

Master's thesis

## Diffusing the Workplace Conflict Bomb: Effects of Leader Competence and Age on Leader-Follower Conflict



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### **Abstract**

A large body of literature has focused on the relationship between intra-organizational conflict and certain leadership qualities. We investigated the effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict. Additionally, based on the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, we investigated the moderating role of leader age in this relationship. Finally, we examined leaders' generativity motive as a potential underlying mechanism of the above moderation. We hypothesized that leader competence negatively relates to leader-follower conflict and that leader age would strengthen that relationship. Finally, we anticipated that leader generativity would mediate the moderated effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement. In line with our predictions, Study 1, a two-week time-lagged study among employees showed that leader competence is negatively related to leader-follower conflict, while the effect was stronger when the leader was older. In Study 2, we found supporting evidence regarding the negative effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement by employing a 2x2 experimental study, yet we were unable to provide evidence for the moderating effect of age on the above relationship. Nevertheless, adding leader generativity as an underlying mechanism, we found significant results on the relationship between leader competence and conflict involvement as a function of leader age. It becomes evident that more emphasis should be placed on such elements (i.e., age, generativity) given the demographic changes that shape the workspace and their relevance with leadership phenomena and intra-organizational relationships. Future directions and implications are discussed.

*Keywords:* leader age, leader-follower conflict involvement, leader competence, generativity

## **Diffusing the Workplace Conflict Bomb: Effects of Leader Competence and Age on**

### **Leader-Follower Conflict**

Conflict is an integral part of human assemblies and frequently erupts within the workplace (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Organizations strive to constructively deal with workplace conflict as it often leads to debilitating consequences for an organization, but most importantly for its personnel. Particularly regarding the latter, conflict effects are shown to manifest in various forms such as anxiety, diminished performance and negative affect (De Dreu et al., 2004).

A decisive factor when dealing with conflict in the workplace is the role played by the leader in mitigating tension, given that prior investigations demonstrate even a 40% allocation of a leader's time solely on dealing with interpersonal conflict (Runde & Flanagan, 2012). Converging literature highlights that certain leader qualities, such as leader competence, contribute decisively to the diminishing of conflict episodes between leader and followers (Capozza et al., 2017; Chou et al., 2005; Hollander, 1978). It appears that competent leaders are better equipped with the skills to maneuver through the series of hurdles that social interactions may cause within a workplace. More particularly, prior findings undergird the notion that competent leaders attract more followers (Rosenbaum & Tucker, 1962), elicit more follower trust towards the leader (Mayer et al., 1995), along with a boost in perceived support, psychological safety and team performance (Mao et al., 2019; Price & Garland, 1981). Additionally, there has been a long-standing request for a paradigm shift towards adopting a life-span perspective on leadership (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988; E. S. Ng & Sears, 2012; Walter & Scheibe, 2013). On that note and keeping the aforementioned advantages leader competence brings to the organization, we sought to investigate how previously neglected variables in leadership research (i.e., leader's age) moderate the effect

of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement, conceptualized as the frequency of disagreements between leaders and their subordinates, or the poor treatment of an organization's leader (Spector & Jex, 1998).

It is important to understand social interactions within the workplace as part of the artefact, shaped by demographic developments that lead to the dejuvenation of the workforce, which in turn means that the average leader is also getting older (Deller & Walwei, 2022; Korunka et al., 2003). Despite the ample research on the topic of conflict involvement at work, the role of leaders' age has received little attention (Spisak et al., 2014; Walter & Scheibe, 2013; Zacher, Rosing, & Frese, 2011; Zacher, Rosing, Henning, et al., 2011). Thus, we will attempt to shed light in the effects on leader follower conflict involvement of the ever-increasing age diversity, caused partly by the advances of modern medicine, the increasing education level, the quality of life rising human longevity in the past decades and the decline of birth rates leading to prolonged labor participation (de Beer, 2020; Gratton & Scott, 2016).

We argue that the main effect of leader competence is moderated by age and that the interactive effects of leader competence with leader age on leader-follower conflict involvement are mediated by follower perception of the leader as generative (i.e., leader's main concern being to guide the next generation rather than to accomplish self-interested goals; Erikson, 1950; Zacher, Rosing, Henning, et al., 2011).

This study touches upon the ever-prevalent topic of intra-organizational conflict, aiming firstly to strengthen the existing evidence regarding the negative effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement, while further extending the literature on the role of leader age in intra-organizational interactions, since currently age is predominantly employed as a mere control variable.

### **Leader Competence and Leader-Follower Conflict**

Competence normally is employed to indicate whether others possess the necessary skills to achieve their intentions (Capozza et al., 2017). Apart from capabilities related to accomplishing one's tasks, a competent leader is equipped with a diverse toolbox and the wisdom to maneuver through the hurdles within a workplace (Colquitt et al., 2007), while also attracting more followers and eliciting their trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Rosenbaum & Tucker, 1962). Competence is deemed as a critical factor of leader effectiveness (Hollander, 1978) and from a follower's perspective, the more competence a leader possesses, the greater the likelihood for higher quality resources in the means of mentoring and feedback provision received by the follower (Mao et al., 2019).

Further, literature demonstrates that competent leaders are capable of motivating and maintaining optimism within the workplace (Jin, 2010). This is performed by effectively employing the right conflict management techniques and emotional skills to deal with dissent and employee frustration. Demonstrating the right communication skills to build a safe environment and successfully influencing followers' emotional states allows for the creation of a shared emotional experience, that boosts organizational performance and promotes inter-relational well-being (Kelly & Barsade, 2001). Competent leaders are strategic and flexible in their approach to conflict management, able to accommodate to their followers' goals and to demonstrate listening skills and empathy, enhancing others' self-worth (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). Thus, there is converging evidence hinting towards leader competence being a catalyst for management success and intra-organizational wellbeing with the competent leader carrying the necessary tools for success and being capable to efficiently create a nurturing environment that tends to everyone's desires. Due to the aforementioned, we expect that followers' perception of their leader as competent will lead to decreased leader-follower conflict involvement.

**Hypothesis 1:** Leader competence will be negatively related to follower conflict involvement with the leader.

### **The Moderating Role of Leader Age**

With such increased power due to the competence a leader possesses, comes great responsibility. As we will argue below, there are good theoretical reasons to assume that chronological age is a key factor in determining how competent leaders utilize the power the position they bear within an organization provides them with. More specifically, by virtue of their role, leaders occupy a position accompanied by greater power than their subordinates (Rus et al., 2010), ultimately begging the question as to whether it will be employed to satisfy self-interested (DeCelles et al., 2012; Keltner et al., 2003) or prosocial motives (Fousiani & van Prooijen, 2022; Fousiani & Wisse, 2022). Drawing on the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, which posits that one's goals shift as they age, older competent leaders due to their perception of time as finite, are expected to be more present-oriented, demonstrating a diminished agentic motivation, while simultaneously increasing the formation of communal goals (SST; Carstensen, 1991, 2006). In other words, the focus is predominantly shifted towards setting and satisfying communal goals (e.g., strengthening meaningful social relationships) rather than future-oriented objectives (e.g., seeking new ventures; Thrasher et al., 2019). Along with the aforementioned decrease in agentic motivations and this simultaneous increase in communal values (Gielnik et al., 2012; Ng & Sears, 2012), a previously dominant pursuit of control and advancement over others is shown to subside with age (agentic dominance; Rosette et al., 2016). Thus, the interplay between age and competence, could prove crucial in studying intra-organizational relations, since an other-oriented nurturing leader, who possesses all the necessary technical and emotional expertise is leading the organization.

Naturally with age comes some degree of cognitive decline (Hedge et al., 2006; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Warr, 2001), yet in its place an increase of positive affect and compassion is demonstrated, with the focus shifting on the quality rather than the quantity of one's relationships. The perceived as amicable older leader demonstrates an increase in relational-oriented behaviors, that ultimately yields higher ratings of perceived leader effectiveness (Labouvie-Vief, 2003; Thrasher et al., 2019). Based on the above, and drawing on the SST, we posit that the chronological age of the leader will strengthen the already negative effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement.

An alternative theory whose evidence converge with the aforementioned is the Social Role Theory (SRT; Eagly, 1987; Wood & Eagly, 2000, 2002). SRT suggests that when a certain homogenous group disproportionately occupies a particular social role (e.g., older individuals occupying an overwhelmingly greater number of top leadership positions in contrast to their younger counterparts), it often leads to an association of certain personality traits and qualities with the members of said group. Thus, due to gerontocracy being the norm within the business realm, older individuals are attributed stronger leadership qualities than their younger counterparts (Klofstad et al., 2015; Magni-Berton & Panel, 2021). Naturally, individuals may encounter older competent leaders, due to the mere fact that leaders have accumulated more experience and skills during the years holding the reins of an organization, yet that leads to the formation of the impression that older age is a common element among competent leaders (Worthy et al., 2011), which in turn allows them to outclass their younger counterparts (Liden et al., 1996). Given the over-representation of older leaders in positions predominantly assumed to require competence to succeed, we anticipate that leaders' chronological age will strengthen the negative effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement. Based on the above, we stated the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Leader age will moderate the effect of leader competence on leader-follower

conflict involvement, such that the negative effect of leader competence on conflict involvement will be stronger when the leader is older.

### **The Mediating Role of Leader Generativity**

Literature has shown that the above-described selfless, other-oriented attitude of older leaders has a positive effect on the performance of the whole organization (Zacher, Rosing, Henning, et al., 2011). We will argue that the root of such a boost in performance originates in the generativity that older competent leaders demonstrate, in comparison to their younger counterparts, who predominantly behave in a self-serving manner (De Dreu et al., 2001). Generativity motives shape leaders' behaviors and actions to prioritize the coaching of the next generation, while a progressive decrease of the focus on their own accomplishments takes place. As Erikson (1950) suggested, perhaps an innate desire for symbolic immortality begets the generative attitude demonstrated by older leaders. In a similar vein, legacy beliefs are theorized to allow for one's contributions to be remembered post-mortem (Zacher, Rosing, & Frese, 2011). Therefore, in a turbulent time for ageing leaders, where fluid intelligence decreases, older leaders assist their younger proteges by providing them with ideas, guidance, and support. Perhaps the legacy that older competent leaders leave behind is the people they shaped to leave in their place after their succession has been finalized (Simonton, 1989).

Following the rationale of the Leadership Categorization Theory (Brown & Lord, 2001; Lord et al., 1984), one's followers create implicit leadership representations, based on their socialization and previous experiences with other leaders, with a list of traits that a successful leader ought to encompass. If said prerequisites are met, followers' evaluation of leaders' success is massively impacted. More specifically, the closer a leader's behavior resembles the behavior and attributes of the subjectively manufactured mental representation of a stereotypically competent leader, the more positively predisposed the follower will be



towards that leader and the higher the assumed perceived competence of the leader will be. Additionally, it seems that generativity plays a pivotal role in maintaining high levels of leadership success solely at an older age. Such a trait is not as prevalent among younger leaders, since it only fits the implicit representation of how an older leader should behave, placing the focus on shaping the next generation as the Generativity Theory suggests (Doerwald et al., 2021; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992).

As Leadership Categorization Theory informs us, generativity in older competent leaders satisfies our expectations, and is a rather critical factor in predicting older leaders' success than it is for younger leaders, who are expected to act in a rather self-serving manner. Based on our implicit representations, older leaders are expected to be more generative, and when said expectation is satisfied followers' attitude and behavioral response will be more positive towards the leader. Thus, we expect that older competent leaders will be evaluated as focusing more on guiding and paving the way for the future generations to come, rather than pursuing their own gains and achievements. This will in turn yield more favorable follower ratings towards their leaders, thus diminishing friction between the two parties. Essentially, due to generativity, being a pillar in the intra-organizational relations between leader-follower, we expect that the older generative competent leader will be evaluated as more emotionally literate and sociable in comparison to one's younger counterpart, which we expect to consequently diminish leader-follower conflict involvement. Based on the above, we hypothesize that,

**Hypothesis 3:** Leader generativity will mediate the moderated effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement, such that leader competence will be positively related to leader generativity when the leader is older. Leader generativity will be, in turn, negatively related to leader-follower conflict (see Figure 1 for conceptual model).

## Overview of the Present Research

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two studies: a time-lagged survey (Study 1) and a scenario experiment (Study 2). In Study 1 we assessed perceived leader's competence and chronological age at time point one, and subsequently leader generativity and leader-employee conflict involvement at time point two. In Study 2, we manipulated leader competence (high versus low) and leader chronological age (old versus young) with the help of scripted vignettes, assessing generativity and leader-follower conflict involvement.

### Study 1

#### Method

##### *Participants*

A total of 324 British employees working at least 20 hours per week were recruited (61.10% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 35.70$ ,  $SD = 10.70$ ) in the 1<sup>st</sup> wave of the study via Prolific. Five participants did not complete the biggest part of the questionnaire and were excluded from further analysis. Of the remaining sample, 227 took part in the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of the study. Of the participants, 73% had previously obtained at least a bachelor's degree. A sensitivity analysis with G\*Power revealed that this sample holds 95% power to detect a medium effect with size:  $\rho = .23$ . Study 1 was pre-registered:

[https://osf.io/vra75/?view\\_only=fe959f63f1d849628e595b7ded55eb6e](https://osf.io/vra75/?view_only=fe959f63f1d849628e595b7ded55eb6e).

##### *Procedure*

This is a time-lagged study consisting of two waves. In the first wave we measured leader competence and leader age as rated by the employee. In the second wave, which took place two weeks later, we measured leader-follower conflict involvement and employee perception of their leader as generative. Upon the completion of the study, participants were thanked and debriefed. After the successful completion of both surveys, participants were compensated with £1.20 for participating in this 10-minute task.

## **Measures**

**Perception of Leader's Competence.** Employees rated their leaders' competence filling out the 7-item competence subscale of Abele and Wojciszke (2007) (e.g., "When thinking about my direct supervisor (the person that I report to) I would say that as a supervisor he/she is... skillful, intelligent"; 1= *Not at all*, 7= *To a great extent*;  $\alpha = .94$ ).

**Leader Age.** Employees indicated the age of their leader in years.

**Employee Conflict Involvement with the Leader.** Employees filled in an adapted version of the 4-item Interpersonal Conflict at Work scale (Spector & Jex, 1998) measuring their involvement in conflict with their leader (e.g., "How often do you yell at your supervisor at work?"; 1= *Never*, 7= *Very often*). The scale was adapted to fit the specifics of this study and presented good reliability:  $\alpha = .84$ .

**Leader Generativity.** To assess perceived generativity of the leader we used the 3item scale by Zacher and colleagues (2011) (e.g., "I believe that my supervisor uses more time for rearing young employees than for making progress in his/her own career  $\alpha = .91$ ; 1= *Does not apply at all*, 7= *Applies completely*).

## **Results**

### ***Preliminary Analysis***

Our results demonstrate that leader competence is negatively related to leader-follower conflict involvement. Additionally, the correlation between leader competence and generativity was found to be positive and significant (see Table 1 for an overview of the study variables).

### ***Hypothesis Testing***

To test our proposed model, we ran a moderated mediation analysis using SPSS, version 26 through the Process function (Model 7; Hayes, 2018; IBM Corp, 2019) with leader competence as predictor, leader age as our moderator, leader generativity as our

mediator and leader-follower conflict involvement as our dependent variable (see Table 2 for the relevant statistics). All variables were centred. The effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement was negative and significant (supporting Hypothesis 1). The interaction between leader competence and leader age was significant (supporting Hypothesis 2). Given the latter significant interaction, we further investigated what that might entail, and as can be seen in Figure 2, older competent leaders are involved in considerably less leader-follower conflict than younger competent leaders. Finally, the main effect of leader age on generativity was not significant and neither was the interaction effect between leader competence and leader age on leader-follower conflict involvement with generativity as the mediator, thus we were unable to find evidence supporting Hypothesis 3. However, an interesting finding is that the main effect of leader generativity on conflict involvement was negative and significant (for a visual illustration of the effects see Figure 3).

## **Discussion**

We attempted to examine the underlying mechanisms that could potentially diminish conflict at the workplace using a time-lagged design. Supporting Hypothesis 1, we found evidence that leader competence is negatively and significantly related to leader-follower conflict involvement. Further, we were able to find evidence for the hypothesised moderating effect of age on leader-follower conflict involvement (Hypothesis 2) suggesting that older competent leaders are less likely to be involved in workplace conflict. On the other hand, we were unable to find evidence supporting the mediating effect of generativity on the above moderation (Hypothesis 3 not supported). Nonetheless, as Figure 3 shows, there seems to be an interesting effect of competence on generativity as a function of age worthy of further investigation. Perhaps an explanation as to why the interpolated lines of Figure 2 demonstrate a shift in the degree of generativity motives depending on age is the fact that generativity is not a trait expected of younger leaders, instead it is expected of older ones (Thrasher et al.,

2019). Therefore, in order to fit our preconception of an older leader acting in the manner that the Leadership Categorization Theory dictates, we witness a larger perceived evaluation of the generativity motive attributed to the older leaders rather than the younger ones (Zacher, Rosing, Henning, et al., 2011). To replicate the findings of Study 1 and shed further light onto the potential that age plays as a moderating factor between leader competence and conflict involvement, we conducted an experiment fully described below.

## Study 2

### Method

#### *Participants*

A total of 372 full-time employees living in the U.K. (55.10% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 37.40$ ,  $SD = 10.10$ ) partook in this experiment. Participants were recruited via Prolific. More than half of the participants (57%) had previously acquired a university/college degree. An a priori power analysis revealed that to achieve 80% power in detecting a medium effect size:  $f = .25$ , 400 participants would be required. Study 2 was pre-registered:

[https://osf.io/k9mfx/?view\\_only=811b2e6689174cbb87a6465761b09ebb](https://osf.io/k9mfx/?view_only=811b2e6689174cbb87a6465761b09ebb).

#### *Experimental Design and Procedure*

Participants were randomly assigned based on a 2 (leader's competence: high versus low) x 2 (leader's age: old versus young) between-subjects design. Participants were presented with a vignette describing a leader who was high vs. low in competence based on the vignettes of Laustsen and Bor (2017). Leader age (old= 65 years old vs. young= 30 years old) was manipulated similar to Kaufmann et al. (2017). To strengthen the manipulation of leader age, participants were presented with a picture of the leader supposedly described in the vignette. The picture was selected through a picture pool and was average in attractiveness and likability (Ebner et al., 2010). To ensure generalizability of our findings, we created both a female and a male version of the vignettes, similar to Kaufmann et al.

(2017). Subsequent to the general information, participants were requested to fill in a series of measures and were ultimately debriefed and thanked. Participation lasted approximately five minutes in return for £0.70.

### ***Measures***

**Manipulation Checks.** Two items served as manipulation checks for age: “Based on the scenario that you read, what is the age of your manager?” (30 vs. 40 vs. 65) and “My manager is relatively” (*Young* vs. *Old*). An additional two items were employed as manipulation checks for competence, namely “Based on the scenario that I read, my manager, is a competent manager” (1 = *Not at all true*, 7 = *Absolutely true*) and “My manager is a manager with limited managerial abilities” (1 = *Not at all true*, 7 = *Absolutely true*;  $\alpha = .74$ ).

**Employee Conflict Involvement with the Leader.** The same scale as in Study 1 was used, except for one excluded item on the grounds of it measuring conflict initiated by the leader rather than the employees. (e.g., “How often do you believe that each of the following happen to Mr John Adams at the workplace? ...Employees yell at Mr./Mrs. Adams”;  $\alpha = .92$ ; 1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*).

**Generativity.** The same 3-item scale as in Study 1 was employed to assess leaders’ generativity motives (Zacher et al., 2011;  $\alpha = .94$ ).

**Control Variables.** Participants’ experience in the current position (in years) served as a control variable.

## **Results**

### ***Manipulations Checks***

After conducting a univariate Analysis of Variance, the main effect of competence on the competence scale revealed that the participants perceived the leader as more competent in the high competence ( $n = 188$ ,  $M_{high} = 6.48$ ,  $SD_{high} = 0.83$ ) rather than the low competence ( $n$

= 184,  $M_{low} = 2.15$ ,  $SD_{low} = 1.02$ ) condition (see Figure 4 for a visual representation).

Regarding the manipulation of age, all participants responded to both manipulation items correctly, thus no participants were excluded from further analysis. With that, we concluded that our manipulations functioned as intended.

### ***Preliminary Analysis***

Our results demonstrate that leader competence was significantly and negatively related to conflict involvement (see Table 3 for an overview of the study variables). Leader age was significantly and positively related to generativity and generativity was negatively and significantly related to leader-follower conflict involvement, thus we proceeded with our models as to fully disseminate what belies within the correlations.

### ***Hypothesis Testing***

We followed the same path as with Study 1, namely employing a moderated mediation analysis utilising the same software (Model 7; Hayes, 2018; IBM Corp, 2019) with leader competence as our predictor (1 = *low*, 2 = *high*), leader age as our moderator (1 = *young*, 2 = *old*), leader generativity as our mediator and leader-follower conflict involvement as our dependent variable with years in the current position as a control variable. The effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement was negative and significant (supporting Hypothesis 1). We were unable to find evidence supporting the moderation hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), with the interaction between leader competence and age being negative, yet non-significant. Finally, the effects of the moderated mediation are illustrated on Table 4. Importantly, the interaction between leader competence and leader age on generativity was positive and significant and showed that leader generativity ratings significantly increase when the leader is older than younger. Providing support for our moderated mediation hypothesis (Hypothesis 3), we found the indirect effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement via generativity to be stronger when

leader was older rather than younger. The overall moderated mediation model was significant (index = -0.8,  $SE = 0.05$ , CI [-0.183; -0.002]).

## **Discussion**

Study 2 attempted to replicate the findings of Study 1 using an experimental design. In a similar vein to Study 1, we showed that leader competence negatively correlates to conflict involvement in the workplace, thus finding evidence for Hypothesis 1. Unlike Study 1 regarding Hypothesis 2, we were unable to find evidence supporting our a priori moderating hypothesis of age on the relationship between leader competence and leader-follower conflict involvement. Nonetheless, we found evidence regarding the mediating role of generativity on the above moderating role of leader age on the relationship between our predictor (leader competence) and our outcome variable (conflict involvement), thus supporting Hypothesis 3. Leader competence seems crucial in diminishing leader-follower conflict involvement and additionally the strength of the aforementioned effect justifies the suggestion that additional emphasis needs to be placed on demographic variables, such as leader age, and leadership-related variables, such as generativity than has previously been the case.

## **General Discussion**

Prior research has underlined the necessity to adopt a life-span perspective when examining leadership in organizations. Despite constant iteration of the above within the organizational literature, the evidence regarding the role of leaders' age in the organizational domain remain limited. To mitigate the aforementioned, we predominantly viewed leadership through the lens of the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory to examine the extent to which leader competence and age jointly influence conflict involvement at work. This ever-topical issue necessitates further investigation given the detrimental effects that conflict deals to the personnel and the organization altogether. Intra-organizational conflict is shown to affect revenue due to decreased performance of personnel but also workers' bandwidth due to the



anxiety and the negative affect that it creates, while further depriving leaders of precious time allocated to managing conflict (De Dreu et al., 2004; Runde & Flanagan, 2012). Thus, to expand the literature on conflict management, we began by investigating the relationship between leader competence and leader-follower conflict involvement. Following, we investigated the moderating role of leader age in this relationship, concluding with a potentially underlying mechanism driving the latter, namely exploring the mediating role of generativity on the above moderation.

Prior findings demonstrate that competent leaders are more capable of resolving clashes in the workplace by using their knowledge and expertise to effectively lead their subordinates towards a positive direction (Hollander, 1978; Mao et al., 2019). Additionally, competent leaders seem to attract more followers and inspire more trust from their followers due to the psychological safety they exude (Bergmann & Schaeppi, 2016). We were able to find evidence supporting Hypothesis 1, regarding the negative effect of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement in both the time-lagged survey (Study 1) and the experimental design (Study 2). Thus, our subsequent endeavour was the investigation of age as a possible moderator of leader competence on leader-follower conflict involvement. Age is an interesting element, given the demographic changes occurring in the past decades leading to the rapid ageing of the workforce for a variety of reasons, such as the improvement of the quality of life, the modernization of workplace tools, the advancements of modern medicine and the drop of birth rates in developed countries (de Beer, 2020; Gratton & Scott, 2016; van Selm & van den Heijkant, 2021).

As we have previously mentioned, the literature on leaders' age has been scarce and fragmented (Walter & Scheibe, 2013). Instead, a large amount of evidence shapes the general image of older workers as low on hard skills like visionary leadership, professional development abilities and competence (van Selm & van den Heijkant, 2021). Such

stereotypical beliefs are often exacerbated due to the media coverage they receive, which further perpetuates such a line of thinking, but also leads to decreased willingness to hire older workers as colleagues, dealing a heavy blow on the self-esteem of older workers, who in turn adopt self-stereotyping beliefs (Bai, 2014; Westerhof et al., 2010). On the contrary, there is evidence of a favourable image describing older workers as more dependable, reliable and trustworthy than their younger counterparts (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Additionally, older individuals demonstrate a stronger propensity towards positivity maintenance, which can crucially affect the leader-follower relationship. Such findings are based on the increased demonstration of organizational citizenship behaviour and the fewer counterproductive work behaviours that older workers exhibit (Ng & Feldman, 2008).

Given all the above, we began our inquiry by adopting the socioemotional selectivity lens (Carstensen, 1991, 2006) to consider the effects of team leaders' competence and age on conflict involvement. SST was the first framework employed to provide us with a unique perspective when examining the leader-follower relationship, providing a theoretical rationale for the interactive effect of leader competence and leader age on a team-level phenomenon (leader-follower conflict). This line of reasoning allowed us to focus on the justification why older leaders would be less involved in conflict with their followers. More specifically, the perception of time as finite allows for a shift in the orientation of the individual, and in the event that a younger leader would otherwise maintain a future-oriented mentality with agentic goals as one's incentive, thus fixating on perpetuating one's dominance and status, their older counterparts seem to adopt a present-oriented viewpoint, focusing on relational quality over quantity (Thrasher et al., 2019). The latter allows for an increased ability to self-regulate, boosting older leaders' ability to tend to positive environmental stimuli and their propensity to maintain meaningful relationships. We were solely able to find evidence for the moderating role of age on the relationship between leader competence and leader-follower

conflict involvement in the time-lagged study (Study 1), whereas the experimental design yielded non-significant results (Study 2). Thus, solely Study 1 supported Hypothesis 2, even though the data of Study 2 point towards the right direction (Figure 5) the interaction effect was not significant, thus, further investigation needs to take place.

Research shows that setting and working towards the accomplishment of communal goals leads to more positive follower ratings on relational outcomes, thus age is expected to influence conflict involvement. Moreover, the amicable behaviour of older leaders is further explained by the generativity motive, under which older leaders meticulously guide members of the succeeding generations and instead of focusing on self-relevant goals and accomplishments, labour towards carving the path for their successors as part of creating a legacy that will outlive them (Carstensen, 1991; Zacher, Rosing, & Frese, 2011). Study 1 did not provide evidence for Hypothesis 3, instead our moderated mediation hypothesis was supported by the experiment we designed (Study 2). It became apparent that the implicit representations that we commonly create when interacting with others affect our evaluations of said others. Individuals seem to be actively seeking for proof that others act according to the exemplar, thus witnessing an older competent leader behaving in a generative manner justifies the diminished conflict involvement with that person.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

It is evident that further research is required to investigate predictors commonly employed as control variables, such as leader age, since it seems that this factor influences task and relationship-oriented behaviours, which ultimately shape intra-organizational interactions. Thus, a life-span approach when investigating the interplay of the forces shaping the workplace seems promising and rather urgent, given the drastic demographic changes taking place. Additionally, emphasis should be placed on age-related changes in a leader's

qualities, with both prior research and our findings hinting towards generativity being a particularly promising predictor for future research to examine.

Finally, we contributed towards the direction that irrespective of the natural cognitive deterioration due to ageing, older competent leaders activate compensatory mechanisms to continue thriving in the workplace. Therefore, besides the urgency for further research on the interaction between competence and age to ameliorate the distorted representation of older workers by the media, our contribution took a step towards shattering the stereotypical way in which older individuals are portrayed in recruitment advertisements. We gathered evidence to show how older leaders' competence and age collaborate to effectively diminish leader-follower conflict while simultaneously boosting performance, workplace psychological safety and positive affect. Thus, by extending this line of research older leaders will ultimately be appreciated for the ample experience and wisdom they possess, along with their other-serving attitude, rather than predominantly being presented as simply victims of ageism and prejudice. To close, given the significant mediating effect of generativity in our experimental design, perhaps organizations could focus on further promoting mentoring opportunities coupling older leaders with younger apprentices, as to benefit the involved parties from this leaders' trait and their drive to set a legacy.

### **Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions**

By employing a diverse toolset, we were able to mitigate the shortcomings that each individual approach bears, namely increasing our external validity by utilising a time-lagged study design (Study 1) and our internal validity by replicating the findings of Study 1 through an experimental design (Study 2). It is often the case that leaders' age correlates to a great extent with other control variables, such as organizational tenure or prior experience in similar positions. To avoid potential third variables contaminating one's data, we suggest that

future researchers collect demographical data that they statistically control for, thus gaining confidence against possible alternative explanations for their findings.

Naturally the findings presented in this contribution should be interpreted with consideration of a few limitations. A potential reason behind the inability to find supporting evidence for the moderating role of age in Study 1 could be an insufficient sample age variability among the leaders, thus it is important to exercise caution when interpreting studies aiming to examine such effects. One can, also, argue that the vignettes designed might not be realistic or immersive enough, and that the photos employed might resemble someone the participants are familiar with thus leading to their ratings being contaminated by their predispositions, yet we hope that such occurrences were negligible when examining the effects on average. To minimise transient influences that might have contaminated our data when selecting the portraits to use for our experiment, we opted for average looking individuals based on a predetermined scale of attractiveness that the FACES database provided upon request (Ebner et al., 2010). Additionally, there could have been instances that a participant was negatively predisposed towards older individuals in general, which could certainly be exaggerated due to the depiction of older people by media outlets. Thus, to ameliorate such effects and minimize error, we suggest that future researchers employ age stereotype scales capable of detecting negative inclinations (Zacher & Bal, 2012).

Furthermore, another advice for future researchers is to employ a more heterogenous pool of participants that allows for potential cultural differences to appear and for an increase in the applicability of the findings across a larger demographic background. It is important to mention that perhaps the hiatus between the two waves of the time-lagged study (Study 1) was too limited for intra-individual developments to materialise. Given the fact that we did not include an item inquiring about the state of the participant at the time of the survey, so there is no way to know whether intra-individual changes took place in the meantime, a

suggestion for future researchers would be the increase of said time or the use of cross-lagged designs to examine phenomena of such nature. For future endeavours, potentially a combination of other-reported, such as in our case, with self-reported assessments could yield more accurate results. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that we presented both a male and a female version of the leader, which is a step towards the right direction given the lack of such gender-sensitivity from previous work on the domain.

### **Conclusion**

The current research suggests that leader age is a critical factor impacting leaders' qualities, such as competence, which in turn affects leader-follower conflict involvement. Older competent leaders appear superior to their younger counterparts by being involved in less conflict with their followers with their generativity and communal orientation allowing them to focus on the quality of one's relationships rather than the pursuit of control and one's dominance over others being the key.

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### Tables

**Table 1**

*Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Study Variables (SDs) – Study 1*

	<i>M(SD)</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Conflict Involvement <sup>a</sup>	3.69 (1.38)	-	-.249**	-.044	-.315**
2. Leader Competence <sup>b</sup>	5.40 (1.19)		-	.002	.465**
3. Leader Age	43.50 (10.43)			-	-.019
4. Generativity <sup>c</sup>	3.76 (1.49)				-

<sup>a</sup>Leader-follower conflict involvement was measured in a 7-point scale (1= *Never*, 7= *Very often*). <sup>b</sup>Leader competence was measured in a 7-point scale (1= *Not at all*, 7= *To a great extent*). <sup>c</sup>Generativity was measured in a 7-point scale (1= *Does not apply at all*, 7= *Applies completely*).

\*\* $p < .001$ .



**Table 2***Mediating Effect of Leader Generativity on the Effect of Leader Competence on Leader-**Follower Conflict Involvement as a Function of Leader Age – Study 1*

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
Mediator: Leader Generativity <sup>b</sup>				
Constant	3.75	0.09	<.01	3.57, 3.92
Leader Competence <sup>1</sup>	0.55	0.07	<.01	0.41, 0.70
Leader Age	-0.00	0.01	.78	-0.02, 0.01
(In Years)				
Leader Competence <sup>a</sup> x Leader Age	0.01	0.01	.14	-0.00, 0.02
Dependent Variable: Leader-Follower Conflict Involvement				
Constant	4.50	0.26	<.01	3.99, 5.02
Generativity <sup>b</sup>	-0.24	0.07	<.01	-0.31, 0.01
Leader Competence <sup>a</sup>	-0.15	0.08	.06	-0.37, -0.11
Indirect Effects				
Mediator: Generativity				
Leader Age: Young	-0.11	0.05	-	-0.21, -0.03
Leader Age: Middle	-0.13	0.05	-	-0.23, -0.05
Leader Age: Old	-0.16	0.06	-	-0.28, -0.06

<sup>1</sup> Leader competence was measured in a 7-point scale (1= *Not at all*, 7= *To a great extent*).

<sup>b</sup>Generativity was measured in a 7-point scale (1= *Does not apply at all*, 7= *Applies completely*). Leader-Follower conflict involvement was measured in a 7-point scale (1= *Never*, 7= *Very often*).

**Table 3***Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Study Variables (SDs) – Study 2*

	<i>M(SD)</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Conflict Involvement <sup>a</sup>	2.82 (1.37)	-	-.560**	-.039	-.424**
2. Leader Competence <sup>b</sup>	1.51 (0.50)		-	.000	.563**
3. Leader Age <sup>c</sup>	1.51 (0.50)			-	.153**
4. Generativity <sup>d</sup>	3.79 (1.58)				-

<sup>a</sup>Leader-Follower conflict involvement was measured in a 7-point scale (1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*) – 3 Items.

<sup>b</sup>Leader Competence was a dichotomous manipulation item (1 = *low* and 2 = *high*).

<sup>c</sup>Leader Age was a dichotomous manipulation item (1 = *young* and 2 = *old*).

<sup>d</sup>Generativity was measured in a 7-point scale (1 = *Does not apply at all*, 7 = *Applies completely*).

\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4***Mediating Effect of Leader Generativity on the Effect of Leader Competence on Leader-**Follower Conflict Involvement as a Function of Age – Study 2*

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
Mediator: Leader Generativity				
Constant	1.67	0.69	.02	0.30, 3.03
Leader Competence <sup>2</sup>	0.91	0.44	.04	0.05, 1.77
Leader Age <sup>b</sup>	-0.38	0.43	.38	-1.23, 0.47
Leader Competence <sup>a</sup> x Leader Age <sup>b</sup>	0.57	0.28	.04	0.03, 1.11
Years in Current Position	0.00	0.01	.99	-0.02, 0.02
Dependent Variable: Leader-Follower Conflict Involvement				
Constant	5.42	0.21	<.01	5.02, 5.83
Leader Competence <sup>a</sup>	-1.31	0.14	<.01	-1.60, -1.03
Generativity <sup>3</sup>	-0.13	0.05	<.01	-0.22, -0.04
Years in Current Position	-0.02	0.01	.04	-0.04, -0.00
Indirect Effects				
Mediator: Generativity				
Leader Age: Young	-0.19	0.07	-	-0.35, -0.06
Leader Age: Old	-0.27	0.10	-	-0.49, -0.08

<sup>2</sup> Leader Competence was a dichotomous manipulation item (1 = *low* and 2 = *high*).

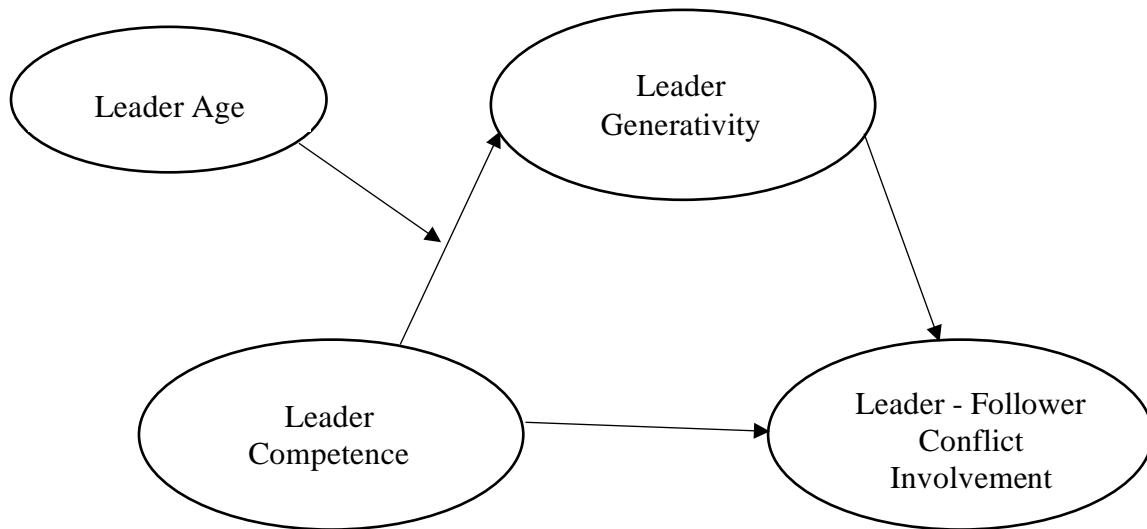
<sup>b</sup> Leader Age was a dichotomous manipulation item (1 = *young* and 2 = *old*).

<sup>3</sup> Generativity was measured in a 7-point scale (1 = *Does not apply at all*, 7 = *Applies completely*). Leader-Follower conflict involvement was measured in a 7-point scale (1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*).

## Figures

**Figure 1**

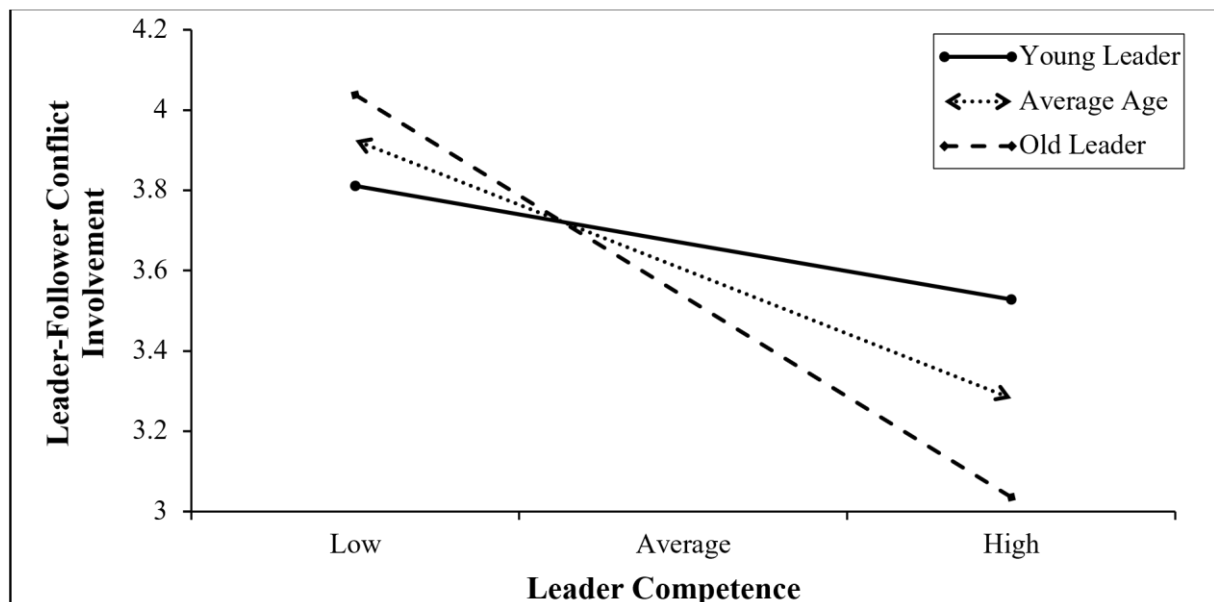
*Hypothesized Conceptual Model.*



**Figure 2**

*Effect of Leader Competence on Leader-Follower Conflict Involvement as a Function of Age*

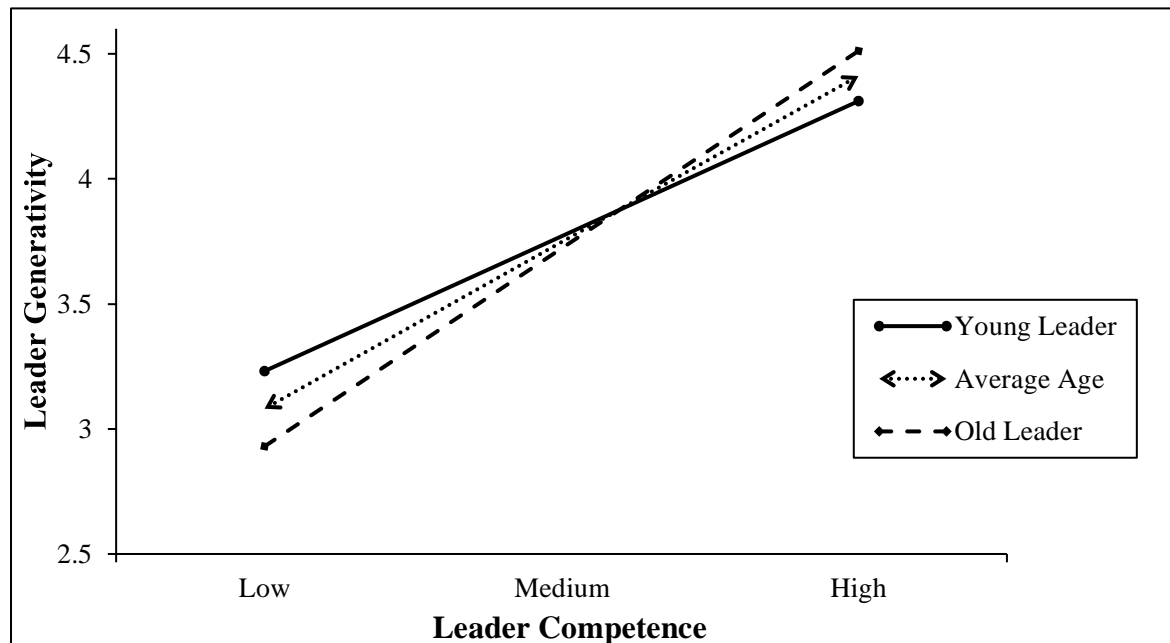
*Study 1*



*Note.* Leader-Follower conflict involvement was measured in a 7-point scale (1= *Never*, 7= *Very often*). Leader Competence measured in a 7-point scale (1= *Not at all*, 7= *To a great extent*; centred variable).

**Figure 3**

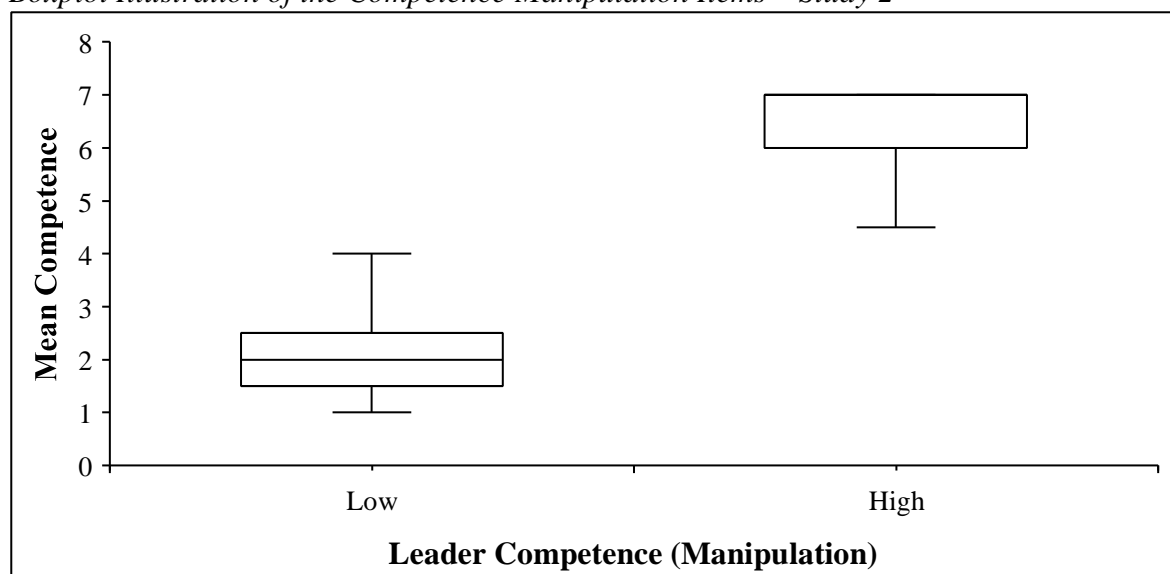
*Conditional effects of Competence on Generativity as a Function of Leader Age – Study 1*



*Note.* Leader Generativity was measured in a 7-point scale (1= Does not apply at all, 7= Applies completely). Leader Competence measured in a 7-point scale (1= Not at all, 7= To a great extent; centred variable).

**Figure 4**

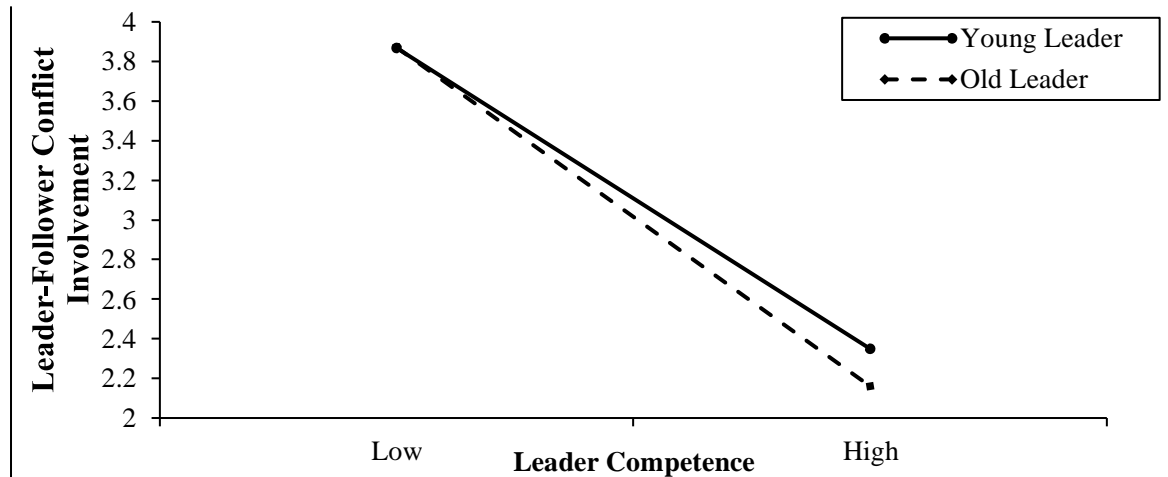
*Boxplot Illustration of the Competence Manipulation Items – Study 2*



*Note.* Manipulation of leader competence was a dichotomous item (1 = low and 2 = high).

**Figure 5***Effect of Leader Competence on Leader-Follower Conflict Involvement as a Function of Age*

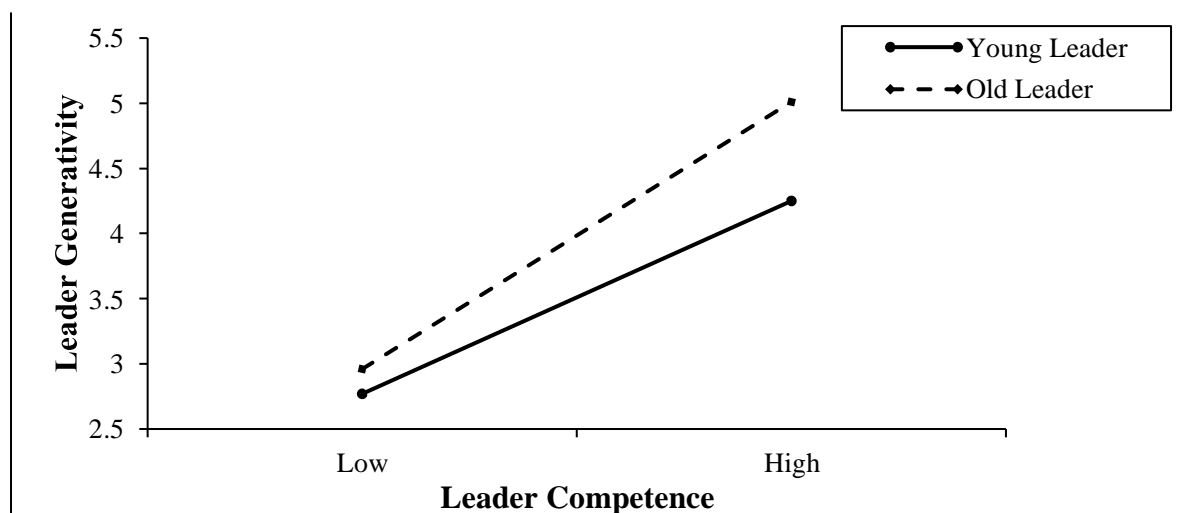
– Study 2



Note. Leader-Follower conflict involvement measured in a 7-point scale (1 = *Never*, 7 = *Very often*). Leader Competence was a dichotomous manipulation item (1 = *low* and 2 = *high*).

**Figure 6***Conditional effects of Leader Competence on Generativity as a Function of Leader Age*

– Study 2



Note. Leader Generativity was measured in a 7-point scale (1 = *Does not apply at all*, 7 = *Applies completely*). Leader Competence measured in a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *To a great extent*).