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Regional Disparities Among Teams in Selected Countries with a Focus on Age Variations

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to investigates the impact of age and geographical differences on team satisfaction and interaction within selected European countries. In the context of an increasingly multicultural society, characterized by diverse ethnicities, cultures, races, religions, ages, and genders, this study examines the impact of internal disparities influenced by regional factors on social dynamics, with a particular focus on team dynamics across different geographical locations and their influence on social cohesion. Amid demographic and technological shifts emphasizing the growing significance of age, this research investigates whether individuals under the age of 36, residing in major urban areas, experience lower levels of team satisfaction and interaction compared to their older counterparts and those from smaller towns. Utilizing a dataset comprising 250 participants from leisure, work, and sports teams across Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Germany, the study explores variations in team satisfaction among different age groups and regional backgrounds. This paper contributes to the understanding of how multicultural environments affect team dynamics, highlighting the importance of considering both age and regional factors in assessing team satisfaction within both work and recreational settings.

Keywords: age variations; disparity; European union; regional differences; teams

INTRODUCTION

As Paoletti et al. (2019) point out, the changes driven by both economic and technological development are increasing the reliance of organizations on teams. This statement is corroborated by Blustein's study (2013). Further emphasizing the importance of teams, Paoletti et al. (2019) concur with the findings of Joshi and Roh (2009), who argue that team diversity sustains productivity across various work solutions, regardless of age. Consequently, age is becoming an increasingly important factor in research of teams and regional disparities, significantly impacting and altering the composition of work teams across different regions in the forthcoming years. The process of population aging across the European Union (EU) Member States presents both opportunities and challenges. Profili et al. (2017) highlight the rapid increase in the employment of older workers (aged 55-64) across EU countries, even amid the debt crisis. In 2015, this demographic constituted 53.3% of the workforce in the then 28 EU Member States. Such a trend underscores the evolving dynamics of the workplace, reflecting greater age diversity among workers. This shift is attributed to demographic changes, the abolition of mandatory retirement, and a rise in life expectancy, as noted by Jones and George (2014).

The demographic changes as well as the growth of the population aged over 65 possess the potential to alter the distribution of the labour market. The variable of age has emerged as a significant dimension of diversity, where effective management is pivotal for overall success (Wziątek-Staśko, 2015). Employers are now actively adapting to these changes, recognizing the importance of diversity in the workplace while encompassing ethnicities, nationalities, races, sexual orientations, religions, and age groups (Trawinski, 2019). The existing literature, as in case of Salcinovic et al. (2022), highlights various theories and definitions that underpin the age diversity within teams, teamwork, and organizations. One such theory is the social comparison theory. It revolves around an inherent desire to evaluate and compare one's own opinions to those of the others (Festinger, 1954). This theory specializes in resolving contradictions within groups where escalating contradictions lead the group to establishing a measure (opinion) aimed at reducing any discord. This process endeavors to diminish any mutual hostility or, in more severe cases, the intolerance of opposing opinions. Another closely related theory is the social identity theory, according to which the individuals align themselves with the teams or organizations possessing established social identities (Dur and Sol, 2010). According to Tajfel (1978) and Rotemberg (1994), individuals develop a social identity over time, based on their self-perception and interactions with the world and social relationships. This model relies on similarity traits, proximity, and the situational context.

Age diversity, however, is a critical aspect of work and team environments, influencing both successes and failures in the goal achievement (Turi et al., 2022). This is also confirmed by Pytlovany and Truxillo (2015), who supplemented these statements with the definition of age diversity itself. According to them, age diversity involves the age differences among employees working in organizations and teams. It has become a challenge in many developed countries due to lower birth rates, increased prosperity, and improved healthcare. The question arises as to whether age diversity contributes positively or negatively to teamwork (Sluiter, 2006). Tempest et al. (2002) argue that this trend leads to a decrease in younger workers and an increase in older workers.

Consequently, stereotypes related to ageism diminish within organizations and teams (Nelson, 2005). Whereas the initial results indicate the positive and negative impacts of age diversity contingent on environmental context, task complexity, and interaction (Wegge & Jungmann, 2016), as early of 2014, Darwin affirmed that age diversity is a crucial strategic asset that lends a value and character to a company, particularly in competitive landscapes.

However, this topic is intimately related to another concept known as organizational diversity. This notion, commonly debated within contemporary corporate environments, explores the significance of terminologies pertinent to teamwork. According to Karimi and Busolo (2019) and Żarczyńska-Dobiesz and Chomątowska (2016), diversity represents a cornerstone principle in the field of human resource management. This diversity, in contemporary organizations, encompasses gender, religion, language, ethnicity, and personal orientation of the workforce. Although it is not a Member State of the EU, Norway, for instance, enacted a law in 2003 mandating that 40% of the total workforce in public organizations shall be women. The resource-based theory is often applied to address the organizational diversity, focusing on the integration of diversity and subsequent effects on organizational resources and "Organizational Diversity." The institutional theory supports the overall inseparability of organizational structure from the internal social environment, offering insights into comprehending the organizational structure (Yang & Konrad, 2011). As Hodson (1997) argues, the significance of teamwork is an undeniable reality, underscored by Salas et al. (2017), who claim that teams and teamwork are integral to society. These can encompass work teams as well as sports teams, characterized by collective identity, structured patterns, communication modes, and social interactions (Martin & Carron, 2012). As per Bales (2001), these involve the process of message exchange and communication within a team, incorporating both cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions. Bales attributes the cognitive dimension to a task fulfilment and skill acquisition, while the socio-emotional dimension pertains to members' personal well-being. Kreijns et al. (2013) suggest that this dimension is supported by rather spontaneous interactions. Sports teams offer an ideal example of these attributes.

The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the critical need for cooperation, integrating this concept into the very essence of daily societal operations (Sjølie et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it is imperative to understand that teams are more than mere aggregates of individuals. Dyer (1984) and Salas et al. (1992) conceptualize teams as collectives of two or more individuals who engage in adaptive, dynamic interactions within their specific roles to pursue common objectives. This definition is further refined by Salas et al. (2005), who depict teams as groups of individuals with distinct roles and responsibilities, characterized by their adaptive and interactive behaviour. Odetoyinbo (2019) underscores the significance of teams and teamwork by examining elite sports teams, which comprise not only coaches but also sports medicine professionals and scientific personnel, all collaboratively striving to optimize the performance and well-being of athletes.

These teams are considered organizational building blocks essential for the goal attainment (van Knippenberg, 2003). The success relies on effectively utilizing various teams irrespective of age, gender, nationality, or other attributes, necessitating a well-structured and efficient age management system (Ratajczak, 2020). In this landscape, the main goals of managers should include formulating effective strategies while considering historical context, work styles, communication

preferences, and other generational specifics (Kołodziejczyk-Olczak, 2014). Age diversity can offer substantial benefits in workplaces and working groups, yet organizational inefficiency and the inability to adapt to dynamic developments remain as issues, often rooted in a lack of understanding of basic team processes and context (Scheuer, 2017). This diversity can lead to both beneficial differences in the problem-solving experience and intensified emotional conflicts in teamwork (van Knippenberg & Shippers, 2007). Wegge and Schmidt (2009) contend that the negative effects of age diversity often outweigh the positive ones in teamwork. Nonetheless, they highlight the need for further research. For successful age diversity, Wegge and Jungmann (2016) then suggest complex tasks without time constraints, diverse teams, a positive team environment, reduced age stereotypes and discrimination, and age-differentiated leadership. The value of social interaction and communication has therefore emerged as pivotal for the overall success, shaped by cooperation, effectiveness, and employee loyalty (Rosales, 2016). Optimal social interaction is being characterized by the task performance and suitable team models (Yang, Ju & Tian, 2022).

The 21st century's constant changes influence each facet of life and one another, creating the foundation for new technologies, affecting the economy, culture, politics, and society (Berkup, 2014). Effective strategies should accommodate these changes, reflecting the importance of emotional support, friendship, financial rewards, and efforts to achieve a higher team performance (Li et al., 2014). However, any social interaction has its drawbacks, including reduced pro-sociality among colleagues interacting with less prosocial counterparts (Hattori & Yamada, 2023). Hattori and Yamada (2023) also identify five essential aspects of social interaction, such as mutual effects, social interaction's role in teams with/without leadership, and interdependence between the individual and group performance. In a grander scheme, the intricate interplay between age diversity, social interaction, and effective strategies is fundamental for organizational success, demanding a comprehensive understanding of each factor's nuances and their interconnections.

METHOD

The primary aim of this investigation is to examine how age and geographical differences influence team satisfaction and interaction across various environments in selected countries. The SPSS was utilized to facilitate the analysis of data, employing single-factor ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) tests to rigorously examine the collected information. Ethical protocols were stringently observed throughout the study, with measures taken to anonymize the identities of all participants involved, including individuals from various sports, recreational clubs, and work teams.

The used research method was designed to incorporate a parametric one-factor ANOVA test, aimed at evaluating the dynamics within individual teams through a structured questionnaire survey. This survey, comprising nine distinct segments, was administered to 250 participants across seven teams located in four different countries. These teams were strategically selected to represent a mix of three small towns and four large towns, thereby offering a comprehensive perspective on the impact of urban versus rural settings on team interactions.

The questionnaire was crafted to prioritize open-ended questions, thereby encouraging participants to provide detailed and insightful responses. This approach was intended to enrich the

dataset with diverse viewpoints, enhancing the depth of the analysis. A significance level of 5% was established a priori for the analysis, ensuring that the results would yield significant insights into the factors influencing team satisfaction and interaction across various environments. Teams were selected to provide a diverse representation across different regions: In Czechia, surveys targeted a work team, a work team with regular volleyball activities, and a handicrafts recreational club. Slovakia contributed with surveys among two sports teams, one focused on professional kayaking and the other on regular Zumba classes. In Hungary, the focus was on two work teams, whereas in Germany, the study included a sports team of medical students specializing in fitness training (see Table 1). The classification of towns was based on population size, with towns of up to 25,000 inhabitants considered small and those with more than 25,000 categorized as large. Surveys were distributed in paper format following team activities, with the research span extending from December 2022 to June 2023. The questionnaire was selected for the initial phase of the study due to its efficiency and the relative ease of processing the data collected. Although in-depth interviews are planned for subsequent stages of research, they pose challenges in terms of time and data management. The initial survey is seen as crucial for gaining a foundational understanding of the issues under investigation, promising a substantial return on the investment of time and effort. Future research will delve deeper into the nuances of team satisfaction through interviews, with a particular focus on the influence of regional differences.

This study also aims to expose the internal disparities among team members, influenced by both regional factors and age differences. The questionnaire survey serves as a preliminary step, with future research intending to supplement these findings with in-depth interviews. The goal is to uncover the complexities of team dynamics influenced by age, gender, and the distinct characteristics of individuals from large and small towns. Teams from Hungary, the Czechia, and Slovakia were selected to represent the selected Visegrad Group (V4) countries, with Germany providing a contrasting perspective from a Western country.

Table 1. Demographic and Structural Overview of Teams

Country of survey	Type of team	Specialization of team	Team members	Composition by gender	Town size
Czechia	collective	Work team	47	22W (women), 25 M (men)	LT
	collective	Volleyball	12	5 W, 7 M	ST
	part individual	Handicrafts club	55	28 W 27 M	LT
Slovakia	collective	Zumba	24	22 W, 2 M	ST
	part individual	Kayaking	38	5 W, 33 M	LT
Germany	part individual	Fitness	32	21 W, 11 M	LT
Hungary	collective	Work team	42	12W, 30 M	ST

For enhanced clarity and distinction within the dataset, an organizational scheme differentiates between teams originating from small and large towns. Specifically, data corresponding to teams from large towns are designated with a blue colour code, whereas information for teams from small towns is represented in white. This color-coding facilitates a more intuitive understanding of the data's geographical context and allows for quicker visual differentiation between the two categories. Furthermore, the concept of collective teamwork is introduced to describe scenarios in which team members are interdependent, necessitating collaboration as no individual can complete their tasks in isolation. This contrasts with individual activity within a team context, where a member's work is autonomous, not requiring input, support, or collaboration from other team members or the team as a whole. This distinction is critical for analysing team dynamics, as it highlights the varying degrees of interdependence and collaboration required in different team settings and tasks.

RESULTS

The analysis, conducted using the SPSS and employing single-factor ANOVA, confirms the hypothesis, indicating significant age-related and regional differences in team satisfaction. Addressing the initial inquiry of the survey regarding gender identity, the data revealed that out of the total respondents, 135 self-identified as male, whereas 115 indicated their gender as female. Notably, there were no respondents who selected the option for non-binary gender identity. This distribution suggests a pronounced skew towards male participants among the aggregate of surveyed individuals, highlighting a potential overrepresentation of masculine perspectives within the collective makeup of the teams under scrutiny.

Subsequent inquiries delved into the spectrum of age diversity within the teams, the challenges posed by age discrepancies, and the perceived benefits deriving from the inclusion of members across different age groups, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other demographic factors. The responses to these queries exhibited a broad range of perspectives.

In this context, the methodology encompassed the determination of the mean age of all respondents, alongside additional statistical measures such as standard deviations and the variance within the collected data set. Pertinent to the inquiry regarding the age demographics of participants, the analysis unveiled a mean age of 39.5 years amongst the respondents. This statistic predominantly situates the participant group within the nearly middle-aged segment of the populace, particularly those below the age of 40 years, indicating a relatively youthful composition of the team members. The data set under scrutiny revealed a standard deviation of $s = 8.1$, suggesting that the ages of the respondents are moderately spread, with individual ages deviating from the mean by approximately 8 years on average.

Further analysis of the sample's variability yielded a variance (s^2) of 65.58, which is indicative of a moderate level of age diversity within the sample. This standard deviation substantiates the absence of significant disparities in age composition. Nonetheless, a geographical analysis of the sample demonstrates that in Western countries (such as Germany and Czechia), teams are predominantly comprised of younger individuals, whereas in Eastern countries (such as Slovakia and Hungary), the team composition skews towards older members.

Further exploration into team affiliations disclosed a varied distribution, with 92 individuals associating themselves with work-related teams and 158 identifying with teams oriented towards sports and leisure activities. Detailed examination under the query concerning team description revealed a delineation of roles and gender compositions reflective of the cumulative survey outcomes. Additionally, an exceptional case was noted involving a work team member from Hungary, who was reported to be on sick leave at the time of the survey's administration.

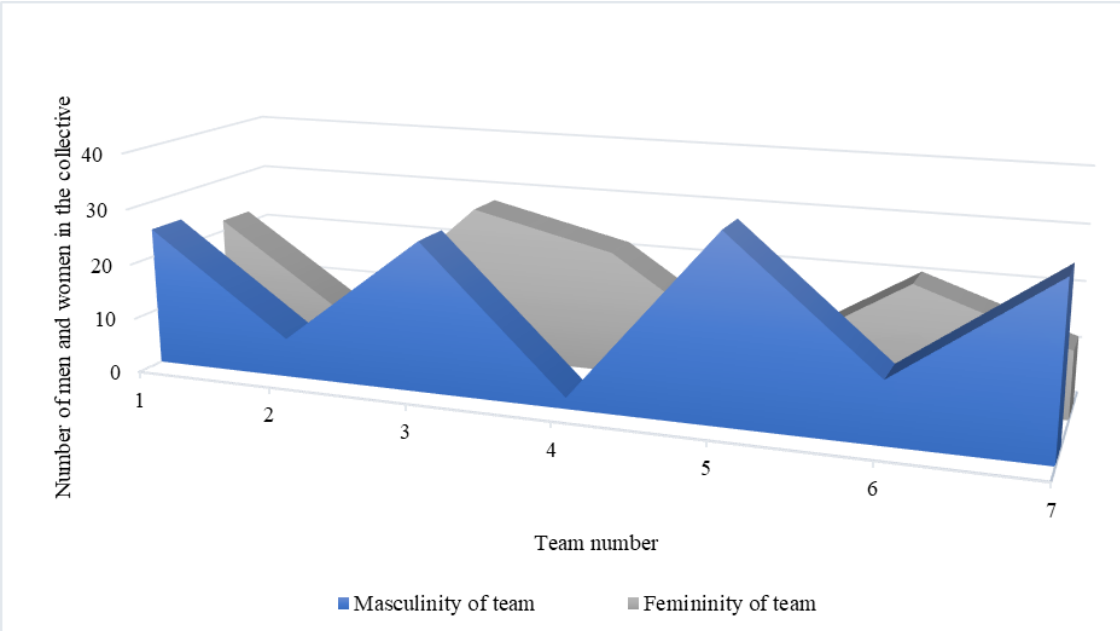
The survey also encompassed questions targeting the geographical composition of the teams, highlighting variances in priorities, especially when contrasting responses from participants residing in larger urban centres with those from smaller towns. Notably, younger respondents from smaller municipalities reported a more flexible approach, whereas participants from larger urban areas indicated distinct priorities among older members, alongside a perceived limitation in adaptability to evolving conditions.

Table 2. Distribution of the individual teams studied by nationality, gender attributes, and the average age of members

Team no.	Nationality	Masculinity of team	Femininity of team	Town size	Average age of team members
1	Czech	25	22	LT	38
2	Czech	7	5	ST	32
3	Czech	27	28	LT	35
4	Slovak	2	22	ST	47
5	Slovak	33	5	LT	19
6	German	11	21	LT	23
7	Hungarian	30	12	ST	39.5

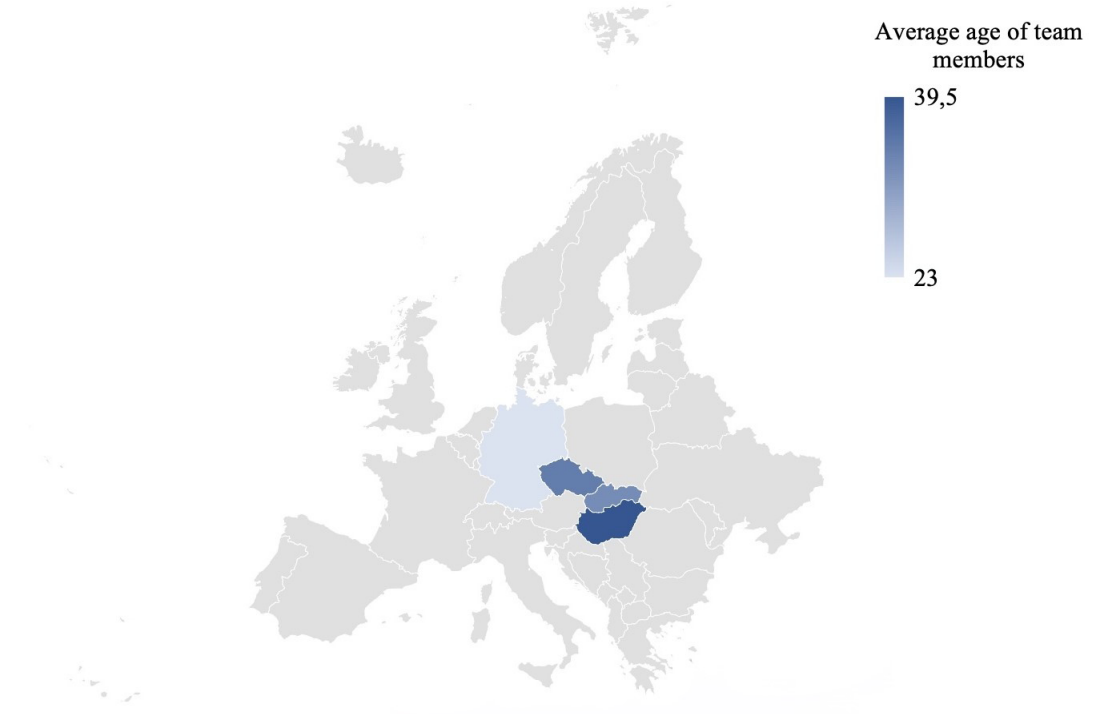
Table 2 above and Figure 1 below collectively elucidate the gender composition within teams (from survey groups 2), highlighting significant disparities that are contingent upon the size of the towns from which team members hail and participate in their respective team activities. The graphical representation distinguishes between gender compositions by employing a color-coding scheme: the grey area of the Figure symbolizes the presence of feminine elements within the team, whereas the blue area denotes the masculine components. This visual differentiation facilitates an understanding of the gender dynamics within teams, illustrating how the proportions of male and female members vary significantly across different town sizes and types of teams. The distinct delineation of gender representation in these visual aids underscores the influence of geographical and contextual factors on team composition, revealing nuanced insights into how gender diversity is manifested within various team environments.

Figure 1. Gender distribution of teams



Map 1 (below) uses a colour gradient from light to dark blue to represent the age distribution within the team, with lighter shades for younger members and darker shades for older ones. This visual analysis uncovers a geographical trend in age demographics, with older age groups more prevalent near Central and Eastern countries (Micle et al., 2022). This west-to-east progression shows significant variations in age composition, highlighted by the average ages across the countries studied. Notably, German athletes have the lowest average age, which aligns with notable differences in views on team diversity and aging's effects. This finding prompts further investigation into how cultural or regional factors influence team composition and attitudes towards diversity and aging within sports teams.

Map 1. Average age of team members among selected countries



According to the data presented in Table 3 and the outcomes of the ANOVA test, the p-value, which is significantly below the 0.05 threshold, leads us to reject the null hypothesis. This indicates a meaningful difference in the responses to questions Q1, Q2, Q3, Q5, Q7, Q8, and Q9, highlighting varied responses among the participants. The results thus confirm differences particularly in responses concerning team's affiliation and composition, and also in differences in terms of diversity within the examined team and characteristics related to ethnicity, religion, and in this context, contributions to the given team. The results also reflect different perceptions of motivational factors across individual teams, which are likely influenced by the factors studied. In contrast, the similarity in responses to questions Q4 and Q6 suggests a lack of significant variance among these items. Notably, the analysis reveals significant differences in perceptions between individuals from large towns compared to those from small towns, particularly within the age group up to 36 years as opposed to those over 45 years. Despite observable cultural, age, and demographic variances, these factors were found to minimally affect the experiences and perceptions of women and men from various ethnic backgrounds within the surveyed teams. This suggests that, while demographic factors may influence individual perspectives, they do not significantly alter the overall trends observed in this study.

An overwhelming 98% of respondents across examined demographics and regions provided positive evaluations of their team environments, encompassing work, sports, and leisure activities. This trend of positivity was even more pronounced within specialized interest groups, such as those dedicated to ceramics, indicating a potential correlation between specialized engagement and team satisfaction. Notably, despite acknowledging regional disparities, team members generally perceived these differences as contributing positively to their life outlooks and team dynamics. This suggests that awareness and appreciation of diversity within teams not only enhance satisfaction but also foster a more inclusive environment conducive to positive experiences and outcomes. These findings underscore the value of inclusivity and the embrace of varied perspectives in enriching team environments and promoting a high level of satisfaction among members.

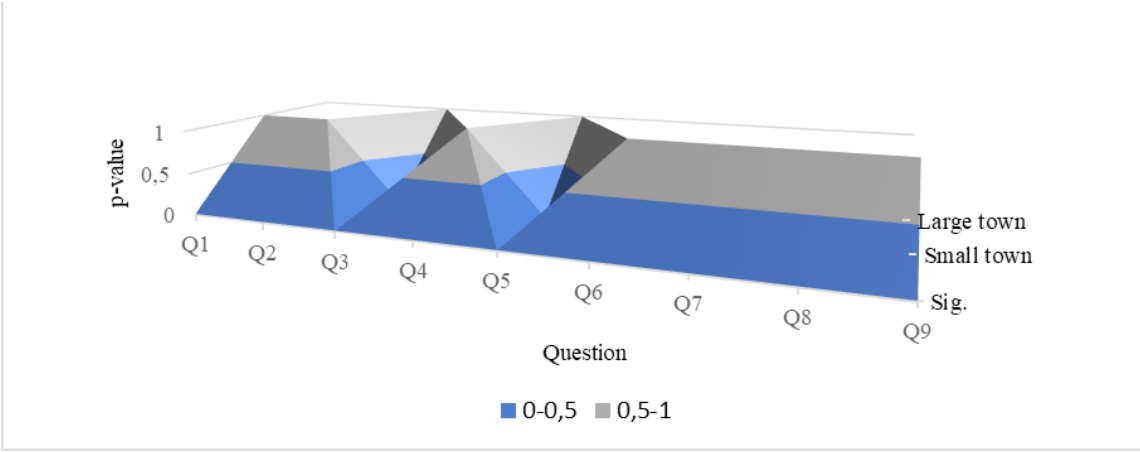
Table 3. ANOVA results – Processing of summary questionnaire

Question		Sig.
Q1	Between groups (1-7)	**.018**
Q2	Between groups (1-7)	**.000**
Q3	Between groups (1-7)	**.025**
Q4	Between groups (1-7)	.087
Q5	Between groups (1-7)	**.004**
Q6	Between groups (1-7)	.080
Q7	Between groups (1-7)	**.000**
Q8	Between groups (1-7)	**.012**
Q9	Between groups (1-7)	**.015**

The findings reveal disparities across the regional nuances of small and large towns, as further depicted in the figure below. Figure 2 sheds light on the disparities among teams from small versus large towns, with a specific emphasis on the differences across various age groups. The graphical illustration highlights the starkest differences among the age groups of 36 years and those aged

45 and above, demonstrating a distinct split in team dynamics and perceptions according to the town's size. An important observation from the study is that within larger towns, the variation in responses was solely due to age differences, without any significant variation based on gender. This suggests a uniformity in gender perspectives within these age groups. Moreover, the graph highlights a disregard for cultural and ethnic diversity within teams, indicating a pervasive impact of globalization and internationalization. Such phenomena seem to infiltrate even smaller towns, suggesting a widespread trend towards homogenization in team composition and attitudes towards diversity, regardless of geographical differences.

Figure 2. Differences in responses to the questionnaire within the context of regional variations in teams



Note: The Figure takes into, account and maps the results of the ANOVA test within the context of regional differentiations, combining p-values and the predominant response values in the form of 1 or 0.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this investigation resonate with various preceding studies, either corroborating or refuting the initial research hypothesis. The analysis of data garnered through the questionnaire survey unequivocally confirms the null hypothesis. Specifically, it has been determined that individuals under the age of 36, residing in larger urban areas, exhibit lower levels of satisfaction and diminished interaction within teams in comparison to their elder counterparts and those hailing from smaller towns. Furthermore, the hypothesis that women under the age of 36 living in large towns express less satisfaction in team settings than older women has also been validated. Across the board, a trend of reduced satisfaction is noted among both male and female participants from large towns, in stark contrast to those from smaller towns. This observation stands in contradiction to the assertions made by Wegge and Schmidt (2009), who posited that the potential for negative outcomes stemming from age diversity in teams is higher than the likelihood of positive impacts. Despite this, Wegge and Jungmann (2016) argued for the beneficial integration of age diversity within teams, suggesting strategies such as the assignment of complex team tasks devoid of stringent time constraints, fostering a team culture that appreciates diversity while minimizing the focus on age differences, and the eradication of age-related stereotypes and

discrimination in the workplace. They advocate for the promotion of age-diverse leadership and the enhancement of the team environment as essential strategies for leveraging the benefits of age diversity. Contrary to the perspectives offered by Wegge and his colleagues, the results of this survey, involving 250 participants, challenge the previously held view. Instead of corroborating the potential negatives associated with age diversity in teams, the study's outcomes underscore the positive reception of age differences among team members. Such differences are perceived as enriching, fostering the exchange of novel ideas, fresh perspectives, and contributing significantly to the overall development and dynamism of the team. This indicates a nuanced understanding of age diversity's role within teams, highlighting its potential to enrich team experiences and outcomes rather than detracting from them.

The exclusion of Poland was noted as a limitation, attributed to challenges in establishing cooperation. Future research will seek to include new partners from Poland and Austria, enhancing the comparative scope of the study. Expanding research to include additional countries will help increase the relevance of the results and aid in creating more appropriate statistical evaluations when assigning Likert scale values (3-5 levels) to values of 0-1 for the significance level.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the research reveal a divergence from the theories and discussions previously highlighted. Individuals from smaller communities exhibit a welcoming stance towards the presence of age diversity within their teams, recognizing the value that diversity in age, culture, and ethnicity contributes to both problem-solving capabilities and overall team dynamics. Given the continuing trend of aging, the integration of individuals with diverse characteristics is more than desirable. According to the literature reviewed, this situation is likely to most significantly affect the labour market in the near future, where, unlike in sports teams, some positions do not depend on the physical fitness of the employee. Creating suitable conditions for these diverse teams can, according to the results, positively influence the overall efficiency of the team as well as cooperation. On the contrary, participants hailing from larger urban areas, who are generally younger, demonstrate either a neutral or adverse perspective on the subject of age diversity within teams, often citing a variance in task and activity prioritization. The data gathered supports the theory that women aged 36 and below from larger cities report lower levels of satisfaction within their teams compared to their older counterparts. This observation remains consistent across different teams and geographical locations included in the study. In summary, individuals from larger urban centres tend to view age diversity less favourably, a sentiment that is particularly pronounced among those older than 25 and women younger than 45.

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ANNEX

FORMULATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to contribute to our study. Your participation is invaluable in enhancing our understanding of team dynamics, with a particular focus on the influence of regional and age differences. This research aims to shed light on how these factors affect team belonging and functionality.

Please be assured that all responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and analysed anonymously to protect your privacy. This questionnaire is designed to require approximately 8 minutes of your time.

Your insights are crucial to the success of this investigation, and we are grateful for your contribution.

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1. What is your gender? (Male/Female/Non-binary)
2. Please specify your age.
3. Which team are you affiliated with?
4. Could you describe the team's composition?
5. How diverse is the age distribution within your team? Have there been any challenges arising from the age differences among team members? If so, could you provide examples?
6. Do you perceive advantages in having team members from various age groups?
7. Are there individuals from different ethnicities, religions, etc., in your team? How do you view their contributions? Do they serve as sources of inspiration and assets to the team, or do you perceive any potential drawbacks?
8. Does your team consist of members from different regions of the country? Are there disparities between members hailing from larger towns versus those from smaller ones? Have you noticed any variations in problem-solving approaches among the team members?
9. What aspects of your team, such as its diversity or solidarity, motivate you the most? How would you rate your team's handling of regional, age-related, and other differences?

We extend our deepest thanks for your participation in this study. Your contributions are invaluable to advancing our knowledge of this significant subject.

Should you have any further questions or wish to inquire about the results of this research once it is completed, please do not hesitate to contact us.

With sincere appreciation,

Research Team

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