were particularly visible in project planning and budget approvals, where older employees prioritised comprehensive review while younger staff pushed for quick implementation. Nguyen and Lester (2023) argue that hybrid work structures combining methodical processes with agile project phases can mitigate these tensions by allowing each generation's strengths to complement the other.

6.3 Communication Style as a Source of Misunderstanding

Five participants explicitly identified communication style as a major source of tension. Senior employees strongly preferred face-to-face communication, while younger employees relied heavily on digital platforms.

A younger participant reflected:
"Sometimes seniors think we are rude when we just text, but for us it is normal. We don't mean disrespect, it's just faster."

Meanwhile, a Baby Boomer manager noted:
"When they only send short messages, I feel they don't respect the work. A proper email or meeting is more professional."

This resonates with Gao (2023), who found that digital communication, while efficient, can erode relational depth if not balanced with interpersonal interaction. Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) also helps explain these dynamics: senior employees value "rich" communication channels like meetings, while younger employees see "lean" channels like chat apps as adequate. Furthermore, Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 2015) suggests that employees may converge or diverge in their communication styles to negotiate identity. In this case, younger employees' preference for brevity can be read as divergence, while seniors' insistence on formality may reflect attempts to preserve authority.

In state-owned organisations, where hierarchical coordination is essential, mismatched communication preferences occasionally led to project delays when clarifications were repeatedly sought after brief digital exchanges. Bridging these gaps requires multi-channel communication protocols that combine both efficiency and clarity.

6.4 Practical Implications for Human Resource Practitioners

The findings demonstrate that intergenerational conflict is not an inevitable liability but a manageable dimension of workforce diversity. Proactive human resource strategies are

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necessary to prevent tensions from escalating into dysfunction. Multi-channel communication protocols are essential. Teams should agree on a blend of synchronous (meetings, calls) and asynchronous (emails, messaging apps) methods to accommodate different preferences. Work redesign can also help. Combining structured processes with agile project phases allows older employees' risk awareness to complement younger employees' speed and adaptability.

Leadership training is equally crucial. Managers must develop inclusive leadership capabilities such as empathy, adaptability, and conflict resolution skills to bridge generational divides. Transformational leadership, which inspires and motivates across cohorts, has been shown to foster cohesion in diverse teams (Macovei & Martinescu-Bădălan, 2022).

6.5 The Role of Leadership and Organisational Culture

Although not an explicit focus of interview questions, several participants highlighted the role of leaders in either exacerbating or mitigating generational tensions.
One Gen X manager noted:

"Sometimes the conflict is not about age, but about how the leader manages us. A flexible boss makes it easier to work together."

This underscores the significance of organisational culture. In state-owned organisations, cultures that are rigidly hierarchical may reinforce generational divides, while cultures that encourage dialogue and experimentation can enable cross-generational learning (Omar et al., 2021). Inclusive leadership practices such as recognising contributions across cohorts, rotating communication responsibilities, and encouraging mentorship programmes can transform potential conflict into opportunities for knowledge sharing. Transformational leadership, in particular, can unite employees around shared goals while respecting different styles of contribution (Johnson, 2019).

6.6 Coping Strategies Used by Employees

Participants also reported various strategies for coping with generational differences. Younger employees often adjusted their communication style when dealing with seniors, adopting more formal emails or face-to-face discussions. Conversely, older employees increasingly embraced digital tools after observing their efficiency.

One Baby Boomer shared:

"At first I didn't like WhatsApp groups, but now I see they are useful for quick updates. Still, for big issues, I prefer meetings."

Such adaptations reflect convergence strategies described by Communication Accommodation Theory. They also suggest that conflict is not static but evolves as employees learn to negotiate expectations. HR policies that support cross-generational mentorship and digital literacy training can accelerate this adjustment process.

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Overall, the findings indicate that intergenerational conflict in the Selangor state-owned organisation arises mainly from differences in work styles and communication preferences, magnified by cultural traditions of hierarchy and respect. Yet, these differences also provide opportunities for synergy if managed through inclusive leadership, hybrid work structures, and multi-channel communication strategies. By integrating Mannheim's generational theory with communication and leadership frameworks, the findings suggest that conflict can be reframed as a catalyst for organisational learning and innovation rather than a barrier to productivity.

The findings of this study highlight three important contributions; contextual, conceptual, and practical. In terms of contextual, it is one of the very few empirical studies that explore intergenerational conflict specifically within a *Malaysian state-owned* organisational environment which is an institutional context characterised by bureaucratic structures, multigenerational tenure, and dual commercial–public accountability. This provides insights unavailable in studies conducted in private or Western organisations. Conceptually, unlike studies that treat work style, communication, or generational traits separately, this research shows how the interaction between work style differences and communication preferences becomes the primary catalyst of intergenerational conflict.

The study also integrates Mannheim's Generational Theory with organisational behaviour perspectives to provide a more holistic explanation. In the perspective of practise and human resource management, the findings highlight specific conflict management implications for HR practitioners and leaders, demonstrating how inclusive leadership, multi-channel communication systems, and hybrid work processes can transform generational differences from sources of tension into organisational strengths. These insights are uniquely aligned with Malaysia's socio-cultural norms of hierarchy and respect.

On the whole the findings imply that beyond recognising the existence of generational differences, effective intergenerational conflict management has become increasingly critical in Malaysian organisations, particularly state-owned institutions where long-serving employees work alongside rapidly growing cohorts of digital-native staff. Poorly managed conflict can reduce collaboration, slow decision-making, undermine trust, and weaken organisational performance. However, when managed constructively, generational differences can enhance creativity, knowledge transfer, and team adaptability. Intergenerational conflict management therefore plays a central role in ensuring organisational harmony, supporting digital transformation, and maintaining public accountability within state-owned organisations. This study is important because it provides empirical insight into how conflict emerges and how leaders and HR practitioners can proactively address these tensions to harness the strengths of a multigenerational workforce.

7.0 Conclusion

This study examined the dynamics of intergenerational conflict in a Selangor state-owned organisation, focusing on differences in work styles and communication preferences.

The findings demonstrate that intergenerational conflict is not merely a matter of chronological age but the product of complex interactions between socio-historical experiences, organisational structures, and individual dispositions. Older employees tended to value discipline, procedural adherence, and face-to-face interaction, while younger employees emphasised speed, autonomy, and digital communication.

The Malaysian cultural context adds a distinctive dimension to these dynamics. Traditions of hierarchy, respect for authority, and collectivist values amplify the way generational differences are interpreted and managed (Omar et al., 2021). For example, communication that younger employees regard as efficient may be perceived by seniors as dismissive or disrespectful. This highlights the importance of context-sensitive models, as frameworks developed in Western settings (Appelbaum et al., 2022; Ng & Parry, 2023) cannot be uncritically applied to Asian organisations. Instead, cultural and institutional specificities must inform strategies for managing generational diversity.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study affirms Mannheim's (1952) argument that generational cohorts are shaped by formative historical contexts, while also extending organisational behaviour perspectives by linking generational differences to communication practices and leadership styles. By integrating Media Richness Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory, the findings show how everyday communication preferences can escalate or alleviate workplace tensions. The study also supports conflict theory perspectives, which view conflict not solely as destructive but as a potential driver of innovation and adaptation when channelled constructively.

For Malaysian state-owned organisations, these measures are particularly urgent given their dual accountability to both stakeholders and the public. As the nation approaches aged status by 2030, state-owned organisations will face increasing pressure to remain efficient, innovative, and socially responsive. Harnessing the strengths of a multigenerational workforce is therefore not optional but central to organisational sustainability and national development goals.

The research is bounded by limitations inherent in single-case qualitative designs. Findings are context-specific and not statistically generalisable, though they provide conceptual insights applicable to organisations with similar structures and cultural contexts. Future studies could expand by adopting multi-case designs, sectoral comparisons between public and private organisations, or mixed-method approaches that triangulate qualitative insights with quantitative measures of conflict and productivity. Longitudinal studies may also be valuable in examining how intergenerational dynamics evolve over time, particularly as Malaysia's workforce continues to age.

This study is subject to certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The research employed a single-case design focusing on one state-owned organisation in Selangor. The findings should be understood as offering analytical generalisation providing conceptual insights that may be applicable to organisations with similar structures and cultural characteristics (Yin, 2018). The relatively small number of participants means that some perspectives may not be fully captured, particularly if certain generational cohorts were

underrepresented. However, the aim was not representativeness but rather the exploration of diverse viewpoints within a bounded organisational setting.

In addition, translation from Bahasa Malaysia to English introduces the possibility of semantic slippage, where certain cultural or linguistic subtleties may not be fully conveyed. Subsequent studies could expand to multiple organisations, employ comparative designs across sectors, or incorporate mixed-method approaches to triangulate qualitative insights with quantitative measures of organisational conflict and communication practices. In conclusion, intergenerational conflict in Malaysian state-owned organisations should not be seen as an inevitable liability. With thoughtful leadership, inclusive policies, and sensitivity to cultural context, these organisations can transform generational differences into a source of creativity, resilience, and long-term competitiveness.

Acknowledgement

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