

ARTICLE

Mind the ad: How personality requirements affect older and younger job seekers' job attraction

Aylin Koçak¹  | Claudia Rooman¹  | Wouter Duyck²  | Eva Deros¹ 

¹Vocational and Personnel Psychology Lab,
Department of Work, Organization and Society,
Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

²Department of Experimental Psychology, Ghent
University, Ghent, Belgium

Correspondence

Aylin Koçak, Vocational and Personnel
Psychology Lab, Department of Work,
Organization and Society, Ghent University,
Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000, Ghent, Belgium.
Email: aylin.kocak@ugent.be

Funding information

Ghent University Special Research Fund, Grant/
Award Number: BOF24Y2017001201

Abstract

Age discrimination may explain lower labour market chances of older and younger job seekers. What remains underresearched, however, is how older/younger job seekers might self-select out from early recruitment procedures due to stigmatizing information in job ads. Building on theories of metastereotypes and the linguistic category model, two experimental studies investigated how personality requirements that older/younger job seekers hold negative metastereotypes about and the way in which these requirements are worded (behavioural vs. dispositional) affected their job attraction. Within-participant mediation analyses showed that as expected, job attraction was higher for older ($N = 123$, aged 50 years or more) and younger ($N = 151$, 30 years or less) job seekers when requirements were worded in a behavioural way (e.g., 'You can be flexible'), compared with a dispositional way (e.g., 'You are flexible'). This relation was mediated by perceptions of challenge among younger but not older job seekers. Contrary to expectations, perceptions of threat did not explain the effects of negatively metastereotyped personality requirements on job attraction. Understanding how job seekers perceive information in job ads might help recruiters to design age-sensitive recruitment policies.

KEYWORDS

diversity, aging workforce, recruitment

Practitioner points

- Research has overlooked how older and younger job seekers perceive and experience information in job advertisements, like personality requirements.
- In general, personality requirements in job ads that job seekers have negative metastereotypes about lower their job attraction.
- Study results show that a behavioural wording of such personality requirements that older/younger job seekers have negative metastereotypes about (i.e., using expressions with verbs instead of adjectives) tempers negative effects of job attraction for both older and younger job seekers.
- As a practical implication, organizations should carefully consider what type of requirements to use in job ads and how they are worded to create age-diverse recruitment strategies and avoid that older and younger job seekers self-select out early in the recruitment process.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the war for talent, ample studies still report age discrimination in recruitment. These studies typically consider how implicit/explicit cues to job seekers' age trigger recruiters' stereotypical reactions and affect job chances (e.g., Farber et al., 2019). A less considered perspective is how older/younger job seekers' perceptions of recruitment information affect recruitment outcomes in early recruitment stages (i.e., the interest stage; Evertz & Süß, 2017). Such perceptions may guide job seekers' intentions and self-selection (Born & Taris, 2010; Mirowska, 2020).

Imagine, for instance, a job advertisement that calls for flexible and dynamic employees. Would older job seekers be as attracted to this ad as their younger counterparts? Similarly, how would younger job seekers feel about an ad that calls for responsible and disciplined employees? Older job seekers might believe recruiters perceive them as less dynamic than younger job seekers, while younger job seekers might believe recruiters perceive them as less disciplined than older persons (Finkelstein et al., 2013). These so-called negative metastereotypes are stereotypical, negative beliefs that one thinks other groups hold about their group and might lower job attraction. The present study considered how personality requirements that older/younger job seekers hold negative metastereotypes about affect their job attraction, which—to the best of our knowledge—has not been considered before, but is important for building age-inclusive organizations. That is, job advertisements might also discourage job seekers from applying (Newman & Lyon, 2009) even though they would be qualified for the job, which is problematic for both job seekers and organizations (Ployhart, 2006).

As a first goal, we examined whether the wording of requirements in job ads affects older and younger job seekers' attraction to the advertised job (Gaucher et al., 2011). The linguistic category model (LC-Model; Semin & Fiedler, 1991) posits that wording may affect how information is perceived and evaluated by others. The use of adjectives ('We expect *flexible* candidates') triggers perceptions of *how one is*, whereas verbal expressions ('We expect candidates *to behave in a flexible way*') trigger perceptions of *how one can behave* in a certain context. Hence, negatively metastereotyped personality requirements worded in a dispositional way might be perceived as less attractive because of their innate nature than (the same) personality requirements worded in a more behavioural way.

Second, not only *whether*, but also *how* negatively metastereotyped personality requirements in job ads affect job attraction is not well understood. Consistent with stereotype threat literature (Steele & Aronson, 1995), studies suggested—but did not test—whether stereotyped information in job ads might elicit threat, which in turn may lead to a loss of interest in the advertised job (Wille & Derous, 2017, 2018). Alternatively, Finkelstein et al. (2020) recently showed that negative metastereotypes might also trigger perceptions of challenge and possibly result in more positive recruitment outcomes. Specifically, negative metastereotypes could incentivize people to prove they do not apply to them. Hence, as a

second goal, we tested whether job seekers' perceptions of threat and challenge mediate effects of negatively metastereotyped personality requirements on job attraction.

Finally, research considers employment chances and hiring discrimination of older-aged job seekers more than younger-aged job seekers, despite anti-discrimination legislation prohibiting age discrimination for all ages (Council Directive, 2000/78/EC). Therefore—and given that unemployment rates are typically higher among both older and younger workers compared with middle-aged workers (OECD, 2020)—we investigated if the wording of negative metastereotypes in job ads affects older (Study 1) and younger (Study 2) job seekers' attraction to jobs and how this is perceived in terms of threat or challenge.

Metastereotyped traits, recruitment, and job ads

Following Hilton and von Hippel (1996)'s definition of stereotypes, *age stereotypes* are beliefs about the characteristics of certain age group members. Young-aged stereotypes, for example, typically include views that younger individuals are less responsible/reliable/loyal, and more impulsive/lazy/materialistic than older individuals (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Truxillo et al., 2014). Similarly, people may view older people as more grumpy/stubborn, and less agreeable/flexible (Finkelstein et al., 2013; Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Individuals might be aware of existing stereotypes about their own group. These *metastereotypes*, or beliefs about stereotypes that out-group members hold about one's in-group (Vorauer et al., 1998), are formed irrespective of what the out-group *actually* thinks, but shape how older and younger people interact (Fowler & Gasiorek, 2020). Verbal cues during recruitment can activate these age-related metastereotypes among older/younger job seekers (Vorauer et al., 1998).

Building on symbolic attraction (Highhouse et al., 2007) studies also demonstrated the impact of (meta)stereotypes in recruitment: When reading job advertisements, job seekers make assumptions (symbolic inferences) about the advertised job based on information in these ads (like personality requirements or traits), which in turn affects their job attraction (Newman & Lyon, 2009). If candidates believe that the traits in job ads relate to personal characteristics that others think they do not hold, this might negatively affect their job attraction. That is, research showed that activation of negative metastereotypes does not only undermine job seekers' general beliefs about their employability chances (e.g., beliefs about how easy it is as a member of one's in-group to find a job; Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2014) but also decreases one's job attraction to that specific job in the job ad (Wille & Deros, 2017, 2018). Relatedly, research showed that job ads with stereotyped language (stereotypically masculine traits, such as 'decisive') negatively affected how job seekers perceive the job (job appeal; Gaucher et al., 2011), and even their intention of applying to the job (Born & Taris, 2010). Thus, not only stereotypes, but also job seekers' expectations that recruiters will evaluate them accordingly, might affect their job attraction. While the (meta)stereotyped connotation of personality requirements in job ads might affect job attraction, we argue that the way in which these requirements are formulated and job seekers' appraisal of these traits (as a threat or challenge) should also be considered. Below, we elaborate on both aspects.

Dispositional versus behavioural wording

According to the symbolic attraction theory (Highhouse et al., 2007), information in job ads, such as personality requirements, may signal whether a job fits job seekers' social identity and whether they want to be affiliated with that job/organization. Not only the type of traits mentioned in job ads but also *how these traits are formulated* may affect job seekers' attraction (Born & Taris, 2010; Wille & Deros, 2017, 2018), since it can signal different things to job seekers. Building on the linguistic category model (LC-Model; Semin & Fiedler, 1991), personality requirements in job ads can be presented as more abstract characteristics (using adjectives, like 'This organization expects *flexible* workers'), or as more concrete behaviours (using verbs, like 'This organization expects workers to *adapt easily to colleagues*'). Research

showed that female job seekers are indeed prone to these subtle linguistic cues in job advertisements: A more concrete, behavioural wording of the personality requirements tempered the negative effect of gender-stereotyped information in job ads on application outcomes for women (Born & Taris, 2010). Studies that empirically tested assumptions from the LC-model relied mostly on gender/ethnicity rather than age to determine the in- and out-group (Wigboldus et al., 2000). While many studies have touched on the idea that organizational communication towards older/younger workers should be deliberative (e.g., Lievens et al., 2012), this has never been tested empirically. This study expected that a dispositional wording (adjectives) of a negatively metastereotyped requirement suggests a more innate nature of personality requirements. Job seekers may therefore get the impression that recruiters' assessments are influenced by negative stereotypes about how older/younger job seekers stereotypically *are* ('one is flexible') across situations. A behavioural wording of negative metastereotypes, on the other hand, puts these requirements in a behavioural/situational context and suggests to job seekers that recruiters may pay more attention to how they *behave* in a concrete situation ('one behaves in a flexible way'). Hence, for older and younger job seekers we expected:

Hypothesis 1 *Job attraction is higher for a behavioural than dispositional wording of negatively age-related metastereotyped traits in job ads.*

Threat versus challenge

Cuddy et al. (2007) showed that people may be more affected by stereotype *appraisals* than by the actual stereotypes themselves. According to Blascovich and Tomaka (1996), any goal-relevant situation (like reading job ads) is followed by a cognitive appraisal of either *threat* or *challenge*, based on a comparison between demands and available resources. Finkelstein et al. (2020) indeed found both threat and challenge reactions to age metastereotypes. People may experience more threat in a situation with an activated negative stereotype compared a situation without such stereotype activation (Schuster & Martiny, 2017). Perceived threat can even impair attitudes and performance (Brubaker & Naveh-Benjamin, 2018). While age-related threat is mostly studied among older people (Lamont et al., 2015), Popham and Hess (2013) showed that younger people's performance was also impaired by perceived threat. Although previous studies assumed that job ads with negative metastereotypes would be experienced as threatening to certain individuals (Wille & Deros, 2017, 2018), such an underlying mechanism has not been tested before and is considered here.

If (meta)stereotypes or anticipated discrimination can create social identity threat (i.e., a threat to one's identity that is based on one's membership of a social category; Steele & Aronson, 1995) in older/younger job seekers, such threat might negatively affect their attraction to these situations. While information that fits one's social identity may increase job attraction (Highhouse et al., 2007), any perceived threat to job seekers' social identity might lower overall job attraction (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Whereas experimental studies (Bretz & Judge, 1998) indeed showed that negative/threatening information about job characteristics decreased job attraction, they did not consider personality requirements that job seekers might have negative metastereotypes about.

The present study not only investigated whether older and younger job seekers experience threat upon confrontation with negative metastereotypes in job ads, and whether such threat perceptions negatively affect job attraction, but also whether the way in which the negative metastereotype is worded changes threat and job attraction levels. A dispositional wording of a trait that one holds a negative metastereotype about might be perceived as more threatening because the job seeker expects that the recruiter will attribute the negative trait more to one's dispositional nature ('how one is'). A behavioural wording, on the other hand, is expected to be less threatening because the negative trait is less linked to one's dispositions but more to one's behaviour in a certain context ('how one can behave'). For older and younger job seekers we thus expected:

Hypothesis 2 *Perceptions of threat are lower for a behavioural wording of negatively metastereotyped traits, compared with a dispositional wording (Hypothesis 2a), which in turn results in higher job attraction for a behavioural wording (Hypothesis 2b). Hence perceptions of threat are expected to mediate the effect of a behavioural/dispositional wording on job attraction (Hypothesis 2c).*

Alternatively, research suggested that people might also feel challenged when being faced with negative metastereotypes (Finkelstein et al., 2020; Kalokerinos et al., 2014). Moreover, being exposed to a negative age-related prime actually increased participants' performance on a cognitive task (*stereotype challenge effect*; Hehman & Bugental, 2013). If job seekers perceive metastereotypes as a challenge, they might aim to disprove them and thus feel stimulated to conquer such stressors: *'As a younger person, I believe older people think that younger people are not responsible, but this challenges me to prove them I can be responsible'* (Alter et al., 2010; Finkelstein et al., 2020). Experimental findings (Thorsteinson et al., 2004) showed that this translates into higher levels of attraction, since higher challenge perceptions in job ads led to higher organizational attraction in their study. Applied to the wording of negatively metastereotyped traits in job ads, one can expect a behavioural wording as opposed to a dispositional wording to present these requirements as more situational, such that job seekers may feel more able and challenged to perform accordingly. Hence, behaviourally worded negative metastereotypes may boost perceptions of challenge and in turn increase job attraction of older and younger job seekers, such that:

Hypothesis 3 *Perceptions of challenge are higher for a behavioural wording of negatively metastereotyped traits, compared with a dispositional wording (Hypothesis 3a), which in turn results in higher job attraction for a behavioural wording (Hypothesis 3b). Hence perceptions of challenge are expected to mediate the effect of a behavioural/dispositional wording on job attraction (Hypothesis 3c).*

STUDY 1

Study 1 investigated whether older job seekers (aged 50 years and older) are more attracted to jobs if negatively metastereotyped¹ personality requirements in job ads are worded in a behavioural way compared with a dispositional way (Hypothesis 1) and whether this effect can be explained by decreased perceptions of threat (Hypothesis 2) and/or increased perceptions of challenge (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

Job seekers ($N = 123$; $M_{\text{age}} = 55.51$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.90$; 52% women) were recruited via HR professionals and were 50 years or more because managers typically consider someone an 'older' worker from the age of 50 years on (McCarthy et al., 2014), employees may suffer more discrimination (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2020) and seem to experience specific (meta)stereotypes from that age on (Finkelstein et al., 2013).

¹Note that the above-mentioned hypotheses consider job ads with negatively metastereotyped traits only. In the absence of such metastereotyped traits, perceptions of threat and challenge are not expected to mediate the relationship between wording and job attraction. Two additionally collected samples, in which this was tested as a robustness check, supported this assumption; results can be consulted in Appendix S1.

Design and procedure

An online experimental study was conducted in which participants had to evaluate that specific part in the job ad where personality requirements are mentioned (the person profile). These profiles included negatively metastereotyped personality requirements, but differed in wording of these requirements. Specifically, the study featured a two-condition within-participant multiple mediators design (Montoya & Hayes, 2017) with within-subjects comparisons of wording (dispositional vs. behavioural), perceived threat and perceived challenge as potential parallel mediators and job attraction as the outcome variable. After signing the informed consent,² participants were instructed to carefully read/evaluate two job ads (presented in counterbalanced order) and evaluated perceived threat, challenge, and job attraction, which was followed by manipulation checks and demographics.

Development of study materials

Study materials consisted of job ads with personality requirements that older people hold negative metastereotypes about and were developed in two stages using different samples than the main study. In Stage 1, we conducted a literature review to investigate Big Six personality traits (Ashton & Lee, 2009) that older people have negative metastereotypes about. In their review on age metastereotypes at work, Finkelstein et al. (2013, 2015) reported 'out of touch'/'technophobic'/'set in ways' as the most important negative metastereotypes of older workers, followed by 'boring'/'old'/'stubborn'/'conservative'/'negative'/'grumpy'. In line with these results, more recent studies found 'old'/'slow'/'out of touch'/'physically declining' (Weiss & Perry, 2020) and 'not adaptable' (Peters et al., 2019) as older-aged negative metastereotypes. Since we were interested in personality requirements that older/younger-aged workers hold metastereotypes about, we analysed existing metastereotypes on their trait-like nature and compared these with the traits of HEXACO (Ashton & Lee, 2009), a well-known and validated Big Six personality model that includes the traits: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Emotionality, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience, and Integrity. Older-aged negative metastereotypes mostly corresponded to a certain lack of adaptability and kindness, referring to the trait Agreeableness (Ashton & Lee, 2009). Stage 2 consisted of a pilot study in which we empirically tested HEXACO-traits that older workers hold most negative metastereotypes about to a further extent. Participants ($N = 80$; $M_{\text{age}} = 53.91$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.25$, 100% 50 years and older; 55% women; 98.8% Caucasian/White; different from the main study) indicated for each negative item of the HEXACO Personality Inventory Revised (de Vries et al., 2009) whether they believed that *younger* (<50 years) workers think that *older* (≥ 50 years) workers are [adjective], for example, 'stubborn', using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). A higher score thus indicated more negative metastereotypes for the trait. Results showed the most negative metastereotype about the trait Agreeableness ($M = 2.90$, $SD = .57$), compared with the other HEXACO-traits ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .46$), $t(42) = 3.42$, $p = .001$ (Table 1). Subsequently, we developed and evaluated pairs of 'verbs'/'adjectives' that represented the highest scoring Agreeableness items in a behavioural and dispositional wording, respectively. The adjectives 'obedient' ['volgzaam'], 'flexible' ['meegaand'] and 'friendly' ['vriendelijk'] and the corresponding behavioural expressions (with verbs) 'In the workplace, you can obey and follow orders' ['Je neemt niet graag de leiding op de werkplek en je volgt liever'], 'You can easily comply and adapt to colleagues' ['Je past je gemakkelijk aan collega's aan'] and 'You create a friendly atmosphere at work' ['Je zorgt voor een aangename werksfeer'] were selected. Subject Matter Experts (SMEs; $N = 9$; Industrial and Organizational Psychologists), blind to the study design/purpose, evaluated adjectives and expressions on their content, wording, and realism. Results showed that adjectives and expressions were perceived as intended and can be consulted in Appendix S1. No other

²Both studies were approved by the Ethical Commission of Ghent University in accordance with the Helsinki declaration [Special Ethical Protocol no 2020/75].

TABLE 1 Perceptions of negative metastereotypes based on HEXACO-items in Study 1 (older-aged job seekers) and Study 2 (younger-aged job seekers)

Trait	Older workers		Younger workers	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Extraversion	2.72	.55	2.52	.49
Agreeableness	2.90	.57	3.05	.46
Emotionality	2.57	.53	3.25	.49
Conscientiousness	2.13	.49	3.36	.64
Openness to experience	2.80	.63	2.56	.45
Honesty-humility	2.66	.65	3.12	.52

Note. $N_{\text{Pilot Study 1}} = 80$; $N_{\text{Pilot Study 2}} = 28$. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

specific information about other job characteristics (like working conditions or organization type) was mentioned as those characteristics might differentially attract older job seekers (Zacher et al., 2017).

Validation of study materials

We additionally investigated the prevalence of selected HEXACO-traits in real job ads and cross-checked whether job seekers hold negative metastereotypes about them in a field study. Older job seekers ($N = 85$; $M_{\text{age}} = 54.06$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.03$; 100% ≥ 50 years; 57.6% women, different from the developmental stage/main study) were asked to select two ads for a job they were interested in and qualified for. Subsequently, they had to rate the attractiveness of the ads (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Three independent raters ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.67$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.15$, I-O psychologists working as recruiters) content-coded the job ads for information that referred to the HEXACO-trait 'Agreeableness' through inductive thematic analysis (discussion until agreement; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Results showed that 31.8% of all ads included 'Agreeableness'. Ads that included 'Agreeableness' ($M = 3.56$, $SD = .89$) were perceived as less attractive than ads without this trait ($M = 3.98$, $SD = .84$), $F(1, 81) = 3.32$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. Finally, older job seekers had to report information from the ads that they believed others held negative old-age stereotypes about. Negatively metastereotyped information was subsequently content-coded on HEXACO-traits based on definitions, scale descriptions, and adjectives (de Vries et al., 2009; <https://hexaco.org>). Results showed that 15.0% of the information job seekers held negative stereotypes about explicitly referred to Agreeableness, for example, 'being flexible', 'capable of working in a team', 'sociable/friendly atmosphere' (de Vries et al., 2009, p. 240, <https://hexaco.org>). In sum, through a literature review, pilot study and a field study, we developed, tested and validated study materials that are relevant for older job seekers and increase the ecological validity in the main study.

Measures

Job attraction was measured with three items retrieved from Van Hoof et al. (2006). An example item was 'Based on this information in the job ad [i.e., personality requirements], I would feel attracted to the advertised job' (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Principal axis factoring showed 1 factor with an eigenvalue larger than 1, explaining 91.78% (dispositional wording condition) and 87.95% (behavioural wording condition) of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha was .93 and .96 for the behavioural wording and dispositional wording condition, respectively.

Perceived threat and challenge were measured with one item each, adapted from job anxiety scales (Muschalla et al., 2010) and Thorsteinson et al.'s (2004) single item of challenge. The item that measured

perceived threat was: 'This person profile poses a threat to people aged 50 or older, like me' (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The item that measured perceived challenge was 'This person profile poses a challenge to people aged 50 or older, like me' (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Items were counterbalanced with higher scores indicating that respectively more threat or challenge was experienced based on the metastereotyped personality requirement.

Manipulation checks evaluated whether the type of trait ('The person profile shows that they were looking for an agreeable person', with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) and its wording ('The person profile shows that they value *how one can behave* (=behavioural)/*how one's nature is* (=dispositional)', with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) were perceived as intended. We also checked whether the negatively metastereotyped trait was indeed perceived as a metastereotype with the question 'To what extent do you believe that younger (<50y) workers think that older (≥50y) workers are [obedient], [flexible] and [friendly]?', with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. A series of Repeated Measures ANOVA's showed that participants perceived the job ads looking for agreeable persons as intended for both the behavioural wording ($M = 3.98, SD = .99, F(1, 122) = 156.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .56$), as well as the dispositional wording ($M = 3.87, SD = .72, F(1, 122) = 112.72, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .48$). When adjectives were used, traits were perceived as more dispositional ($M = 4.02, SD = .74$) than when verbs ($M = 3.81, SD = .83$) were used, $F(1,122) = 6.60, p = .011, \eta_p^2 = .05$. Finally, participants of the main study held negative metastereotypes about the manipulated Agreeableness items ($M = 2.90, SD = .76$) that were comparable to and not significantly different from participants of the pilot study ($M = 2.90, SD = .57$), $t(96.70) = .02, p = .99$. A one sample t-test further showed that participants indeed held more negative metastereotypes about the Agreeableness items in the ads ($M = 2.90, SD = .76$) when compared with the pilot sample mean of the other five HEXACO-traits ($M = 2.66, SD = .88$), $t(122) = 3.53, p = .001$. These results showed that manipulations were successful.

Demographics included participants' 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*).

Results

Table 2 presents descriptives, internal consistency reliabilities, and correlations among study variables. We performed a within-participant statistical mediation analysis through path analysis (Montoya & Hayes, 2017) using the MEMORE macro (V2.1; Montoya, 2019). This approach allows a test of a two-condition within-subjects design with two parallel mediators, which is required to test the model with a negative metastereotype³ among older people (see Figure 1 for regression coefficients).

Hypothesis 1 investigated whether job attraction is higher for negatively metastereotyped personality requirements that were worded in a behavioural rather than a dispositional way, that is, the total effect of wording on job attraction. In line with our expectations, a behavioural wording, compared with a dispositional one, significantly increased job attraction for job ads with a negatively metastereotyped trait, $b = .49, SE = .16, t(87) = 3.11, p = .003$, supporting Hypothesis 1. To further investigate our hypothesized mediators (Hypotheses 2 and 3), we split up this total effect into a direct effect and two indirect effects through perceived threat and perceived challenge. First we investigated whether perceived threat was lower if personality requirements were worded in a behavioural rather than dispositional way (Hypothesis 2a) and whether perceived threat related negatively to job attraction (Hypothesis 2b). We expected perceived threat to mediate the relationship between wording of a negatively metastereotyped trait and job attraction (Hypothesis 2c). Results showed no support for Hypothesis 2a, $b = .15$,

³We additionally investigated older job seekers' ($n = 125$) appraisal of job ads without metastereotyped traits as a robustness check. As expected, no parallel mediation effects were found (see Appendix S1).

TABLE 2 Descriptives, correlations, and internal consistencies of Study 1 and Study 2

	Study 1		Study 2		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>										
1. Job Attraction DW ^a	2.96	1.12	3.08	.97	(.96)/(.92)	.45**	-.24*	-.15	.60**	.26*	.08	-.04	.09	-.01
2. Job Attraction BW ^b	3.37	1.34	3.45	.91	(.93)/(.93)	(.93)/(.93)	-.13	-.33**	.14	.59**	.16*	-.11	.05	-.12
3. Threat DW ^a	2.28	1.06	2.21	1.03	-.28**	-.06	(-)	.26**	-.04	.03	.01	-.05	--	-.13
4. Threat BW ^b	2.29	1.02	1.84	.78	-.14	-.35**	.47**	(-)	-.01	-.10	-.18	.03	--	.03
5. Challenge DW ^{a,c}	2.67	1.08	2.79	1.02	.66**	.27*	-.00	.10	(-)	.37**	.07	-.05	--	.12
6. Challenge BW ^{b,c}	2.69	1.09	3.38	1.00	.47**	.65**	-.07	-.21	.52**	(-)	.24*	-.00	--	.03
7. Gender ^{c,d}	.52	.50	.74	.44	-.12	.01	.05	.03	-.06	.07	(-)	-.02	.05	.04
8. Age ^e	55.51	4.90	23.49	2.55	.17	.05	.03	.00	.06	.01	-.10	(-)	.01	.03
9. Ethnicity ^{d,f}	.01	.09	.03	.41	-.11	-.05	-.02	.14	-.07	-.07	.08	-.04	(-)	--
10. Education Level ^{d,g}	1.85	1.25	3.79	1.00	-.06	-.07	-.01	-.01	-.02	-.07	-.05	.00	-.08	(-)

Note. Results for Study 1 are displayed under the diagonal ($n = 123$); Results for Study 2 are displayed above the diagonal ($n = 151$).

^aDW: dispositional wording.

^bBW: behavioural wording.

^cGender: 0 = male; 1 = female.

^dSpearman correlation.

^eAge: all job seekers were 50 years or older in Study 1 and all job seekers were 30 years or younger for Study 2.

^fEthnicity: 0 = Caucasian/White; 1 = Arab; 2 = African; 3 = Asian, 4 = Latin-American, 5 = other.

^gEducation 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.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

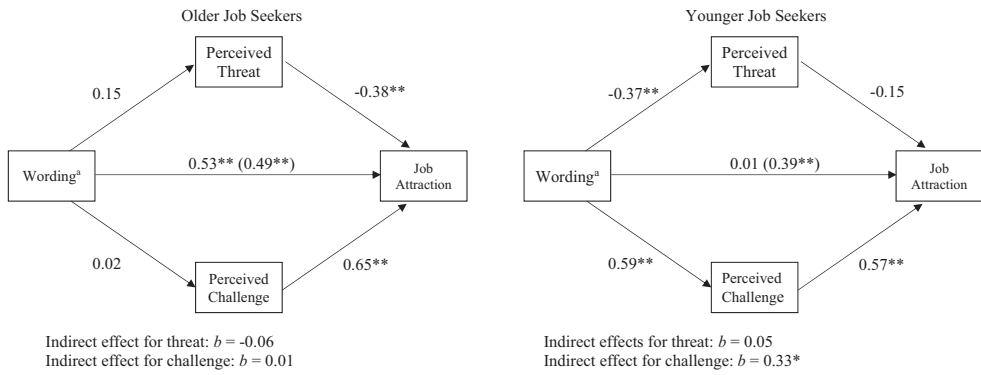


FIGURE 1 Parallel mediation models for older job seekers (Study 1) and younger job seekers (Study 2) for ads with negative metastereotypes. *Note.* $N_{\text{Study 1}} = 123$; $N_{\text{Study 2}} = 151$; Unstandardized coefficients are reported. The coefficients in parentheses represent the total effect of wording on job attraction, that is, the direct and indirect effect. ^aWording: 0 = dispositional (adjectives), 1 = behavioural (verbs). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

$SE = .12$, $t(87) = 1.26$, $p = .21$, yet a significant, negative relationship between perceived threat and job attraction was found, $b = -.38$, $SE = .12$, $t(83) = -3.07$, $p = .003$, supporting Hypothesis 2b. In addition, as the total indirect effect of wording on job attraction through perceived threat was not significant, $b = -.06$, bootstrapped $SE = .06$, bootstrapped 95% CI = $[-.21, .22]$, Hypothesis 2c could not be supported for older job seekers. In the same way, we proceeded testing whether wording related positively to perceived challenge (Hypothesis 3a), whether perceived challenge related positively to job attraction (Hypothesis 3b) and whether perceived challenge mediated the relation between wording and job attraction (Hypothesis 3c). Wording did not significantly relate to perceived challenge, $b = .02$, $SE = .11$, $t(87) = .20$, $p = .84$, providing no support for Hypothesis 3a. However, in support of Hypothesis 3b, we observed a significant, positive relationship between perceived challenge and job attraction, $b = .65$, $SE = .13$, $t(83) = 5.00$, $p < .001$. Because the total indirect effect of wording on job attraction through perceived challenge was not significant, $b = .01$, bootstrapped $SE = .08$, bootstrapped 95% CI = $[-.13, .17]$, Hypothesis 3c could not be supported. Finally, the direct effect of wording on job attraction, while accounting for perceived threat and challenge was significant $b = .53$, $SE = .13$, $t(83) = 4.04$, $p = .001$.

Discussion

Study 1 results showed that when negatively metastereotyped requirements in job ads were worded in a behavioural way, older job seekers considered the job ads more attractive than when the same requirements were worded in a dispositional way. These findings provide support for the LC-model (Semin & Fiedler, 1991) and corroborate with Born and Taris (2010) and Wille and Deros (2017). Although wording did not affect job seekers' perceptions of threat and challenge, results showed that perceived threat elicited by negatively metastereotyped traits related negatively to job attraction and that perceived challenge related positively to job attraction.

STUDY 2

Study 2 tested the same mechanism (hypotheses), namely, whether job attraction is higher for a behavioural versus dispositional wording of negatively metastereotyped traits (Hypothesis 1) and whether this effect can be explained by decreased perceptions of threat (Hypothesis 2) and/or increased perceptions of challenge (Hypothesis 3) among younger job seekers (aged 30 years and younger). The method used in Study 2 was identical to that of Study 1, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Method

Participants

Given that life stage transition from emerging adulthood to young adulthood is situated around the age of 30 years (Arnett, 2011) and that researchers also found specific metastereotypes for people younger than 30 years compared with their older counterparts (Finkelstein et al., 2013), we recruited 151 job seekers aged 30 years or younger ($M_{\text{age}} = 23.49$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.55$; 76.6% women).

Design and procedure

In an online experiment, younger-aged job seekers rated job ads with negatively metastereotyped personality requirements that were worded in either a behavioural or dispositional way. Study 2 also featured a two-condition within-participant multiple mediators design (Montoya & Hayes, 2017) with wording measured within-subjects, perceived threat and challenge as potential mediators, and job attraction as the outcome.

Development of study materials

As in Study 1, we developed personality requirements that younger people hold negative metastereotypes about in two stages. In Stage 1, a review of relevant literature, we found that Harwood and Williams (1998) reported young beliefs that older counterparts see them as ‘irresponsible’/‘reckless’/‘naïve’, which is confirmed by later studies (Finkelstein et al., 2013, 2015) who also listed ‘irresponsible’/‘reckless’/‘naïve’, together with ‘lazy’/‘unmotivated’/‘unreliable’/‘inexperienced’/‘unknowledgeable’/‘rash decision making’, as most important negative metastereotypes of younger workers. In terms of HEXACO-traits (Ashton & Lee, 2008), these listed traits referred to lower levels of Conscientiousness. In a second Stage, we indeed found through a pilot study (Table 1) that younger-aged workers ($N_{\text{young}} = 28$; 100% 30 years or younger; 53.7% women; 96.4% Caucasian/White; different from the main study) held the most negative metastereotype about the HEXACO-trait Conscientiousness ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .64$) compared with the other HEXACO-traits ($M = 2.90$, $SD = .33$), $t(27) = 3.79$, $p = .001$. Subsequently, adjectives and verbs representing Conscientiousness were developed. We selected the adjectives ‘punctual’ [‘stipt’], ‘disciplined’ [‘gedisciplineerd’] and ‘deliberative’ [‘bedachtzaam’] and the expressions (with verbs) ‘You can work punctually’ [‘Je kan taken en projecten stipt op tijd afwerken’], ‘You can work in a disciplined way’ [‘Je kan met veel discipline aan taken werken’] and ‘You can think deliberately when working on tasks’ [‘Je denkt eerst goed na voor je taken begint uit te voeren’]. As in Study 1, SMEs ($N = 9$) evaluated the content, wording, and realism of the materials. Results supported that adjectives/expressions were perceived as intended (see Appendix S1).

Validation of study materials

We proceeded in the same way as in Study 1. Through a field study, we evaluated job ads to cross-check findings of the first two stages of the development of the study material. First, 62.5% of job ads that younger job seekers were asked to select (for jobs they were interested in and qualified for) included 'Conscientiousness' as a personality requirement. Further, younger job seekers found ads with 'Conscientiousness' ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .81$) significantly less attractive than ads without this trait ($M = 3.49$, $SD = .56$), $F(1, 89) = 3.85$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Finally, when specifically asked about negative metastereotypes in the ads, younger job seekers ($N = 100$; $M_{\text{age}} = 24.16$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.20$; $100\% \leq 30$ years; 66.0% women) mentioned Conscientiousness in 19.0% of all answers. For instance, the answers 'time management' and 'detail oriented' were both coded as Conscientiousness (de Vries et al., 2009).

Measures

The same measures were used as in Study 1 for job attraction (3 items adapted from Van Hooft et al., 2006; with $\alpha = .93$ and $.92$ for behavioural and dispositional wording, respectively), perceived threat and challenge (1 item each; Muschalla et al., 2010; Thorsteinson et al., 2004), and demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, educational level). Through manipulation checks, we evaluated whether the type of trait (metastereotyped or not), its wording (behavioural or dispositional), and the metastereotyped connotation of the traits were perceived as intended using analogous items to Study 1. For instance, to test whether metastereotyped traits were perceived as intended, we asked "To what extent do you believe that older (>30 years) workers think that younger (≤ 30 years) workers are [punctual], [disciplined] and [deliberative]?", with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Repeated Measures ANOVA's showed that manipulations were successful. Participants perceived the job ad looking for conscientious persons as intended for both the behavioural wording ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .68$), $F(1, 150) = 16.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .52$, and the dispositional wording ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .71$), $F(1, 150) = 350.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .70$. Traits were indeed perceived as more dispositional when adjectives were used ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .70$) than when verbs were used ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.06$), $F(1, 150) = 37.37$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$. Participants of the main study held negative metastereotypes about the Conscientiousness items ($M = 3.39$, $SD = .68$) that were comparable to and not significantly different from participants of the pilot study ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .64$), $t(177) = .22$, $p = .82$. Through a one sample t -test, we found that participants of the main study indeed held more negative metastereotypes about Conscientiousness ($M = 3.39$, $SD = .68$) when compared with the pilot sample mean of the other HEXACO-traits ($M = 2.93$, $SD = .92$), $t(150) = 8.28$, $p < .001$.

Results

Descriptives, internal consistency reliabilities, and correlations among study variables are displayed in Table 2. Similar to Study 1, a within-participant statistical mediation path analysis was conducted (Montoya & Hayes, 2017) with MEMORE (V2.1; Montoya, 2019). Figure 1 displays the observed regression coefficients of the parallel mediation for younger job seekers in the condition with a negatively metastereotyped⁴ trait in the job ad. In support of Hypothesis 1, job attraction was significantly higher when the negatively metastereotyped personality requirements were worded in a behavioural way than when they were worded in a dispositional way, $b = .39$, $SE = .11$, $t(81) = 3.58$, $p = .001$. As regards Hypothesis 2, a behavioural wording significantly lowered levels of perceived threat, $b = -.37$, $SE = .12$, $t(81) = -2.97$, $p = .004$ (Hypothesis 2a supported). However, perceived threat did not significantly relate to job attraction, $b = -.15$, $SE = .08$, $t(77) = -1.90$, $p = .06$

⁴As in Study 1, we additionally investigated younger job seekers' ($n = 157$) appraisal of job ads without metastereotyped traits. Results were in line with our expectations (see Appendix S1).

(Hypothesis 2b unsupported). Finally, the total indirect effect of wording of a negatively metastereotyped trait on job attraction through threat was not significant, $b = .05$, bootstrapped $SE = .05$, bootstrapped 95% CI = $[-.03, .16]$. Hypothesis 2c could therefore not be supported. Results of Hypothesis 3 showed that as expected, a behavioural wording of the negatively metastereotyped trait resulted in higher levels of perceived challenge compared with a dispositional wording, $b = .59$, $SE = .13$, $t(81) = 4.68$, $p < .001$ (Hypothesis 3a, supported). In support of Hypothesis 3b, perceived challenge significantly increased job attraction, $b = .57$, $SE = .07$, $t(77) = 7.84$, $p < .001$. Moreover, the total indirect effect of wording of a negatively metastereotyped trait on job attraction through perceived challenge was significant as well, $b = .33$, bootstrapped $SE = .09$, bootstrapped 95% CI = $[.18, .52]$, providing support for Hypothesis 3c. Additionally, pairwise contrasts showed that the mediation through perceived threat and the mediation through perceived challenge significantly differed from one another, $b = -.28$, bootstrapped $SE = .10$, bootstrapped 95% CI = $[-.50, -.09]$. Finally, the direct effect of wording on job attraction when accounting for perceived threat and challenge was not significant, $b = .01$, $SE = .09$, $t(77) = 4.68$, $p = .94$.

Discussion

In line with findings among older workers and the LC-model (Semin & Fiedler, 1991), results showed that job attraction was higher when negatively metastereotyped personality requirements in job ads were worded in a behavioural way than in a dispositional way. Further, among younger-aged job seekers, the relationship between wording and job attraction was mediated by perceived challenge but not by perceived threat. When negatively metastereotyped traits were worded in a behavioural way, younger-aged job seekers felt more challenged by these personality requirements and were thus more attracted to the job than when requirements were worded in a dispositional way. These findings disconfirm assumptions from stereotype threat models (Steele & Aronson, 1995), but support both theoretical assumptions (Alter et al., 2010; Kalokerinos et al., 2014) and empirical findings (Finkelstein et al., 2020; Hehman & Bugental, 2013; Thorsteinson et al., 2004) on challenge reactions, as further discussed below.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Despite the war for talent and changing age composition of the labour market, older/younger age groups still experience more difficulties in finding jobs compared with middle-aged job seekers (OECD, 2020, 2021). While human capital factors (e.g., lack of experience and competences/skills) may explain lower labour market outcomes to some extent, hiring discrimination was also suggested, thereby predominantly focusing on recruiters' stereotypes and biased decision-making (e.g., Farber et al., 2019). The present study, however, considered how job seekers experience information early in the recruitment process. Up until now, job seekers' perspectives have received only limited attention (Highhouse et al., 2007; Russell & Brannan, 2016). Yet, they are equally important to consider, given self-selection processes that might steer recruitment outcomes (Born & Taris, 2010; Mirowska, 2020). Researchers therefore called for a better understanding of job seekers' attitudes and behaviour to avoid that talented job seekers would drop out early from recruitment procedures (Casper et al., 2013; Wille & Deros, 2017). Addressing this call, we investigated in two empirical studies *how* negatively metastereotyped personality requirements in job ads affect older and younger job seekers' attraction. Whereas previous studies mostly investigated *whether* stereotyped information in job ads affects recruitment outcomes (Born & Taris, 2010; Wille & Deros, 2017, 2018), they did not consider *how* exactly this might happen. The present study aimed to fill that literature gap by examining perceived threat and perceived challenge as potential mediators.

Key findings and contributions

Below, we first discuss two key findings and similarities across both studies, followed by unique contributions of each. A first key finding is that wording of personality requirements in the job ads affected both older and younger job seekers' attraction to the advertised job. In line with assumptions from the LC-model (Semin & Fiedler, 1991), ads that included negatively metastereotyped personality requirements were perceived as more attractive if such traits were worded in a behavioural way compared with a dispositional way. Similar findings were reported among ethnic minority and female job seekers (Wille & Derous, 2017, 2018) and seem to uphold for other groups of job seekers that might suffer from stereotypes and stigmatization on the labour market, like older/younger job seekers.

Second, the few studies that investigated stereotyped information in job ads assumed stereotyped cues in job ads to be ego-threatening. Hence people typically tend to avoid situations where they anticipate to be negatively evaluated (Fowler & Gasiorek, 2020). We empirically tested this threat mechanism. Our findings, however, illustrate that the relationship between wording of a negatively metastereotyped personality requirement and job attraction might not be explained by perceived threat, for either older nor younger job seekers. While these results are not in line with literature findings on stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), they do seem to resemble findings among other demographic groups, such as women and ethnic minorities (Davies et al., 2005; Pennington et al., 2019). Whether participants perceive threat when confronted with negative metastereotypes might depend on their own estimation of personal resources. Core self-evaluations, for instance, might moderate whether one feels threatened or not (Finkelstein et al., 2015). Thus, a high level of general belief in oneself might lower the perceived threat one might experience because of negative metastereotypes. Furthermore, the level of diagnosticity of a task was a moderator for stereotype threat activation (Steele et al., 2002). Evaluating personality requirements in job ads might –overall– evoke less threat than addressing questions on one's personality in job interviews. Additionally, elements inherent to the study methodology might also have added to low perceived threat levels. First, perceptions of threat might have been suppressed because there was no real job at stake. Second, when faced with a negative stereotype, group members tend to create a vigilance for cues that indicate whether others might view them accordingly. Perceptions of threat might also have been suppressed because the nature of the stimulus (wording of traits in job ads) was rather subtle compared with stimuli that are mostly used in threat research (such as numeric representation of the group at the workplace, selection tests, ambiguous promotion practices, and job conditions; Walton et al., 2015). Our study investigated a rather unique and under-explored work-related cue, namely, the wording of metastereotyped personality requirements in job ads. This cue might be inherently different from the earlier mentioned cues. Hence, future research could consider other potential sources in job ads that might trigger threat.

As previously suggested by scholars (Finkelstein et al., 2015; Kalokerinos et al., 2014), one might also feel positively challenged when coming across negative metastereotypes, which—remarkably—has been somewhat overlooked in the area of recruitment and selection. By explicitly testing challenge as an alternative to feeling threatened, Study 2 showed empirical evidence for a stereotype challenge effect (Finkelstein et al., 2020; Hehman & Bugental, 2013) among younger job seekers. Similarly, Hehman and Bugental (2013) observed a positive challenging effect of stereotypes among younger but not among older participants. They attributed these differential effects to the dynamic nature of age-related stereotypes, meaning that reactions to age stereotypes are life stage-specific and depend on participants' current age. Similarly, the present study only found evidence for a mediating role of challenge among younger (Study 2) but not older (Study 1) job seekers. Following Hehman and Bugental (2013)'s idea of life stage-specific reactions to stereotypes, younger people know that as they grow older, they will come closer to the 'prime-aged' group. Therefore, their age-based status will improve over time. This prospect could make younger job seekers more resistant to negative age (meta)stereotypes. Older people, on the other hand, do not only experience older-aged stereotypes, but they additionally know that—by growing older—their older-aged status will not change, which might make them more alert/vulnerable to negative stereotypes against their age group. Life stage-specific reactions to stereotypes might thus

provide a possible explanation as to why we did not find identical pathways for older and younger job seekers. These findings also highlight the added value of targeting different age groups and their unique experiences.

In sum, building on theories of (meta)stereotypes and the LC-model, the present paper adds to studies on age-based hiring discrimination by focusing on job seekers' reactions to negative metastereotypes in the early recruitment stage. Results provide important insights for future research and targeted recruitment initiatives by showing that (1) job ads might include person requirements that people have negative metastereotypes about (2) the wording of such requirements should be considered and (3) threat/challenge reactions on these negatively metastereotyped requirements might be different for older/younger job seekers. These topics have typically received little attention up until now.

Limitations and directions for future research

The present study answered a call for more recruitment research that takes a microperspective (Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001) by considering job seekers' perceptions of job ads. By focusing on the wording of metastereotyped personality requirements in job ads and the perceived threat/challenge they may trigger, we provide scholars and organizations with knowledge on how older/younger job seekers appraise job ad information and the benefits of employing a behavioural wording. However, as with any study, potential limitations and ideas for further research need to be mentioned. For instance, when developing study materials, we started in a 'top down' manner by identifying/testing personality requirements from the literature. Despite the fact that study materials were developed/validated very carefully through a literature review, lab and field studies, and that manipulation checks were successful, different personality requirements may still carry different meanings even *within* older and younger-aged groups of job seekers. Similar to stereotypes, metastereotypes include generalizations and their conceptualization in the present study might not hold for all older/younger people. Given this potential individual variability, future research might generate personality requirements in a more 'bottom-up'/individual way to engender even stronger effects. Relatedly, as negative metastereotypes may also lead to challenge reactions, more research could investigate how exactly job seekers experience this 'challenge' emotionally and what it means for them. This might be an interesting addition to the existing literature that predominantly focuses on stereotype threat mechanisms. Moreover, one might argue that people with higher qualifications on the requested trait might not be equally affected by metastereotypes and effects of wording, threat, and challenge (Newman & Lyon, 2009). Therefore, as a robustness check (see Appendix S1), additional analyses showed that findings hold for older/younger participants who were highly qualified for the requested trait (i.e., who scored higher than the population mean score for their educational level as reported by de Vries et al., 2009). Future research might additionally check how older job seekers react to negative metastereotypes for younger job seekers, and vice versa. Further, since stereotypical ideas do not only exist about older/younger people but also about jobs and organizations (Truxillo et al., 2012), we controlled for job/organizational characteristics in order not to confound study results (Bhargava & Theunissen, 2019). Interactive effects of personality requirements with job/organizational characteristics could be considered in future research, as well as how job ad information other than the person profile relates to perceived threat and/or challenge. Another interesting research direction that can add to the generalizability of our findings, is evaluating findings among older/younger samples with different ethnicities. In terms of gender, additional analyses showed that participants' gender did not significantly moderate findings for both the older and younger sample. Further, although participants were actual job seekers, research could further investigate whether our results hold/amplify in field settings with real job ads and jobs at stake. Finally, while challenge was indeed a mediator between the wording of a negative metastereotype and job attraction for younger job seekers, nor threat or challenge mechanisms were mediators for older job seekers. Therefore, future research could investigate alternative, potential mediating mechanisms, such as one's perceived person-job fit. This fit represents a link between how the negative metastereotypes relate to one's own needs

and skills and how this affects one's attraction to the job (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Another potential mediator might be the general employability beliefs that might be lowered because of negative metastereotypes and might affect job attraction (Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2014). This mechanism might be particularly interesting to investigate among older workers, since older workers' employability beliefs tend to be lower because of their age. Finally, it might be interesting to investigate whether job seekers' perceived age discrimination might also be a mediator between the wording of negative metastereotypes and job attraction mechanism (Snape & Redman, 2003).

Practical implications

Strategic diversity recruitment is crucial to mitigate bias. Job advertisements are frequently used recruitment sources that organizations seldom/never evaluate on the disparate impact they may have on demographic subgroups. Research on this topic recently initiated in the area of gender and ethnicity: just a few words can increase female and ethnic minority job applicants by more than 20% (Andrews, 2017; Hamidi et al., 2018). Yet, as shown in this study, job ads may also send subtle age cues to older/younger job seekers based on deep-level characteristics (like negatively metastereotyped personality requirements) that can attract or dissuade them from applying. First, although individual variability should be acknowledged, the present study's insights provide practitioners with initial guidance on the *type of personality traits* that older/younger job seekers have *negative metastereotypes* about. Second, findings suggest that practitioners might reach older/younger job seekers more effectively by communicating those traits in job ads in a behavioural way (how one can *behave*) instead of a dispositional way (how one *is*). This adaptation offers recruiters a relatively simple and cost-effective strategy to improve recruitment procedures' outcomes. Third, and especially for younger job seekers, it might be useful to not only focus on how organizations can decrease perceptions of threat through cues (e.g., creating identity safety; Davies et al., 2005), but also on how certain cues can increase perceptions of challenge (e.g., signalling available resources; Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996) to become the employer of choice. While these key findings indicate that recruiters could benefit from decision-making aids that guide towards creating bias-free and challenging job ads, job seekers might also benefit from learning how to interpret requirements in job ads (Deros & Ryan, 2019) and how to focus on challenges instead of threats. Finally, like automatic gender recognitions (AGR, like <https://textio.com/>) watch the gender tone in job descriptions/ads, specific age recognition programs could be developed to evaluate/design bias-free ads as related to age. As such, not only more diverse applicants can be attracted towards applying, but job vacancies might also be filled faster (Halloran, 2017). In sum, our study findings plead for strategic diversity recruitment initiatives that also consider age-related cues and may inspire practitioners to efficiently draft job ads in a more considerate way. With such microlevel perspective, organizations can optimize targeted recruitment initiatives and prevent older/younger job seekers from self-selecting out even before the actual selection phase is initiated.

CONCLUSION

The present study uncovered how older/younger job seekers perceive age-based metastereotyped personality requirements in job advertisements. Findings can inspire practitioners to communicate in a more sensitive and behaviour-like way, given that a behavioural wording of personality requirements in job advertisements results in higher job attraction than a dispositional wording among older and younger job seekers. Perceived challenge might explain these effects among younger job seekers. Study insights extend the limited understanding of older/younger job seekers' recruitment experiences and provide organizations with clear and effective suggestions for successful age-diverse recruitment.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Aylin Koçak: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; software; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Claudia Rooman:** Investigation; methodology; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Wouter Duyck:** Resources; software; supervision; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Eva Derous:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; supervision; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is financed by the Ghent University Special Research Fund (BOF-UGent) with code BOF24Y2017001201.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Aylin Koçak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1868-9163>

Claudia Rooman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5304-4248>

Wouter Duyck  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2114-6212>

Eva Derous  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7874-5836>

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How to cite this article: Koçak, A., Rooman, C., Duyck, W., & Deros, E. (2022). Mind the ad: How personality requirements affect older and younger job seekers' job attraction. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *95*, 718–737. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12396>