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# What (not) to add in your ad: When job ads discourage older or younger job seekers to apply

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## Abstract

Both older and younger job seekers face difficulties when entering the workforce. Qualification-based targeted recruitment (QBTR) might be used to attract older/younger job seekers, yet how this strategy is perceived by older/younger job seekers has not been considered before. The present study fills this gap and investigated effects of negatively metastereotyped information in job ads (i.e., personality requirements or traits) on application intention and self-efficacy of both older and younger job seekers. An experimental study ($N_{total}$ = 556; 44.6% aged 50 or older, 55.4% aged 30 or younger) showed that negatively metastereotyped traits in job ads (e.g., "flexible") lowered older job seekers' application intention and that this effect was mediated by older job seekers' self-efficacy regarding that trait. No such effects were found among younger job seekers. Results showed that organizations can fail to attract older candidates because of the traits mentioned in job ads, which is particularly alarming when aiming to target age-diverse applicants. Suggestions for practitioners and future research are formulated.

**KEYWORDS**
age, diversity, metastereotypes, recruitment

**Practitioner Points**

- Research largely overlooked how older and younger-aged job seekers experience personality requirements in ads.
- Instead of attracting older job seekers, negatively metastereotyped personality requirements in ads lowered their application intention through lower self-efficacy.
- Hence, talented job seekers from underrepresented groups (like older-aged job seekers) may self-select out.
- Organizations should, therefore, avoid metastereotyped personality requirements in job ads.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Organizations may use a wide variety of channels in their hunt for talented workers. These channels or recruitment sources can be directed to either internal or external job seekers and they can range from informal to more formal ways of recruitment (Griffeth et al., 2014). Among the most common sources are job advertisements, a formal and frequently used recruitment source with information about organizational and job characteristics, as well as the necessary personality requirements for that job (Walker & Hinojosa, 2013). The information in job ads is limited, yet crucial for job seekers to build an image about the organization, to consider

whether they fit the job requirements, and to decide whether to apply for this position or not. Job ad information, like personality requirements, signals to job seekers whether the job is consistent with their social identity and affects application intentions (Highhouse et al., 2007). Typically, people who believe that they possess the personality requirements mentioned in a job ad are more inclined to apply for that job (Carless, 2005). However, what if these requirements signal an incongruity with job seekers' social identity?

When older job seekers read requirements like "you are *flexible,*" they might anticipate that recruiters will hold the age-stereotype that "older people are less flexible," and hence become reluctant to apply. Similarly, younger job seekers can read the requirement "you are *hard-working*" and might expect that recruiters could hold the age-stereotype that "younger people are less hard-working." In other words, job seekers might be vigilant about how recruiters will perceive them. These so-called *metastereotypes* (Vorauer et al., 1998) might trigger older/younger job seekers' intention to apply or not, as well as how older/younger job seekers perceive themselves. Hence, older or younger job seekers may self-select out early in recruitment procedures because of unwanted stereotyped information in job ads. This not only harms the age-diversity of the applicant pool, but it can also undermine recruitment strategies specifically aimed to create a more age-diverse and qualified applicant pool. One such recruitment strategy, for instance, is qualification-based targeted recruitment (QBTR), which is typically used by organizations to target job seekers from certain (under-represented) demographic groups with certain qualifications (Newman et al., 2013). Yet, research in this area mostly focused on ethnic minority or female job seekers (Casper et al., 2013; Wille & Derous, 2017, 2018), while age is often overlooked as a demographic diversity variable. The present study fills this gap by focusing on job seekers from two specific age groups with lower job chances, that is, older (50 years or more; McCarthy et al., 2014) and younger (30 years or less; Arnett, 2011) job seekers. Older and younger job seekers experience difficulties in entering the workforce compared to prime-aged job seekers (OECD, 2020, 2021).

Previous research has already explored age-related differences in human capital factors as well as hiring discrimination against older and younger candidates (e.g., Farber et al., 2019; Zaniboni et al., 2019). Yet, though such clear problems are being tackled by targeted measures and legislation that are relatively easy to apply and monitor, diversity might also be threatened by more subtle, unwanted mechanisms. More specifically, scholars called for more research on how job seekers perceive personality requirements in job ads and how they might self-select out (Bhargava & Theunissen, 2019; Wille & Derous, 2017). Thus, the first aim of this study is to investigate whether negatively metastereotyped personality requirements (i.e., traits) in job ads affect older/younger job seekers' application intentions (i.e., whether job seekers have the intention to apply or not). Second, whereas studies have already investigated recruitment outcomes for ads with negative metastereotypes (Wille & Derous, 2017, 2018), the effect of negative metastereotypes on job seekers' self-beliefs and how these beliefs relate to recruitment

outcomes has, to the best of our knowledge, not been explored within the context of recruitment. However, scholars did find that negative metastereotypes can lower the extent to which people belief in themselves (i.e., self-efficacy beliefs; Gordijn, 2010; Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2014). Addressing this gap in recruitment, the present study investigates whether negatively metastereotyped personality requirements in job ads decrease older/younger job seekers' self-beliefs regarding these specific requirements. These beliefs about whether or not one possesses certain traits (i.e., trait-specific self-efficacy) can in turn affect one's application intention. Consequently, the third aim of this study is to test whether trait-specific self-efficacy mediates the relationship between negatively metastereotyped personality requirements in job ads and application intentions of older/younger job seekers. Below, we first discuss relevant theoretical frameworks before moving on to the hypotheses.

## 2 | JOB ADS AND METASTEREOTYPES

Job advertisements are a widely used recruitment technique that can represent a crucial first step in the contact between organizations and job seekers (Walker & Hinojosa, 2013). Remarkably, organizations hardly ever evaluate how information in these job ads is perceived by different job seekers. For instance, do members of different demographical groups (e.g., older vs. younger people) perceive all information in job ads in the same way? While all organizations can benefit from knowing how their job ads are perceived by different job seekers, this information is particularly useful for organizations that use QBTR (Newman et al., 2013; Newman & Lyon, 2009). That is, when targeting specific groups of job seekers through QBTR, it is crucial to know which qualifications *attract* certain groups of job seekers and which qualifications might also *discourage* certain groups of job seekers, for instance, because of existing stereotypes about those group members.

Stereotypes exist about members of different socio-demographic groups (e.g., based on one of the Big Three demographics: age, ethnicity, and gender). For example, older people are stereotypically viewed as unadaptable, inflexible, and stubborn, whereas younger aged people are stereotypically perceived as inexperienced, irresponsible, and lazy (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Kleissner & Jahn, 2020; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Interestingly, group members may also contemplate which stereotypes others hold about them. This is referred to as *metastereotypes* or "beliefs regarding the stereotype that out-group members hold about his or her own group" (Vorauer et al., 1998, p. 917). Whereas related constructs such as stereotype threat focus on the implications of such beliefs for performance outcomes (such as avoidance behavior and decremental performance; Voyles et al., 2014), metastereotypes represent cognitions on how one group thinks it is viewed by others. One's belief that some colleagues think that one is not very committed because of one's age is an example of an age-related negative metastereotype (Voyles et al., 2014). Research has shown that older and younger people indeed think this way about their own age group

(Fowler & Gasiorek, 2020; Finkelstein et al., 2013). For instance, Finkelstein et al. (2013) showed that in the workplace, older workers (older than 50) and younger workers (younger than 30) reported specific stereotypes that they believed the other age group holds about them, such as being set in ways/stubborn for older workers and being lazy/irresponsible for younger workers (Finkelstein et al., 2013). In job ads, the required qualifications or traits might activate these negative age-related metastereotypes in older or younger job seekers and, in turn, affect their intention to apply. That is, traits in job ads represent signals that inform job seekers about the organization. When interpreting these signals (i.e., making symbolic inferences), job seekers may consider whether the job and company fit their social identity and whether they want to be affiliated with that organization or not (Highhouse et al., 2007). Thus, through certain cognitive/emotional processes (Steele et al., 2002), negative metastereotypes in job as might affect whether older/younger job seekers apply or not. Typically, when negative metastereotypes are activated, individuals do not only feel negative emotion toward intergroup interaction (Vorauer et al., 1998), they also tend to avoid interactions with the out-group (Goff et al., 2008; Shelton & Richeson, 2005). For instance, experimental studies have established that stereotypical cues can restrain women academically and professionally (Davies et al., 2002; Schuster & Martiny, 2017). Moreover, Wille and Derous (2017, 2018) found that female job seekers and ethnic minority job seekers applied significantly less often for a job ad with a negatively metastereotyped trait than male job seekers and ethnic majority job seekers, respectively. We thus expected:

**Hypothesis 1a.** *Older job seekers' intention to apply will be lower for job ads with traits that older job seekers hold negative metastereotypes about than for job ads with traits they hold no negative metastereotypes about* (H1a).

**Hypothesis 1b.** *Younger job seekers' intention to apply will be lower for job ads with traits that younger job seekers hold negative metastereotypes about than for job ads with traits they hold no negative metastereotypes about* (H1b).

## 3 | METASTEREOTYPES, SELF-EFFICACY, AND APPLICATION INTENTION

While previous studies have established that negative metastereotypes in job ads negatively affect female/ethnic minority job seekers' application intention, they did not consider why that is. The present study adds to the recruitment literature by investigating a possible explanation of this effect in older and younger job seekers, namely decreased self-efficacy. Indeed, studies on metastereotypes and their potential consequences established that negative metastereotypes can lower self-beliefs (Gordijn, 2010; Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2014; Vorauer et al., 1998). For instance, Vorauer et al. (1998) found that activation of a negative metastereotype lowered

individuals' self-esteem and self-concept clarity (i.e., whether one has a clear and concise idea about who one is). Later, Gordijn (2010) found similar results and showed that women activated negative weight-related metastereotypes when they anticipated to be judged on their appearance, and those negative metastereotypes were, in turn, negatively related to their self-evaluation. Finally, in a work-related context, Owuamalam and Zagefka (2014) found that activation of negative metastereotypes decreased self-esteem in stigmatized female and ethnic minority individuals, which in turn, lowered employability beliefs. Similarly, work-related personality requirements (like traits) in job ads that one holds negative metastereotypes about make one's social category (e.g., age group) more salient such that an individual becomes more aware of the social group one belongs to (e.g., older job seekers). As a consequence, individuals may perceive themselves more in terms of that social group and related stereotypes (i.e., social self) instead of their individual and unique capabilities (i.e., personal self). This social categorization process (Turner et al., 1994), where one defines one's personal identity more in terms of one's social category (e.g., older-aged job seeker), can thus affect one's perceived self-efficacy or the extent to which one believes/is confident that they possess the required traits for the advertised job.

We thus expand on existing literature that studied the effect of metastereotyped personality requirements in job ads on recruitment outcomes such as job attraction and application intention (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Highhouse et al., 2007; Wille & Derous, 2017, 2018) by also considering the effect of personality requirements on job seekers' self-efficacy regarding those traits, that is, their *trait-specific self-efficacy*. While self-efficacy refers to a general belief in one's capabilities (Bandura, 1997), Bandura (2015) has more recently called for using *specific* forms of self-efficacy rather than a general belief. Addressing this call, we build on previous research and use a more specific form of self-efficacy regarding one particular capability/trait. We thereby extend research on self-efficacy regarding specific capabilities (such as job search self-efficacy; Van Hoye et al., 2015) and traits (such as creativity, friendliness, extraversion, and so on; Moon et al., 2020; Tierney & Farmer, 2002) by studying job seekers' perceived self-efficacy or the degree they feel they possess the specific traits as required in the job ads. Hence, we expected:

**Hypothesis 2a.** *Older job seekers' trait-specific self-efficacy will be lower for negatively metastereotyped traits in job ads, compared to not negatively metastereotyped traits* (H2a).

**Hypothesis 2b.** *Younger job seekers' trait-specific self-efficacy will be lower for negatively metastereotyped traits in job ads, compared to not negatively metastereotyped traits* (H2b).

A person's belief in oneself (like self-efficacy about personality requirements) shapes one's behavior (Bandura, 1997). Related to job search, research has found that job seekers' self-beliefs predicted their job pursuit intentions (Arnold et al., 2006) and application

behavior (Jaidi et al., 2011). Moreover, job seekers' belief that one's abilities/values match those required for the job (i.e., P-J fit; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) was related to their job acceptance intentions (Carless, 2005). In the present study, we incorporate this estimation of one's abilities in light of the personality requirements portrayed in job ads. We specifically test how older/younger job seekers see themselves in terms of the required traits in job ads, i.e. their *trait-specific self-efficacy* and how this relates to their application intentions:

**Hypothesis 3a.** *Older job seekers' trait-specific self-efficacy will be positively related to their intention to apply (H3a).*

**Hypothesis 3b.** *Younger job seekers' trait-specific self-efficacy will be positively related to their intention to apply (H3b).*

Taken together, given that personality requirements that older/younger job seekers have negative metastereotypes about might lower their trait-specific self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Turner et al., 1994), which in turn might affect their intention to apply for the job (Arnold et al., 2006; Carless, 2005; Jaidi et al., 2011), we expected that:

**Hypothesis 4a.** *Older job seekers' trait-specific self-efficacy will mediate the relationship between negative metastereotypes in job ads and their intention to apply, such that negative metastereotypes will decrease older job seekers' trait-specific self-efficacy, which will, in turn, lower their intention to apply (H4a).*

**Hypothesis 4b.** *Younger job seekers' trait-specific self-efficacy will mediate the relationship between negative metastereotypes in job ads and their intention to apply, such that negative metastereotypes will decrease younger job seekers' trait-specific self-efficacy, which will, in turn, lower their intention to apply (H4b).*

## 4 | METHOD

### 4.1 | Sample

We recruited job seekers aged 50 and older and aged 30 and younger. In total, 556 job seekers were recruited through HR professionals who contacted participants through their professional network, so that we would be able to obtain more participants with labor market experience. All participants were informed that they were recruited based on their age. Of those 556 job seekers, 44.6% ($M_{age}$ = 55.35 years, $SD_{age}$ = 4.59; 52.8% women; 99.6% Caucasian/White) were "older job seekers" which we defined as people older than 50 years, since a study by McCarthy et al. (2014) showed that organizational decision-makers consider someone an "older" worker from 50 years old. Moreover, employees from 50 years or more may experience more discrimination (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2020) and

encounter specific (meta)stereotypes (Finkelstein et al., 2013). The remaining 55.4% of participants were "younger job seekers" ($M_{age}$ = 23.25 y, $SD_{age}$ = 2.28; 76.6% women; 99.4% Caucasian/White ethnic background). We recruited job seekers aged 30 or younger as Arnett (2011) describes that the age of 30 encompasses a new life stage (i.e., young adulthood), and people younger than 30 hold specific and different age-related metastereotypes compared to their older counterparts (e.g., Finkelstein et al., 2013). Participants were recruited in Belgium, 8.5% of the older job sample was unemployed, and 97.2% of the younger sample was unemployed. All older participants had prior labor market experience: 77.0% was an active (i.e., actively searching for a job) or a passive (i.e., in need of a job, without actively searching at the moment) job seeker at the moment of the study, and 23.0% had recent job-seeking experience. 97.7% of the younger job seekers was an active or a passive job seeker at the moment of the study and 2.3% of the younger job seekers had recent job-seeking experience (e.g., for student side jobs or internships).

### 4.2 | Design and procedure

The study featured a two-condition between-participant design in which personality requirements in job ads (trait: negatively metaste-reotyped vs. not negatively metastereotyped) were manipulated (between-subjects), trait-specific self-efficacy was the potential mediator variable, and application intention (i.e., intention to apply) was the outcome variable. Specifically, in an online experiment, participants had to indicate whether they would apply for job ads based on personality requirements that did or did not include negative age-metastereotypes. Participants gave their informed consent and were randomly assigned to the condition with or without negative metastereotypes. They were instructed to imagine that they were actively applying for a job and that they had to evaluate a profile from a selected job ad. Participants also had to imagine that the parts of the job ads that were not displayed would suit their interests. Measures on trait-specific self-efficacy and intention to apply were completed. Finally, participants' negative metastereotypes and their qualification on the required personality trait were measured (as control variables), which was followed by the manipulation checks and demographics.

### 4.3 | Study materials

Study materials were "person profile" segments of job ads with traits that older/younger job seekers held (no) negative metastereotypes about. The profiles were developed and pilot tested for older and younger job seekers separately in a previous study of this study project. First, a literature review (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Harwood et al., 2013; Peters et al., 2019; Weiss & Perry, 2020) was conducted to search for older and younger-aged negative metastereotypes regarding traits. Next, the results were validated through an empirical pilot study. We presented older and younger participants negative

adjectives from the HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised (Ashton & Lee, 2009; de Vries et al., 2009), the validated Big Six personality model that contains the following six traits: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Emotionality, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience, and Integrity. Older participants ($N_{old}$ = 80; $M_{age}$ = 53.91, $SD_{age}$ = 3.25, 100% 50 years and older; 55% women; 98.8% Caucasian/White; different from the main study) indicated for each of these items whether they believed that *younger* (<50 years) workers think that *older* (≥50 years) workers were, for example, inflexible, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Traits that receive a higher score were thus perceived as a more negative metastereotype. Younger participants ($N_{young}$ = 28; 100% 30 years or younger; 53.7% women; 96.4% Caucasian/White; different from the main study) indicated whether they believed that *older* (>30 years) workers think that *younger* (≤30 years) workers were, for example, unpunctual, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more negative metastereotypes for a trait. Results showed that older workers held the most negative metastereotype about the trait Agreeableness ($M$ = 2.90, $SD$ = 0.57), compared to the other HEXACO-traits ($M$ = 2.60, $SD$ = 0.46), $t$(42) = 3.42, $p$ = .001 and the least negative metastereotype about the trait Conscientiousness ($M$ = 2.13, $SD$ = 0.49), compared to the other HEXACO-traits ($M$ = 2.79, $SD$ = 0.51), $t$ (59) = −10.74, $p$ < .001. For younger workers, we found that the most negative metastereotype was the trait Conscientiousness ($M$ = 3.36, $SD$ = 0.64) as compared to the other HEXACO-traits ($M$ = 2.90, $SD$ = 0.33), $t$(27) = 3.79, $p$ = .001. Younger-aged job seekers held no negative metastereotypes about Openness to Experience ($M$ = 2.56, $SD$ = 0.45) compared to the other traits ($M$ = 3.06, $SD$ = 0.37), $t$(27) = −5.89, $p$ < .001.

Subsequently, as in Wille and Derous (2018), we selected those adjectives that were perceived as the most negatively metastereotyped for the condition with negative metastereotype and the least negatively metastereotyped for the condition without negative metastereotype. We carefully constructed profiles using the back translation method and building on dictionary entries for synonyms and antonyms. Expressions were adapted to fit the positive and work-related context typical for job advertisements (e.g., using positive antonyms and adding "workers"/"at work"). For older workers, the adjectives "obedient," "flexible," and "friendly" were selected for the condition with negative metastereotype (Agreeableness) and "punctual," "perfectionistic," and "orderly" for the condition without negative metastereotype (Conscientiousness). For younger workers, we chose the adjectives "punctual," "disciplined," and "deliberative" for the condition with negative metastereotype (Conscientiousness) and "inventive," "sharp-witted," and "critical" for the condition without negative metastereotype (Openness to Experience). Additionally, the adjectives were presented to nine independent raters who evaluated their content (i.e., whether the adjectives accurately represented the trait in question) and their realism (i.e., to what degree would the adjectives/expressions fit in real job ads?). Results showed that materials were perceived as we intended. Metastereotyped personality requirements were then placed in the job ads and were labeled as the "person profile" (i.e., that part that includes traits that are required for that job). The

negatively metastereotyped trait was supplemented with other person requirements that were held constant across job ads (i.e., required language proficiency and relevant educational degree for the advertised job). Apart from the person profile, no specific information about other job characteristics, like working conditions or organization type, was mentioned ("Organization X is looking for Job Y…") as those characteristics might differentially attract older job seekers (Truxillo et al., 2012).

## 4.4 | Measures

### 4.4.1 | Trait-specific self-efficacy

Bandura (1997) describes self-efficacy as a judgement of one's own personal capability to perform a specific action or produce a certain effect. Following Bandura (2015)'s call to use more specific forms of self-efficacy, one item was adapted from Bandura (1997) and previous measures on specific self-efficacy (Moon et al., 2020; Tierney & Farmer, 2002; Van Hoye et al., 2015) for each of the investigated HEXACO-traits (Ashton & Lee, 2009): Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience (see Section 4.3). The items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). An example item for the trait Conscientiousness is "I feel confident that I can act in a conscientious way (i.e., punctual, disciplined and deliberative)."

### 4.4.2 | Application intention

Participants' application intention was measured with a single item adapted from Roberson and Collins (2005). Specifically, participants answered the item "Would you apply for this job ad?" with either yes or no after they were specifically instructed to imagine that they were actively applying for a job and that the parts of the job ads that were not displayed would suit their interest.

### 4.4.3 | Control variables and manipulation checks

Research on QBTR has established that qualified job seekers apply more for job ads that specifically mention the needed traits/qualifications (Casper et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2013). The present study aimed to uncover how older/younger job seekers perceive these qualifications in job ads and how this relates to their trait-specific self-efficacy and application intention. Considering the basic premise of QBTR, we hence controlled for participants' actual qualifications on the traits in the job ads when doing so. Therefore, older-aged job seekers completed 10 items for the trait Agreeableness and 10 items for the trait Conscientiousness from the HEXACO Personality Inventory Revised (Ashton & Lee, 2009; de Vries et al., 2009). Similarly, younger-aged job seekers filled out 10 items for the trait Conscientiousness and 10 for Openness to Experience

from the HEXACO Personality Inventory. We considered whether job seekers reached a cut-off on these scales, to be considered as qualified (following Wille & Derous, 2017). This cut-off was based on HEXACO population mean scores[1] that were tailored to participants' education level (de Vries et al., 2009). We further controlled for whether participants held negative metastereotypes (yes–no) about traits that were placed in job ads by asking older participants whether they believe that younger people think they are (obedient), (flexible), and (friendly). For younger participants, we asked whether they believed that older younger people found them (punctual), (disciplined), and (deliberative). Finally, as manipulation checks, we evaluated whether the type of traits used in the profiles were perceived as intended, that is, as Agreeable, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience (e.g., "The person profile shows that they were looking for an agreeable person," with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

### 4.4.4 | Demographics

Finally, participants reported their age (in years), gender (0 = *man*; 1 = *woman*), ethnicity (0 = *Caucasian/White*; 1 = *Arab*; 2 = *African*; 3 = *Asian*, 4 = *Latin-American*, 5 = *other)* and education level (0 = *no high school degree*; 1 = *high school degree*; 2 = *professional bachelor's*

degree; 3 = *academic bachelor's degree*, 4 = *academic master's degree*, 5 = *other)*.

## 5 | RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptives and correlations among study variables. First, preliminary analyses showed that manipulations of the HEXACO-traits were successful. First, older participants perceived the ads with the requirement "Agreeableness" more as ads requiring an agreeable ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.91$) than a conscientious ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.09$) person, $F(1,87) = 71.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .45$, and the ads with the requirement "Conscientiousness" more as ads requiring a conscientious ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.72$) than an agreeable ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.03$) person, $F(1,88) = 125.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .59$. Similarly, younger participants perceived the ads with the requirement "Conscientiousness" more as ads requiring a conscientious ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.72$) person than an open ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.02$) person, $F(1,82) = 159.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .66$, and ads with the requirement "Openness to Experience" more as ads requiring an open ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.08$) than a conscientious ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 1.13$) person, $F(1,92) = 25.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$. We subsequently tested the hypotheses for older (Figure 1; Table 2) and younger (Figure 2; Table 2) job seekers. Path analyses in R (Lavaan-package for SEM, v.0.6-5; Rosseel, 2012) were performed that explored the

**TABLE 1** Descriptives and correlations of study variables

| | Older | | Younger | | | | | | | | | | |
| | M | SD | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Trait-specific self-efficacy | 3.60 | 0.70 | 3.77 | 0.63 | (--) | 0.04 | 0.12 | 0.47** | −0.11 | 0.04 | 0.16* | -- | 0.07 |
| 2. Application Intention[a,b] | 0.63 | 0.49 | 0.60 | 0.49 | 0.37** | (--) | −0.06 | 0.13* | −0.05 | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.07 | 0.07 |
| 3. Type of trait[a,c] | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.49 | 0.50 | −0.21** | −0.21 | (--) | 0.29** | 0.63** | −0.06 | 0.06 | 0.00 | −0.03 |
| 4. Qualification[a,d] | 0.73 | 0.44 | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.26** | 0.18** | 0.02 | (--) | 0.11 | 0.04 | 0.09 | −0.08 | 0.04 |
| 5. Metastereotype[a,e] | 0.42 | 0.49 | 0.48 | 0.50 | −0.33** | −0.15* | 0.27** | −0.11 | (--) | −0.10 | −0.02 | 0.00 | −0.06 |
| 6. Gender[a,f] | 0.53 | 0.50 | 0.77 | 0.42 | −0.03 | −0.08 | −0.02 | 0.03 | 0.02 | (--) | −0.04 | 0.05 | 0.04 |
| 7. Age[g] | 55.35 | 4.59 | 23.25 | 2.28 | −0.04 | −0.01 | 0.01 | −0.07 | −0.04 | −0.18** | (--) | 0.04 | 0.09 |
| 8. Ethnicity[a,h] | 0.00 | 0.06 | 0.02 | 0.31 | 0.00 | −0.08 | 0.06 | 0.03 | −0.05 | 0.06 | −0.03 | (--) | −0.06 |
| 9. Education level[a,i] | 1.99 | 1.31 | 3.80 | 0.98 | −0.04 | −0.08 | −0.11 | 0.03 | 0.02 | −0.05 | 0.05 | −0.08 | (--) |

*Note*: $N_{total}$ = 556; N = 352 after listwise deletion for missing variables. Correlations are based on the smallest sample size. Results for older job seekers are displayed below the diagonal (n = 248); Results for younger job seekers are displayed above the diagonal (n = 308).

[a]Spearman correlation.

[b]Application Intention: 0 = no; 1 = yes.

[c]Type of trait: 0 = not negatively metastereotyped (Conscientiousness for older and Openness to Experience for younger sample); 1 = negatively metastereotyped trait (Agreeable for older and Conscientiousness for younger sample).

[d]Qualification: 0 = not qualified for required trait; 1 = qualified for required trait.

[e]Metastereotype: 0 = no negative metastereotype about the trait, 1 = negative metastereotype about the trait.

[f]Gender: 0 = male; 1 = female.

[g]Age: all job seekers were 50 years or older in the older sample and all job seekers were 30 years or younger in the younger sample.

[h]Ethnicity: 0 = Caucasian/White; 1 = Arab; 2 = African; 3 = Asian, 4 = Latin-American, 5 = other.

[i]Education level: 0 = no high school degree; 1 = high school degree; 2 = professional bachelor's degree; 3 = academic bachelor's degree, 4 = academic bachelor.

*$p \leq .05$.; **$p \leq .01$.
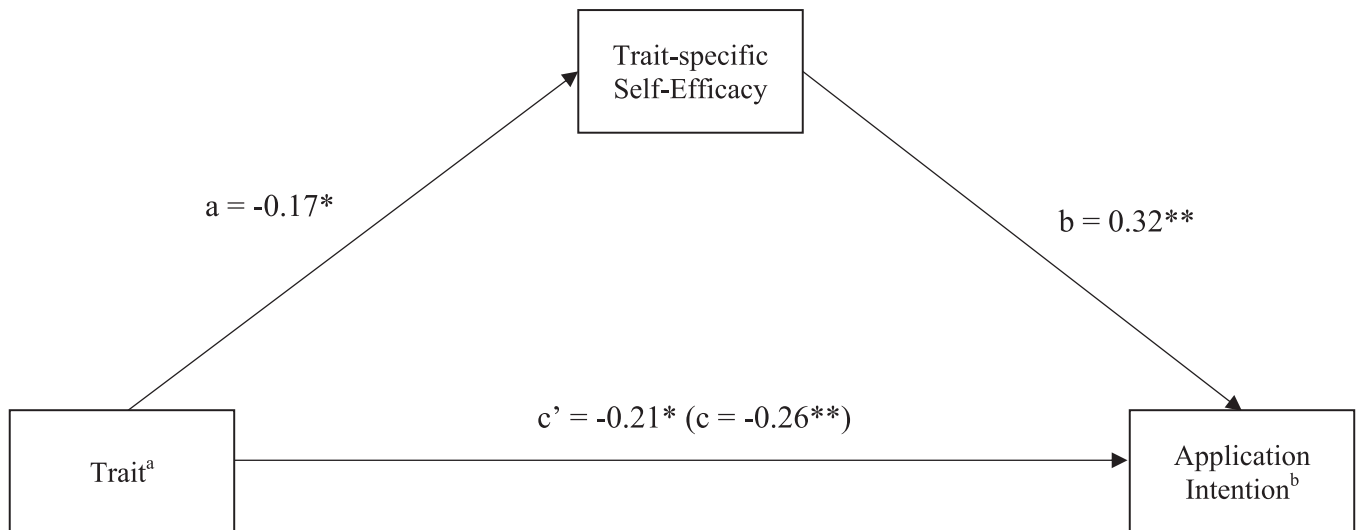
**FIGURE 1** Mediation model for older job seekers. *Note:* $n_{old}$ = 248. Standardized regression coefficients are displayed. We controlled for job seekers' actual qualification on the traits, as well as whether they held a negative metastereotype about the trait or not. Older job seekers' qualifications were significantly related to trait-specific self-efficacy, $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .001$, and application intention, $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.24$, $p = .01$. Whether they held the negative metastereotype or not was negatively related to trait-specific self-efficacy, $b = -0.27$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .001$, but not to application intention, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .959$. The standardized coefficient in parentheses represent the effect of trait on application intention (controlled for participants' qualifications and metastereotypes) before the inclusion of trait-specific self-efficacy in the analysis. [a]Trait: 0 = Conscientiousness (no negative metastereotype), 1 = Agreeableness (negative metastereotype). [b]Application Intention: 0 = no; 1 = yes. *$p \le .05$, **$p \le .01$.

**TABLE 2** Standardized estimates and wald tests for estimated coefficients for older and younger sample.

| Mediation | Older job seekers (N = 248) | | | Younger job seekers (N = 308) | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Standardized estimate | z-Value | p | Standardized estimate | z-Value | p |
| a-path (trait ⟶ trait-specific *SE*) | −0.17 | −2.40 | .02* | 0.01 | 0.15 | .89 |
| b-path (trait-specific *SE* ⟶ AI) | 0.32 | 3.99 | .001** | 0.04 | 0.34 | .73 |
| ab-path (indirect effect trait ⟶ AI) | −0.05 | −2.03 | .04* | 0.00 | 0.13 | .90 |
| c′-path (direct effect trait ⟶ AI) | −0.21 | −2.21 | .03* | −0.08 | −0.68 | .50 |
| c -path (total effect trait ⟶ AI) | −0.26 | −2.82 | .005** | −0.08 | −0.68 | .50 |
| | Older job seekers (N = 248) | | | Younger job seekers (N = 308) | | |
| $R^2$ trait-specific *SE* | 0.184 | | | 0.251 | | |
| $R^2$ AI | 0.263 | | | 0.017 | | |

*Note*: McFadden's $R^2$ is reported for the dichotomous outcome Application Intention.

Abbreviations: AI, application intention; SE, self-efficacy.

*Note*: McFadden's $R^2$ is reported for the dichotomous outcome Application Intention.

*$p \le .05$.; **$p \le .01$.

hypothesized model and controlled for participants' qualifications on the personality traits and participants' negative metastereotypes. First, results supported Hypothesis 1a, namely that older job seekers' application intention was lower for job ads with negatively metastereotyped traits, $b = -0.26$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .005$, but not Hypothesis 1b, $b = -0.08$, $SE = 0. 25$, $p = .50$. That is, younger job seekers' application intention was not significantly lower for job ads with negatively metastereotyped traits. Second, Hypothesis 2 investigated whether negatively metastereotyped traits in job ads were negatively related to

trait-specific self-efficacy of older (H2a) and younger job (H2b) seekers. For older job seekers, Hypothesis 2a was supported, $b = -0.17$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .016$. For younger job seekers, Hypothesis 2b, was not supported, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .885$. Further, support was found for Hypothesis 3a, which stated that higher trait-specific self-efficacy is related to more application intention, for older, $b = 0.32$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$ (H3a supported), but not for younger participants, $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = .734$ (H3b unsupported). Finally, Hypothesis 4 expected trait-specific self-efficacy to mediate the negative relation between
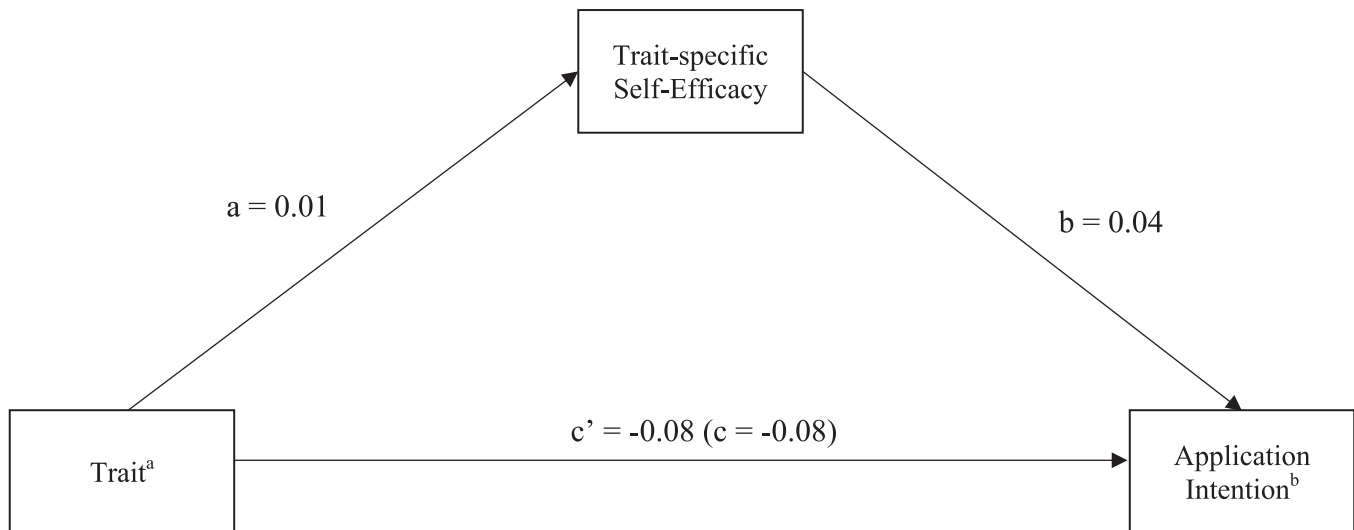
**FIGURE 2** Mediation model for younger job seekers. *Note*: $n_{young}$ = 308. Standardized regression coefficients are displayed. We controlled for job seekers' actual qualification on the traits, as well as whether they held a negative metastereotype about the trait or not. Younger job seekers' qualifications were positively related to trait-specific self-efficacy, *b* = 0.49, *SE* = 0.09, *p* < .001, but not to application intention, *b* = 0.12, *SE* = .24, *p* = .334. Whether they held the negative metastereotype or not was negatively related to trait-specific self-efficacy, *b* = −0.18, *SE* = 0.10, *p* = .02, but not to application intention, *b* = 0.02, *SE* = 0.23, *p* = .868. The standardized coefficient in parentheses represent the effect of trait on application intention (controlled for participants' qualifications and metastereotypes) before the inclusion of trait-specific self-efficacy in the analysis. [a]Trait: 0 = Openness to Experience (no negative metastereotype), 1 = Conscientiousness (negative metastereotype). [b]Application Intention: 0 = no; 1 = yes. *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01.

negatively metastereotyped traits and application intention among older (H4a) and younger (H4b) job seekers. This hypothesis was supported for older participants, *b* = −0.05, *SE* = 0.06, *p* = .042 (H4a supported) but not for younger participants, *b* = 0.00, *SE* = 0.01, *p* = .894 (H4b unsupported). In the above-mentioned path analyses, we controlled for older/younger job seekers' actual qualification on the traits, as well as whether they held a negative metastereotype about the trait or not. Older job seekers' qualifications were significantly related to trait-specific self-efficacy, *b* = 0.23, *SE* = 0.12, *p* = .001, and application intention, *b* = 0.23, *SE* = 0.24, *p* = .01. Whether they held the negative metastereotype or not was negatively related to trait-specific self-efficacy, b = −0.27, *SE* = 0.10, *p* < .001, but not to application intention, *b* = −0.01, *SE* = 0.20, *p* = .959. Younger job seekers' qualifications were positively related to trait-specific self-efficacy, *b* = 0.49, *SE* = 0.09, *p* < .001, but not to application intention, *b* = 0.12, *SE* = 0.24, *p* = .334. Whether they held the negative metastereotype or not was negatively related to trait-specific self-efficacy, *b* = −0.18, *SE* = 0.10, *p* = .02, but not to application intention, *b* = 0.02, *SE* = 0.23, *p* = .868.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Compared to prime-aged job seekers, older and younger job seekers experience obstacles when trying to enter the workforce (OECD, 2020, 2021). According to QBTR, organizations can overcome these obstacles and target more diverse applicants with certain qualifications in job ads (Newman & Lyon, 2009). However, how job

seekers from specific age groups perceive qualifications in job ads and their possible stereotypical connotation has been largely overlooked and was, therefore, studied here. Results of the present experimental study showed that job ads displaying negatively metastereotyped traits discouraged older, but not younger job seekers to apply. For older job seekers, these results are in line with previous findings among female job seekers (Wille & Derous, 2018) and ethnic minority job seekers (Wille & Derous, 2017) and indicate that organizations can fail to attract age-diverse candidates because of the qualifications mentioned in job ads. This can be particularly problematic when the organization aims to target older job seekers as a recruitment strategy, for example, in QBTR. In that sense, our findings indicate that the success of these initiatives might depend on the type of requested traits and the age group that organizations wish to target. Job ads that mention personality requirements that older job seekers hold negative metastereotypes about, might at the same time make them reluctant to apply because of decreased trait-specific self-efficacy and may thus limit the effectiveness of QBTR-strategies. These findings thus add to the recruitment literature by disclosing how job advertisements are perceived by certain job seekers and showed that even those groups that the organization initially wanted to target, can be discouraged by certain cues during recruitment.

In line with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1994), the self-efficacy that older-aged job seekers had about personality requirements mediated the type of trait in job ads (negatively metastereotyped or not) and their application intention, even when controlled for their *actual*

qualifications and whether they held the negative metastereotype or not. These findings provide more evidence in line with earlier findings on how negative metastereotypes can negatively affects one's self-beliefs (Gordijn, 2010; Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2014; Vorauer et al., 1998). It also supports Bandura (1997)'s notion of self-efficacy as a driver of behavior and more specifically, the importance of self-efficacy during the application process (Arnold et al., 2006; Carless, 2005; Jaidi et al., 2011). Moreover, our findings support assumptions from the self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1994) and demonstrate how certain information in job advertisements can stress job seekers' social age identity. In line with Ashforth and Mael (1989), our results suggest that one's social (age) identity can be activated even without an *actual* physical interaction between (age) groups. Research has indeed established that activation of negative metastereotypes can cause intergroup anxiety among older job seekers when *anticipating* an interaction with other age-groups (Fowler & Gasiorek, 2020). Our results also showed that negative metastereotype activation led to lower application intention, which supports previous findings on the link between the activation of negative stereotypes and out-group avoidance intentions and behavior (Goff et al., 2008; Shelton & Richeson, 2005). Further, the current findings provide more insight into the specific nature of cues related to one's social age identity (i.e., negatively metastereotyped traits in job ads) and support earlier studies on stereotypes as triggers of one's social identity (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Steele et al., 2002). Finally, the current findings also corroborate previous findings on older workers' employability beliefs. Peters et al. (2019) found that having negative old-age metastereotypes was related with lower self-perceived employability among older workers, which in turn discouraged them to proactively enter/remain in the labor market. Similarly, the present study established that, for older job seekers, there is a link between negative metastereotypes, self-efficacy and application intention.

Among younger job seekers, negative metastereotypes did not decrease self-efficacy, nor did they affect application intentions, even though we controlled for whether participants held negative metastereotypes about the traits. These findings support the notion of "life stage-specific" reactions to stereotypes (Von Hippel et al., 2019). That is, younger people who face young-age stereotypes will eventually grow older, which implies that the stereotypes will no longer hold for them in the future. Hence, younger job seekers might be less threatened by such stereotypes because of the prospect that they still have a whole future career ahead of them to prove themselves. Studies have indeed suggested that metastereotypes might not only result in threat, but might alternatively result in feelings of challenge (Finkelstein et al., 2020; Kalokerinos et al., 2014). Translated into the current situation: when younger job seekers are confronted with traits in job ads, such as "punctual," they might hold the negative metastereotype "Older people will probably think that younger people are not punctual...". However, instead of posing a threat to younger job seekers' social identity, this might also activate a challenge within younger job seekers, such as "..., but I see this as a challenge to prove to them that not all young people are like

that." Future research initiatives could test whether negative metastereotypes affect trait-specific self-efficacy via perceptions of stereotype threat (or stereotype challenge).

## 6.1 | Theoretical and practical implications

We believe this study adds value to theory in several ways. First, previous studies typically focused on ethnic minority job seekers or female job seekers (Casper et al., 2013; Wille & Derous, 2017, 2018) and have not considered age as an important demographic variable. A unique contribution of the current study is that we considered *both older and younger* job seekers, while research on job seekers from specific age groups tends to focus on older job seekers alone. We argue that a focus on both age groups is needed, because not only older, but also younger job seekers might experience negative age metastereotypes (Finkelstein et al., 2013) and might face hiring discrimination (Farber et al., 2019), while they are also protected from discrimination by European/American legislation (ADEA [EEOC, 1967]; *Establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation*, Council Directive 2000/78/EC, 2000). Second, we supplemented a mere focus on organizational outcomes, such as application intention, with an outcome reflecting how job seekers see themselves in relation to personality requirements in job ads (i.e., trait-specific self-efficacy). In particular, we examined a rather under-researched age-related cue in job ads, namely stereotyped personality requirements. This contrasts with earlier research that often considers job (e.g., task characteristics or working conditions) or organizational characteristics (e.g., values). Additionally, we examined one potential mechanism through which negative metastereotypes may affect application behavior, or in other words, the extent to which older/younger job seekers may internalize negative metastereotypes into their own perception about their abilities. This has—to the best of our knowledge—not been considered before.

Our study findings are also valuable for practitioners. When investigating why certain age groups have lower labor market participation, scholars have mostly focused on how organizations might (un)intentionally select-out older age groups, for instance through tests with an adverse impact or recruiters' biases (Farber et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2017). The current study takes a different perspective and addresses whether older/younger job seekers might also select themselves out of the applicant pool. In doing so, we acknowledge that recruitment is a two-way street, and that both attitudes/decisions at the organizations' side and attitudes/decisions at the applicants' side should be considered to achieve successful recruitment practices (Born et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2008).

Furthermore, age biases in recruitment processes are more subtle than age biases in other employment stages (e.g., workforce exit). Yet, they should not be underestimated (Earl et al., 2015). The present study showed that organizations that aim to attract age-diverse candidates must be aware of the (existence of) various age-related stereotypes, but also of age *meta*stereotypes. Ample research exists on age-related stereotypes (e.g., Posthuma & Campion, 2009)

and how recruiters might be biased in their decision-making because of these stereotypes (Farber et al., 2019). As an organization, being aware of these existing stereotypes and training recruiters to mitigate biases is an important first step toward more age-diverse employees. However, the present study adds to such initiatives in stressing the importance of metastereotypes within job seekers. Organizations that fail to consider these metastereotypes might lose valuable and qualified job seekers from specific age groups during early recruitment stages.

Specifically, recruiters should carefully construct job ads in such a way that they avoid that older or younger job seekers would select themselves out of the applicant pool. First, organizations should avoid using words in job ads that might be negative age-metastereotypes. The present study, together with reviews on age-metastereotypes at work (Finkelstein et al., 2013) provides organizations with traits that older or younger job seekers might have negative metastereotypes about. Moreover, recruiters could consult older and younger employees who can help identify personality requirements or other job ad information (e.g., working conditions) that might also contain negative age metastereotypes. Additionally, when trying to avoid using negatively metastereotyped information, machine learning techniques can be developed and used to help identify negative age metastereotypes in job advertisements (Burn et al., 2020). Second, apart from eliminating possible threatening words in job ads, organizations could also focus on including cues or statements that stress identity safety (Davies et al., 2005) and might avoid that older and younger job seekers would be discouraged from applying. Davies et al. (2005) provided an example of such an identity safe statement during test taking, a similar statement could also be used during the recruitment stage (e.g., a statement describing that despite controversial beliefs, evidence shows that there are no significant age differences in job performance relevant for this job). Future research is needed to investigate whether cues that stress identity safety might temper negative effects of negative metastereotypes in job ads. Finally, job coaches or career counselors can boost metastereotype awareness aimed to mitigate these biases within older job seekers. Interventions aimed to encourage older applicants to apply for jobs might focus on their self-efficacy to increase their application intention. Previous studies have shown that self-efficacy training may indeed be valuable for job seekers (Eden & Aviram, 1993; Wanberg et al., 2020). Similar to Dello Russo et al. (2020), we argue that the responsibility for the above-mentioned interventions is shared between both older job seekers that can proactively seek out career counseling, as well as organizations that can provide counseling on mitigating bias, increasing self-efficacy, and adjusting the organizational culture to a more age accepting one–if needed.

## 6.2 | Limitations and future research directions

As with any study, some limitations and future research directions should be acknowledged. Given that research has shown that job seekers' age moderates how certain job elements (e.g., task variety or job autonomy) relate to job attraction (Zacher et al., 2017), we decided to include only the person profile with the required traits in our study materials, so that we could investigate effects of negatively metastereotyped traits versus not negatively metastereotyped traits on older/younger job seekers' application intention. However, future research might investigate effects of negatively metastereotyped traits in job ads together with effects of other job information (see, e.g., Zacher et al., 2017)—while controlling for job seekers' age. Second, research has suggested that organizational familiarity, that is, the degree to which one knows the organization, influences job seekers' application intention (Ganesan et al., 2018). Hence, we deliberately chose not to use an existing organization in our job advertisements ("Organization X"). Now that the present study unveiled effects of negatively metastereotyped traits in job ads, further research could use real job ads that belong to existing organizations and explore effects of metastereotypes in combination with organizational familiarity on application intention. This might imply interesting interactions with corporate images that are associated with metastereotypes. For instance, (metastereotypes in) job ads from Google may be perceived differently by older participants than (the same) ads by General Electric. Third, we retrieved negative metastereotypes for older and younger job seekers in a rather "top-down" way by using metastereotypes from pilot tests and a literature review. Although manipulation checks were successful for both older and younger job seekers and we controlled for negative metastereotypes in our analyses, future research can generate traits more tailored to the individual level (in a more "bottom-up" way), since effects might be larger for those traits that individuals have stronger metastereotypes about (Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2014). Of course, such individual, particular sensitivities may be more difficult to consider in actual recruitment practice. Next, middle-aged job seekers (around 40–50 years old) were not included in the current study, future research initiatives that are interested in the labor market experiences of middle-aged workers might also investigate their perception of job ads with negative metastereotypes (Finkelstein et al., 2013). Finally, while we used traits that older or younger job seeker had negative or no negative metastereotypes about, scholars could also look into positive age metastereotypes and their effects, since they might generate different reactions (e.g., challenge; Finkelstein et al., 2020).

## 7 | CONCLUSION

An experiment in a large sample of 556 older and younger job seekers investigated effects of negative age metastereotypes in job ads on application intention. Job seekers' trait-specific self-efficacy was tested as a mediator. Results were in line with expectations for older, but not younger job seekers and can help organizations construct better job ads. Career coaches might also use the current findings to better coach older job seekers towards employment and can focus on self-efficacy within older job seekers. The present study

contributes to insights on recruitment of older/younger job seekers and provides clear suggestions for practice, as well as future research.

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## ENDNOTE

[1] For the trait Agreeableness, we used the cut-offs 3.12 for the lowest education level, 3.07 for the middle education level, and 3.09 for the highest education level. For Conscientiousness, we used 3.43, 3.47, and 3.49, and for Openness to Experience, we used 2.92, 3.16, and 3.40, respectively.

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