



Enterprise owners' attitudes toward the hiring of older individuals

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ABSTRACT

As in many countries, raising the retirement age in Türkiye, declining retirement incomes, and increasing life expectancy are making it necessary for older individuals to remain in the labor market for longer periods. However, enterprise owners' age-based prejudices in hiring decisions make it difficult for older individuals to participate in the workforce. This study, which draws on the theory of planned behavior, aims to reveal the dynamics that shape the perceptions and attitudes of micro and small enterprise owners regarding the hiring of individuals aged 55 and over—those approaching retirement age or who have reached retirement eligibility. In this study, semi-structured interviews conducted with enterprise owners were examined based on a thematic analysis approach. The findings reveal the diversity of enterprise owners' attitudes toward the inclusion of older individuals in the workforce. More specifically, enterprise owners' assessments of older individuals are based on their perceived abilities, and these assessments are shaped within a context where positive and negative attitudes toward their hiring intersect. The findings demonstrate the perceptions and attitudes that prevent older individuals from participating in the labor market without prejudice, thereby contributing to the development of social and organizational awareness aimed at enabling these individuals to participate more inclusively in working life. A significant portion of studies on age discrimination in the labor market have been examined in the context of large corporations. This study, however, approaches the subject from the perspective of micro and small enterprise owners, offering a unique contribution to the existing literature.

İleri yaştaki bireylerin işe alınmasına yönelik işletme sahiplerinin tutumları

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ÖZ

Birçok ülkede olduğu gibi Türkiye'de de emeklilik yaşının yükseltilmesi, emeklilik gelirlerindeki azalma ve artan yaşam süresi ileri yaştaki bireylerin iş gücü piyasasında daha uzun süre yer almalarını zorunlu hâle getirmektedir. Ancak işletme sahiplerinin yaş temelli önyargılarına dayalı işe alım kararları, ileri yaştaki bireylerin işgücünde

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Yaşlanma, yaşlı bireyler, yaş ayrımcılığı, mikro ve küçük işletme sahiplerinin bakış açısı, nitel araştırma

yer almalarını zorlaştırmaktadır. Planlı davranış kuramından yararlanan bu çalışma, mikro ve küçük ölçekli işletme sahiplerinin, 55 yaş ve üzerindeki bireylerin — emeklilik yaşına yaklaşan ya da emeklilik hakkını kazanmış olanların — işe alımlarına ilişkin algı ve tutumlarını şekillendiren dinamikleri ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışmada, işletme sahipleriyle gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler, tematik analiz yaklaşımı temel alınarak incelenmiştir. Bulgular, işletme sahiplerinin ileri yaştaki bireylerin iş gücünde yer almalarına ilişkin tutumlarının çeşitliliğini göstermektedir. Daha spesifik olarak, işletme sahiplerinin ileri yaştaki bireylere yönelik değerlendirmeleri onların algılanan yeteneklerinde temellenmektedir ve bu değerlendirmeler, bu bireylerin işe alımlarına ilişkin olumlu ve olumsuz tutumların kesiştiği bir kapsam içinde şekillenmektedir. Elde edilen bulgular işletmelerde, ileri yaştaki bireylerin önyargısız biçimde işgücü piyasasında yer almalarının önünde duran algı ve tutumları ortaya koyarak, bu bireylerin çalışma yaşamında daha kapsayıcı bir şekilde yer almalarına yönelik sosyal ve örgütsel farkındalığın gelişmesine katkı sunmaktadır. İşgücü piyasasında yaş ayrımcılığına ilişkin çalışmaların önemli bir bölümü büyük ve kurumsal işletmeler bağlamında incelenmiştir. Bu çalışma ise konuyu mikro ve küçük ölçekli işletme sahiplerinin perspektifinden ele alarak mevcut literatüre özgün bir katkı sunmaktadır.

1. Introduction

The proportion of the ageing population worldwide is increasing substantially in developed and developing countries (Bravo et al., 2022; Mok, Mackenzie and Thomson, 2021). For example, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the labor force participation rate of individuals aged 55-64 was 54.8% in 2000, rising to 60.6% in 2019 (International Labour Organization, 2020). European Union data also predicts that the labor force participation rate for this age group will rise from 59.1% to 69.4% by 2070 (European Commission, 2018). Similarly, the hiring rate of individuals aged 55 to 64 in Türkiye increased from 34.2% in 2022 to 38.6% in 2024 (OECD, 2025). This upward tendency points to a group largely defined in the literature as older workers in the context of working life, primarily encompassing individuals aged 55 and above (Cebola, dos Santos and Dionísio, 2023; Komp-Leukkunen et al., 2022). This age group is considered an important threshold in terms of enterprise owners' perceptions and hiring decisions, as they are approaching retirement age or have already earned their retirement rights (Meng, Sundstrup and Andersen, 2022; Neumark, 2024). The increasingly visible presence of this group in the labor market goes far beyond the emergence of a demographic shift, bringing with it discussions about the institutional and economic sustainability of life in the labor market. In this context, this tendency is gaining momentum due to the restriction of early retirement options to maintain the financial sustainability of social security systems (Gaillard and Desmette, 2008; OECD, 2017) and the combination of declining retirement incomes, rising healthcare expenditures, and increasing life expectancy (Munnell and Sass, 2009). Therefore, the success of national economic policies aimed at sustaining the working lives of older individuals requires the active support of enterprise owners (Kossen and Pedersen, 2008). However, previous studies conducted in the US and Europe reveal that enterprise owners are not developing corporate strategies for older individuals to the extent necessary, and that programs aimed at retaining or retraining them are unsatisfactory (Chiu, Chan, Snape and Redman, 2001; Henkens, 2005; Taylor and Walker, 1998; Van Dalen, Henkens and Schippers, 2010).

Based on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), many enterprise owners and managers view older individuals as lacking in job performance and adaptability, and therefore often include them in the workforce only as a final option (Tikkanen, Lahn, Withnall, Ward and Lyng, 2002). This reluctance

is also reflected in enterprise owners' indifference toward hiring older individuals or investing in their human capital, revealing a lack of confidence in these individuals' abilities (Mulders, Henkens, Liu, Schippers and Wang, 2018; Munnell and Sass, 2009; Van Dalen and Henkens, 2018). Thus, age-related stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes pose a significant barrier to the expectations of older individuals seeking work opportunities or striving to maintain their current positions in today's labor market (European Commission, 2015). Policymakers emphasize the need for changes at the enterprise level in recruitment processes, hiring practices, and working conditions to alleviate the precarious situation of older individuals who struggle to re-enter professional life or face difficulties in their current work life due to stereotypes (OECD, 2006). In this context, it is clear that enterprise owners' perceptions regarding the hiring of older individuals play a decisive role. These perceptions can directly affect their probability of being hired, as well as their chances of advancement in an organization (Taylor and Walker, 1998). Previous studies have examined age-based prejudices and investigated situations where older individuals face discrimination in areas such as hiring, promotion, and dismissal (Axelrad, Luski and Miki, 2013; Earl, Taylor and Cannizzo, 2018; Van Dalen and Henkens, 2018). While there is overall consensus that this type of discrimination constitutes a social problem from a normative and practical perspective (Billett, Dymock, Johnson, and Martin, 2011), less is known about enterprise owners' justifications for these practices (Frøyland and Terjesen, 2020). However, the existing justifications are largely shaped by stereotypes, which means that conflicts related to age-based discrimination are expected to rise in the future.

The fact that discrimination based on stereotypes plays a decisive role in today's labor markets raises the following fundamental research question: What perceptions do enterprise owners have about older individuals, and what are the underlying reasons for these perceptions? The study covers individuals who are approaching retirement age and plan to continue working in the future, as well as individuals who have earned their retirement rights and wish to re-enter the workforce. Furthermore, this study aims to understand the perceptions and attitudes of owners of micro and small enterprises in Türkiye regarding the inclusion of older individuals in the workforce and to reveal the differences in these perceptions. In Türkiye, micro and small enterprises represent 99.7% of all enterprises and 70.5% of hiring as of 2023 (TÜİK, 2024), while globally they account for approximately 90% of all enterprises and 50% of hiring (Melo et al., 2023; Ongbali, Omotehinse, Adams, Salawu and Afolalu, 2024). Despite this, a significant portion of existing studies on age discrimination have mostly been conducted in the context of large enterprises (large corporations) that are more institutionalized and more advanced in terms of human resources policies (see Fasbender and Wang, 2017; Lössbroek, Lancee, van der Lippe and Schippers, 2021; Neumark, 2024; Schellaert, Oostrom and Derous, 2025). Large enterprises (large corporations) can offer relatively more transparent and structured processes for integrating older individuals into the workforce. In contrast, hiring decisions in micro and small enterprises are largely based on the perceptions and attitudes of the enterprise owner. Thus, the approach of enterprise owners in micro and small enterprises toward older individuals has the potential to reflect the most obvious and visible forms of discrimination. As argued by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), individuals' attitudes and perceptions guide their behavioral intentions and actions. In this context, examining micro and small enterprises owners' perceptions of older individuals is important for understanding the psychological mechanisms behind human resource decisions.

This study, grounded in the theory of planned behavior, offers two significant contributions. First, it reveals the perceptions and attitudes of owners of micro and small enterprises in Türkiye regarding the inclusion of individuals aged 55 and over in the workforce. This objective contributes to understanding the main psychological mechanisms (attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control) that shape enterprise owners' intentions to include older individuals in the workforce. Secondly, it is to reexamine the knowledge commonly generated within the literature on age discrimination within the context of large enterprises, within the specific context of micro and small enterprises. Consequently, the aim is to provide new and context-specific findings regarding the conditions under which discriminatory or inclusive tendencies toward older individuals are established in these enterprises, where hiring decisions are often based on the perception of a single enterprise owner. Phenomenological design, a qualitative research methodology, was deemed appropriate for understanding the causality of stereotype-based discrimination in the participation of older individuals in the workforce (Taylor, Loretto, Marshall, Earl and Phillipson, 2016). Thus, thematic analysis was

used with a qualitative approach to generate common themes that could advance future studies. This study includes interviews with enterprise owners operating in Türkiye. Identifying common themes related to older individuals can contribute to the development of practices that will strengthen their hiring periods.

2. Attitudes and hiring decisions toward older individuals

International studies show that enterprise owners hold entrenched and widespread negative perceptions of older individuals (Charni, 2022; North and Fiske, 2015). As a result, older individuals are often last in line for hiring opportunities; their chances of finding work are lower than those of younger unemployed individuals, and they encounter a greater risk of sustained unemployment. A study conducted in Poland revealed that certain skill requirements trigger age stereotypes among enterprise owners. This study found that individuals over the age of 50 are less likely to be hired for jobs requiring computer, physical, creative, social, and teaching skills (Turek and Henkens, 2020). Findings from Europe and North America reveal that enterprise owners are directing their investment preferences toward younger and better-educated individuals rather than older individuals (Brunello and Medio, 2001). Similarly, a study conducted in Australia revealed that despite the positive characteristics possessed by older individuals, enterprise owners largely prefer younger individuals; there is limited interest in hiring individuals over the age of 45, and those over the age of 56 are largely excluded from hiring opportunities (Steinberg, Donald, Najman, and Skerman, 1996). Considering these studies, future research should continue to explore the factors underlying hiring decisions regarding older individuals. The present study investigates enterprise owners' perceptions and attitudes toward the inclusion of older individuals in the workforce and seeks to uncover differences in these perceptions.

According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), behavior (i.e., the hiring decision) is governed by the most immediate determinant, intention (i.e., the intention to hire), which is itself completely shaped by attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control over the behavior. Ajzen's theory of planned behavior is a widely recognized theoretical framework that is consistently used to account for hiring decisions regarding groups subject to discrimination (Nasiru and Dahlan, 2021; Peng and Min, 2020). Attitudes (negative attitudes toward older individuals) have been identified as a significant process influencing the hiring decision process for older individuals (Truxillo, Finkelstein, Pytlovany, and Jenkins, 2015). Attitudes in the hiring setting indicate decision-makers' emotional or cognitive assessment of hiring objectives (e.g., older individuals). For instance, one decision-maker may believe that older individuals are reliable and loyal on the job, while another may believe that older individuals resist change, lack motivation, cling to old skills, are resistant to innovation, and have increasing health problems (Kadefors and Hanse, 2012; Man and Man, 2018; McGregor and Gray, 2001; Ng and Feldman, 2012; O'Loughlin, Kending, Hussain, and Cannon, 2017). Moreover, it is assumed that positive attitudes lead individuals toward certain behaviors, while negative attitudes cause them to refrain from certain behaviors, such as including older individuals in the workforce. For example, recent studies in the literature have found that enterprise owners' positive attitudes toward older individuals are positively related to their intention to hire older individuals, rather than avoiding hiring them (see Meng et al., 2022; Wang and Shi, 2024). However, a study conducted in the Netherlands revealed that enterprise owners associate the increasing average age of the workforce with rising costs and perceive older individuals as resistant to change (Remery, Henkens, Schippers, and Ekamper, 2003). Bittman, Flick, and Rice (2001) point out that older individuals are considered overqualified for lower positions and underqualified for higher positions. Avoiding hiring older individuals can be conceptualized as an intention not to hire older individuals. Meta-analytic findings reveal that negative attitudes predict behavioral outcomes more strongly than positive attitudes (Meisner, 2012).

The existing literature, as proposed by the theory of planned behavior, shows that enterprise owners' perceptions of older individuals play a substantial role in forming their intentions and decisions (Nasiru and Dahlan, 2021; Peng and Min, 2020). However, it is noteworthy that most of the existing findings on this process have been presented in the context of large corporations. Since human resources policies are implemented more systematically in large corporations, hiring decisions are made based on specific procedures. However, in micro and small enterprises, such decisions are largely dependent on the perceptions and attitudes of enterprise owners. Thus, enterprise owner approaches in these organizations have the potential to reflect the most obvious and visible forms of age discrimination.

Therefore, it is important to understand enterprise owners' attitudes in the hiring processes of older individuals, as these attitudes influence hiring decisions and the direction of organizational practices toward older individuals (Loretto and White, 2006).

3. Method

Discrimination is a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by context-sensitive social dynamics and is experienced subjectively by individuals (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004). In this regard, a qualitative research design was used in the study to understand how age-based discrimination manifests itself at the level of perceptions and attitudes in the hiring decisions of micro and small enterprise owners toward individuals aged 55 and over. Focusing on the perceptions and attitudes of participating enterprise owners toward the hiring of older individuals allowed for the uncovering of the implicit meanings contained within age-based discrimination. To this end, a phenomenological design was preferred in the study. Phenomenology offers an effective method for revealing layers of meaning that often remain invisible by focusing deeply on participants' perceptions and attitudes (Creswell, 2013; Rose, Beeby and Parker, 1995). Within this context, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of age discrimination as a situation and context-sensitive phenomenon.

3.1. Participants

In this study, data were collected from micro and small-scale enterprises operating in different sectors in order to increase the diversity of findings and achieve more detailed results. Participants consist of owners of micro and small-scale enterprises operating in the private sector in the city of Bursa, located in Türkiye's Marmara Region. The data collection process is based on a purposive sampling method that prioritizes ensuring deep understanding over achieving representativeness (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg and McKibbin, 2015; Patton, 2002). The reason for selecting micro and small enterprise owners in this study is that decisions regarding human resources in these enterprises are largely based on the personal views and preferences of the owners. Therefore, it was considered that the most meaningful data regarding the hiring processes of older individuals would be obtained from this group. Each participant is an enterprise owner who manages their own enterprise and operates in different sectors such as services, retail, technical services, and information technology. Sub-sectors include consulting, supermarket management, tourism, real estate, architecture, and personal care services. The participants' experience in their respective sectors ranges from 8 to 28 years, and the number of individuals in the enterprises they manage varies from 3 to 22. Detailed information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic information of the participants

N#	Participant Code	Age	Sector - Field of Activity (Number of Employees)	Years in Operation
1	Emre	48	Information and communication technologies - Web and mobile application development (9)	10
2	Ahmet	54	Real estate activities - Real estate services (3)	17
3	Hakan	52	Automotive sub-industry - Machining and metal parts manufacturing (22)	19
4	Serpil	57	Financial and insurance activities - Insurance agency and brokerage services (7)	28
5	Burak	46	Tourism and travel services - Travel agency (4)	10
6	Mehmet	35	Information technologies - Data analysis (5)	9
7	Tayfun	58	Metal processing - Sheet metal processing and component manufacturing (19)	21
8	Serdar	47	Sports and fitness - Fitness center operations (12)	11
9	Ebru	38	Digital design and creative industries - Graphic and branding design (8)	13
10	Erkan	41	Food and beverage services - Coffee and beverage service (5)	9
11	Sibel	33	Beauty and personal care services - Beauty treatments (7)	8

3.2. Data collection tool

Semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions were used; this approach allowed participants to influence the flow and content of the questions, prioritizing their own voices and perspectives, and has been chosen as one of the most suitable tools for in-depth data collection in phenomenological studies (Gill, 2014; Turner, 2010). The development of the interview form involves a comprehensive review of the literature on age-based discrimination, enterprise owners' perceptions, and the hiring processes of individuals aged 55 and over. Open-ended interview questions were developed during this process. Subsequently, in order to determine the suitability of the questions for the purpose of the study, expert opinions were sought from two academics specializing in human resources, as required by qualitative research methods. Following the feedback from the experts, minor conceptual and linguistic adjustments were made, and the semi-structured interview form was revised; upon completion of this process, the form took its final form and was used in the data collection process. This approach aims to ensure that the interview questions are appropriate for the purpose of the study and can be clearly understood by participants. The interview questions are structured to gain an in-depth understanding of enterprise owners' perceptions and attitudes regarding the performance evaluations, internal interactions, and hiring processes of individuals aged 55 and over within their enterprises. The interview questions are structured around four main topics, focusing on understanding how age-based biases and attitudes arise when micro and small enterprise owners hire individuals aged 55 and older: (1) perceptions regarding the performance of older individuals, (2) internal organizational interaction and adaptation dynamics, (3) assessments of age-related difficulties and barriers, and (4) perceived enterprise advantages of having individuals aged 55 and over and the criteria considered in hiring decisions.

3.3. Data collection process

To conduct this study, approval was obtained from the Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University Ethics Committee under Decision No. 2025/221 dated 28.05.2025. To gain access to participants, a sample list was initially created from micro and small-scale enterprises using the Bursa Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BTSO) member list. Since the BTSO member list contained a large number of micro and small-scale enterprises, the existing list was gradually narrowed down to create a sample framework that matched the focus of the study. This narrowing down was carried out using the BTSO's sector classifications and enterprise profile information.

First, enterprises in the service, retail, and technology innovation sectors, where age-based hiring assessments are expected to be more pronounced, were selected; these sectors were considered noteworthy for this study because their fast-paced operation cycles and high labor turnover make owners' age-related assessments more pronounced. In the next stage, enterprises with 1-49 employees where hiring decisions were made directly by the enterprise owner were identified from among these enterprises. In the final stage, in order to achieve sector diversity and increase the likelihood of conducting interviews, 43 enterprise owners were contacted based on accessibility, time suitability, and geographical proximity criteria, selecting from among the enterprises that met these evaluation criteria. This multi-stage restriction process is consistent with the purposeful sampling approach prominent in qualitative research, making it feasible to focus on enterprises that can provide the most information within the scope of the study. Attempts were made to contact 43 enterprise owners who met these evaluation criteria by telephone, and direct access was achieved with only 31 of them. Of those reached, 13 enterprise owners declined to participate in the study or indicated that the timing was not convenient. Of the 18 who agreed to participate, 3 were subsequently excluded from the study because they did not meet the basic requirements of the study (being responsible for hiring decisions and having conducted at least one hiring process in the last six months). As a result, although a total of 15 enterprise owners agreed to participate in the interview process, data saturation was determined to have been reached after the 11th interview, as no new codes emerged and the code patterns repeated. This situation is consistent with the criterion of data saturation used in qualitative research and indicates that data diversity has reached an acceptable level (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Fusch and Ness, 2015; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). For this reason, it was not deemed necessary to include the remaining four potential participants in the interview process.

Prior to the interviews, consent forms were obtained from all participants. These forms detailed the objectives of the study, assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity, and emphasized that participation was voluntary. Furthermore, it was clearly stated that participants had the right to refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with participants between June 10 and September 17, 2025. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted at pre-arranged dates and times at the enterprise owners' own workplaces, in neutral settings where they could express themselves comfortably. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher adopted a reflexive approach, continuously considering the potential effects of their own position (Finlay, 2002). For example, in order not to influence the workplace owners' assessments regarding age during the interviews, the researcher refrained from giving feedback that would reveal her own attitudes (approving gestures, guiding explanations) and proceeded without disrupting the continuity of the participants' narratives. During the interview process, attention was paid to the positive development of mutual trust and understanding between the participants and the researcher. The interviews lasted between 75 and 130 minutes, were digitally recorded, and transcribed in full. Throughout the interview process and transcription phase, the researcher was satisfied that the sincerity revealed in the participants' responses was consistently preserved. This sincerity was evident in the participants' sharing of concrete examples and their in-depth treatment of the subject, thus confirming their strong involvement in the study.

3.4. Reflexivity, researcher positionality, and bracketing procedures

Within the phenomenological approach, bracketing and reflexivity were deliberately applied to minimize the influence of the researcher's assumptions during the data collection process. At the beginning of the process, the researcher noted down their own possible preconceptions regarding age-based discrimination, tendencies that could potentially stem from past academic and personal experiences, and general attitudes in the form of written reflexive notes. These notes were continuously evaluated throughout the interviews, providing a reminder structure that allowed the researcher to refrain from making suggestive comments, facial expressions, approving reactions, or using value-laden statements. During the analysis phase, a second researcher was brought into the process to ensure that interpretations and evaluations were not limited to a single perspective and to minimize researcher influence; coding decisions were continuously self-monitored by comparing them with the reflective notes. This integrated approach aimed to minimize researcher influence during data collection and analysis and to remain as faithful as possible to the original structure of participant experiences, in light of the main requirements of phenomenological research.

3.5. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen to analyze the data obtained in this study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data analysis focused on understanding the essence of participants' experiences within the phenomenological approach, and a repetitive, holistic interaction process with the data was followed. The thematic analysis process was carried out with a careful reflexivity approach to minimize the influence of the researcher's subjective position on data interpretations. Accordingly, the stages of data coding and the creation of sub-themes and the main theme were conducted with the contribution of an academic expert in the field of management and organization. The purpose and scope of the study were clearly shared with the relevant researcher; the thematic analysis process was carried out collaboratively between the author of the study and the other researcher. This approach was adopted to reduce the risk of subjectivity that could arise from the analysis process being based on a limited perspective and to ensure a comprehensive review, particularly in coding.

In the first stage, each researcher carefully and repeatedly read the data independently in order to thoroughly analyze the layers of meaning in the interview transcripts. During the active reading process, the existing literature was regularly consulted to ensure that all dimensions evident in the data were fully evaluated; in this process, an open approach was preferred to phenomena that had not previously emerged and could emerge in the future (Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules, 2017). Using an inductive approach, the initial coding process focused on all data segments that carried meaning related to age-based discrimination against individuals aged 55 and over. This focus ensured that the units of meaning expressing the participants' experiences were identified in a planned and consistent

manner. These units of meaning were structured to reflect the subjective assessments of enterprise owners in age-based hiring processes, which were central to the study within the scope of phenomenological sensitivity, and were evaluated and compared in terms of their relationships with each other. For example, while one researcher coded a participant's statement that "Employees over 55 are taking their time with their work" as "declining performance," the second researcher labeled the same statement with the code "productivity-focused anxiety." This discrepancy was discussed after the relevant narrative was re-examined by both researchers, and it was agreed that both codes referred to the same semantic field, leading to the narrative being coded as "perception of age-related decline in productivity." In this way, consensus was reached on the coding differences through discussion. Thus, the two researchers sought to clarify a convergent approach to coding and interpretation to ensure consistency and accuracy through team meetings.

After completing the coding process, a detailed list of codes was created and clustered according to content similarities. These clusters were then transferred to more abstract conceptual levels and transformed into three sub-themes. In subsequent steps of the analysis process, the relationships and common meaning patterns between these sub-themes were examined, thereby designing a main theme that reveals the holistic structure of participants' experiences of age-based discrimination. Throughout the analysis process, team meetings were held to systematically and consistently consider the consistency of sub-themes with the data, their conceptual boundaries, the degree to which they differ from each other, and their degree of alignment with the data summaries (Patton, 2002). In the final stage, researchers clarified how each sub-theme represented participants' experiences and how these sub-themes aligned with the main theme; they identified definitions reflecting the content of the sub-themes and clarified their conceptual naming (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This integrated analytical approach has transformed participant experiences into a consistent and comprehensive thematic structure by integrating the stages of thematic analysis with phenomenological interpretation principles.

4. Findings

The findings of this study, which analyzed the evaluations of enterprise owners in micro and small-scale enterprises regarding the hiring processes of individuals aged 55 and over, are presented in Table 2. Following the table, the findings are explained with the support of direct quotations from the participants' narratives.

Table 2

Thematic analysis of enterprise owners' attitudes toward hiring older individuals

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes
Multidimensional Attitudes Toward the Hiring of Older Individuals from an Enterprise Owner Perspective	Enterprise Owners' Attitudes Toward Sectoral Dynamics	Concerns about rapid learning and adapting to team dynamics Age-related doubts about adapting to technological change Perception of age-related trust and contribution to customer relationships Experience-based market knowledge and perception of trust
	Positive Attitudes Toward the Contribution Potential of Older Individuals	Professional expertise and perception of responsibility Crisis management/calmness Commitment to work and long-term loyalty Mentoring young employees Maturity in customer communication
	Cautious and Restrictive Attitudes Regarding the Hiring of Older Individuals	Perception of age-related decline in productivity Doubts about learning speed/adaptation to the new system Perceived team cohesion and conflict risk Concerns about keeping up with the pace of work Perceived physical adaptation to the high work pace

Multidimensional attitudes toward the hiring of older individuals from an enterprise owner perspective. Participating enterprise owners' statements regarding the participation of older individuals

in the labor market are grouped around three sub-themes: Enterprise owners' attitudes toward sectoral dynamics (sub-themes 1), positive attitudes toward the contribution potential of older individuals (sub-themes 2) and, cautious and restrictive attitudes regarding the hiring of older individuals (sub-themes 3).

Enterprise owners' attitudes toward sectoral dynamics. The interviews conducted revealed that attitudes toward older individuals, whether positive or negative, vary significantly depending on the nature of the sector. Particularly in sectors requiring advanced technology, participants' negative perceptions regarding recruitment decisions for older individuals are more pronounced compared to other sectors. There is no official data available on the recruitment of older and younger individuals in high-tech sectors in Türkiye. However, according to data from the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), a significant portion of the workforce in the high-tech sector consists of individuals aged 25-39. Between 2014 and 2022, the proportion of individuals aged 40 and over in the high-tech sector fell from 55.9% to 52.1% (EEOC, 2023). This decline indicates that young individuals are becoming increasingly prevalent in the sector and that the workforce structure is shifting toward a younger profile. These data are consistent with the participants' narratives in the study on how age-based recruitment decisions are shaped in the high-tech sector. Indeed, enterprise owners in high-tech sectors who participated in the study assessed that older individuals would not contribute to their enterprises at the expected level:

To be honest, we are used to working with young teams, especially when it comes to data analysis and reporting. This is because the pace of work is very high and adapting to new statistical applications has to be very fast. ... When we consider hiring someone older, we have to take into account whether they will be able to adapt to the dynamics of the team, their learning speed, and sometimes even their own expectations. This, obviously, makes us more cautious in our hiring decisions. (Mehmet, information technologies)

Mehmet's narrative shows how the structural characteristics of the sector influence hiring decisions. In the information technology sector, characterized by rapid change, intense work pace, and constantly evolving data technologies, the key characteristics that enterprise owners look for in employees include learning speed, adaptability to technology, and integration into the team's working rhythm. This emphasis highlights a unidirectional relationship with common stereotypes about older individuals in the literature (e.g., assumptions that learning speed slows with age, adaptation to new technologies decreases, or team cohesion declines; Komp-Leukkunen et al., 2022; Lee, Czaja and Sharit, 2009; Niesel and Nili, 2021). The limited scope of corporate procedures in micro and small enterprises often leads to hiring decisions being based on the subjective assessments of the enterprise owner; this situation also leads to age becoming a decisive screening criterion, even if it is not explicitly stated. As can be understood from the participant's narrative, the emphasis on components such as learning speed, adaptation to team dynamics, and management of expectations shows that age has become a decisive factor in the hiring process, aligned with sectoral requirements.

A similar approach is also evident in sectors that require technical infrastructure, such as IT infrastructure. Enterprise owners operating in these areas have expressed concerns that older applicants may struggle to keep up with rapid technological change:

New technologies are constantly coming out, so the team always has to learn something new. ... Especially when we interview applicants aged 55 and over, most of them have knowledge but are hesitant to learn new systems. This inevitably leads us to younger applicants. (Emre, information and communication technologies)

Emre's narrative highlights how rapid technological transformation in the sector shapes enterprise owners' perceptions of age. It has been found that concerns about the learning speed of older applicants have become decisive in hiring decisions, particularly in jobs where adapting to new systems is crucial. This situation appears consistent with the widespread perception in the literature that older individuals are more resistant to adapting to technology (Chang, Xu and Xie, 2023; Mariano et al., 2022; Zhang, 2023). Therefore, the participant's quote serves as an example showing that sectoral innovation pressure supports age-related performance assumptions and directs enterprise owners toward younger applicants.

Contrary to the narratives of participants in high-tech industries, it is noteworthy that the experience and expertise of older individuals in more traditional jobs are valued more highly (Posthuma, Campion, Masimova, and Campion, 2012). In some cases, conditions that require older individuals to be preferred for certain tasks stem from the nature of the service or the characteristics of the target audience. For example, it has been noted that older individuals are considered more suitable for services that require interaction with older customers or are based on social trust. The professional experience that comes with seniority has been considered an advantage by many participants. Ahmet, who works in real estate services, shared his thoughts on this subject as follows:

Customers want to feel a sense of trust. ... I have built up trust in this neighborhood over the years. In particular, I am aware that our customers greatly value our professional experience ... I am now at a certain age, and frankly, my employees, who are in a similar age group to me, approach customers with a patience that enables them to do this job much better. (Ahmet, real estate activities)

Ahmet's narrative emphasizes that age is not a disadvantage in industries where customer relations are central and demonstrates that trust can be seen as a resource in terms of experience and relationship management. This finding is consistent with studies in the literature showing that older individuals provide higher reliability and customer satisfaction, particularly in service areas requiring experience (Alonso, Nguyen, Vu, Tran and Vu, 2026; Okan, Elmadag and İdemen, 2021; Yu, Köseoglu, Mehraliyev and King, 2021). Thus, this quote provides a meaningful example showing that sectoral dynamics do not always shape age perception in a negative way.

The recognition of older individuals as valuable assets in roles based on experience and trust is also prominent in certain service sectors where customer relations are central:

I've been doing this job for many years. ... You learn the market and customer behavior over time. ... Young people are sometimes good at technical matters but don't know the finer details in the field well enough. ... Trust is very important in our enterprise, and it is earned over time. (Aysel, financial and insurance activities)

Aysel's narrative shows that in trust-based service sectors such as insurance, age is seen as a significant advantage in terms of experience, market knowledge, and relationship management, independent of technical skills. This finding is consistent with studies in the literature showing that older individuals can perform more efficiently and have a stronger impact, particularly in jobs requiring customer trust and organizational memory (Burmeister and Deller, 2016; Vasconcelos, 2018). Therefore, this quote is a meaningful example that reveals how the structure of the industry can be evaluated as an element that increases the value of age.

In conclusion, it is evident that the reasons for positive or negative hiring decisions regarding older individuals interact significantly with the structural characteristics of the sector. The level of technology used (e.g., low or high technology), the competency components required for the job, and the organizational structure of activities are key factors that determine how perceptions of age are shaped. The findings obtained in this study more clearly reflect why significant attitudinal differences are observed across sectors and why age is perceived as an advantage in some contexts and as a limitation in others.

Positive attitudes toward the contribution potential of older individuals. Unlike the sub-theme enterprise owners' attitudes toward sectoral dynamics, this sub-theme reveals enterprise owners' positive assessments of the contribution potential of older individuals rather than age-related restrictions. While some enterprise owners expressed reservations based on the sector's level of technology or the skills required for the job, they emphasized that older individuals with specific expertise add value to the enterprise. In the narratives, the positive qualities of older individuals include their sector-based expertise gained over many years, the knowledge transfer they provide to younger individuals, and the calming approach they demonstrate in times of crisis. Additionally, enterprise owners view the attitudes of older individuals that support work discipline, responsibility awareness, and sustainability within the team structure as elements that strengthen the overall functioning of the enterprise. Thus, this sub-theme reveals that enterprise owners' perceptions of older individuals are not shaped by performance expectations or sectoral requirements, but rather that they consider the potential contribution of

experience and organizational fit as an evaluation criterion. Hakan, an enterprise owner in the automotive sub-industry engaged in machining and metal parts production, expressed his thoughts as follows:

Here (referring to his own enterprise), there are employees from different age groups. ... I think employees of this age (referring to older employees) are truly respected. Especially when young people work with them, they want to benefit as much as possible from their knowledge and experience. ... Generally, people of this age (older employees) who are still doing the same job already have a certain amount of expertise in their field. (Hakan, Automotive sub-industry)

The participant's narrative shows that older individuals can be seen as a resource, especially in jobs that require professional knowledge and experience. This aligns with existing findings in the literature that older individuals can contribute to knowledge transfer, mentoring, and preserving organizational memory (Burmeister and Deller, 2016; Burmeister, Wang and Hirschi, 2020). At the same time, Hakan's narrative indicates that the positive approach does not encompass all older individuals, but is rather attributed to individuals who have attained a certain level of expertise, revealing that experience plays a transformative role in the perception of age.

Some of the enterprise owners who participated in the interviews stated that they were satisfied with older individuals because they were less likely to leave their jobs, provided continuity in the workplace, and placed greater importance on job responsibilities. Enterprise owners who pointed out that high staff turnover increased operating costs considered the continuity provided by older individuals to be an advantage. Considering these assessments, it becomes clear that age-based prejudices are not entirely valid; on the contrary, in some cases, older individuals are evaluated by enterprise owners in conjunction with positive characteristics such as reliability and loyalty. Tayfun, the owner of a metals processing company, said the following:

Obviously, loyalty is hard to come by these days. ... Younger employees generally expect a promotion within a year or two, and when that doesn't happen, they can quickly move on to other jobs. You invest in them (young employees), but most of the time, you don't get a return on that investment in the long run. ... Older employees, on the other hand, tend to be more stable because they know it may be harder for them to find a new job. Therefore, you have a better chance of establishing a long-term working relationship with them (older employees). (Tayfun, Metal processing)

Tayfun's narrative reflects how age is associated with perceptions of continuity and loyalty. Younger employees' tendency to change jobs more frequently, and older employees' association with lower employee turnover rates due to the importance they place on job security, is supported by empirical evidence in the literature (Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2008; Bellotti et al., 2022). This narrative shows that older employees' stable hiring behavior can be seen as an advantage for enterprise owners in terms of long-term human resource investment.

Burak, who operates in the tourism and travel services sector, explained the contributions of older employees to the enterprise in terms of customer relations and team dynamics as follows:

Although there are employees of different ages in this office, I need to have experienced older employees in my team. ... Older employees who have gained years of experience in this sector can find solutions without panicking in times of crisis. ... Young colleagues are good too, but sometimes they can be impatient or take offense at what customers say. ... An experienced person sets an example for young people and also softens the atmosphere. (Burak, Tourism and travel services)

Burak's narrative demonstrates that older employees contribute particularly in areas such as crisis management, balancing team dynamics, and customer relations. This situation parallels existing research findings in the literature that experienced employees are stronger than younger employees in terms of emotion regulation, conflict management, and social skills (Davis, Kraus, Capobianco, 2009; Johnson, Machowski, Holdsworth, Kern and Zapf, 2017; Scheibe and Moghimi, 2021). Burak's quote shows that experience can be considered a component that strengthens team interactions and keeps work processes going.

As a result, some of the enterprise owners included in the study stated that older employees made significant contributions to the enterprise in terms of experience, continuity, and relationship management. These positive assessments demonstrate that age is not considered a limitation on performance and can also be a factor that creates value depending on the nature of the job. Therefore, positive attitudes toward the contribution potential of older individuals provide a framework for understanding the different evaluation criteria discussed in the next sub-theme.

Cautious and restrictive attitudes regarding the hiring of older individuals. Unlike the previous two sub-themes, this sub-theme goes beyond the diversity created by the positive contributions of older individuals or sectoral circumstances, revealing enterprise owners' more cautious and restrictive assessments. While the sub-theme enterprise owners' attitudes toward sectoral dynamics examines how attitudes toward age are shaped within the framework of the sector's technological level and the structural requirements of the job, the sub-theme positive attitudes toward the contribution potential of older individuals finds that, under certain circumstances, older individuals create value in terms of their experience and organizational continuity. The sub-theme of cautious and restrictive attitudes regarding the hiring of older individuals, on the other hand, concretizes enterprise owners' perceptions that older individuals may struggle to adapt to demands for innovation, speed, and high adaptability, particularly in sectors characterized by these traits. Participants pointed out that the young customer profile, fast pace, and need to respond quickly to changing trends limit the suitability of older individuals; in this context, they stated that older applicants have a narrower acceptance range in the hiring process. Serdar, who works in the sports and fitness sector, explained that the competitive, trend-focused, and rapidly changing nature of this sector is reflected in the employee profile with the following words:

Most studios in our industry want to create a young profile. In fact, in some places, this is almost an unwritten rule. ... When you suggest someone older, you might get comments like, "This will lower the energy of our team." ... The general atmosphere of this studio promotes employees who appear young and more dynamic. ... Everything changes very quickly in this industry; today, Pilates is trending, tomorrow CrossFit takes center stage, the next day spinning becomes popular. So in such a fast-changing environment, it's unlikely that older employees will be able to keep up. (Serdar, Sports and fitness)

Serdar's narrative demonstrates that in work environments where youth, dynamism, and high energy are considered fundamental elements shaping the sector's identity, older employees are viewed as having a profile that only partially aligns with these expectations. Expectations regarding the employee profile in such sectors go beyond technical competence and also include socio-cultural criteria such as a certain appearance, energy level, and adaptability to the work rhythm. This finding is consistent with evidence suggesting that stereotypes associated with age, such as low dynamism and slower adaptation speed, are particularly pronounced in sectors where trends change rapidly (Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Van Dalen, Henkens and Schippers, 2010). In particular, the sector's unwritten norms, the assumption of natural adaptability attributed to younger employees, and aesthetic preferences can limit older applicants perceived suitability, leading to exclusionary outcomes in the hiring process.

Negative assessments regarding the hiring process for older individuals in the beauty and personal care services sector are consistent with the previous narrative. Due to the sector's constantly evolving practices and fashion trends, older individuals have stated that their relationships with younger individuals sometimes lead to conflicts. Sibel explained her assessment of older individuals as follows:

For example, there was an older person working with us not long ago. ... She had a lot of experience because she entered the industry at a very young age, but she tried to do things the traditional way she knew, despite the constantly changing trends in this industry. ... She wasn't open enough to current practices. Additionally, she often behaved in a way that made her feel like she knew more than the younger colleagues here (referring to her own enterprise). This led to minor conflicts. (Sibel, Beauty and personal care services)

The participant's narrative shows how enterprise owners perceive that older individuals may struggle to adapt to rapidly changing industry practices despite their experience. Adherence to traditional work approaches and limited openness to current practices parallel the adaptation difficulties associated with age in the literature (Niessen, Swarowsky and Leiz, 2010; Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Von

Humboldt et al., 2023). In addition, this finding explains why enterprise owners may be more cautious when hiring older individuals, as the emphasis on experience-based authority can create tension in interactions with younger individuals.

Similar attitudes toward older individuals have also been observed in the food and beverage services sector. In this sector, it has been noted that employees are expected to demonstrate significant adaptability and flexibility due to the constantly changing pace of work and customer expectations. In this regard, Erkan, who is the enterprise owner of a company operating in this sector, expressed his attitude toward older individuals as follows:

This place (referring to his own cafe) is a popular spot among young people. ... We work late into the evening, especially since customer traffic is heavy in the evening hours and there's always a lot of activity inside. ... I particularly prefer young people because they expect fast service, energetic staff, and a dynamic environment. ... It's physically difficult for older employees to keep up with this pace. (Erkan, Food and beverage services)

Erkan's narrative shows how the young customer profile and fast-paced working conditions limit enterprise owners' perceptions of age-related suitability. This approach, in which young employees are considered more advantageous in dynamic, fast-paced, and physically demanding jobs, parallels findings in the literature that older employees are perceived as disadvantaged in roles requiring physical endurance and speed (Kenny, Groeller, McGinn and Flouris, 2016; Van Dalen et al., 2010). Therefore, the participant's narrative is an important example that explains how cautious and restrictive attitudes toward hiring older individuals emerge in service-intensive enterprises.

Overall, the sub-theme cautious and restrictive attitudes regarding the hiring of older individuals highlights that enterprise owners assess the suitability of older individuals as limited due to dynamics such as fast pace, changing trends, physical requirements, and a young customer base. These findings show that age-related stereotypes are particularly visible in sectors with a high rate of change and shape hiring decisions within a cautious framework. Thus, despite positive assessments of the contribution potential of older individuals, a comprehensive picture emerges of restrictive attitudes persisting in hiring decisions in certain sectors.

5. Discussion

This study aims to reveal the dynamics that shape enterprise owners' perceptions and attitudes regarding the hiring of individuals aged 55 and over. The findings indicate that there is diversity in enterprise owners' approaches to the ageing workforce. Data obtained through thematic analysis shows that attitudes toward the hiring of older individuals fall into three themes: Enterprise owners' attitudes toward sectoral dynamics, positive attitudes toward the contribution potential of older individuals, cautious and restrictive attitudes regarding the hiring of older individuals. The findings demonstrate that attitudes toward older individuals vary across industrial sectors.

Enterprise owners actively involved in technology-focused sectors tend to find the performance of older employees insufficient in work environments that require rapid adaptation, high tempo, and constant innovation. These enterprise owners generally base their measured approach toward older individuals on reasons such as the speed at which they learn new technologies, openness to technological innovation, and team cohesion; these reasons often coincide with age-based cognitive stereotypes. According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), enterprise owners' decisions to hire older individuals go beyond rational assessments of labor needs and are also influenced by attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control. When evaluated within this scope, the controlled attitudes of enterprise owners in technology-intensive sectors toward older individuals can be explained primarily by the dimension of "perceived behavioral control." In particular, hesitations regarding the speed of learning new technologies and adaptation to technology limit these control perceptions of enterprise owners and thus reduce the strength of their hiring intentions. Tams and Dulipovici's (2024) findings also support this situation: in digitally intensive enterprises such as information technology, older individuals' participation in the use of innovative technologies is often limited due to low perceptions of creative IT self-efficacy.

On the other hand, in sectors where customer relations play a key role and experience is directly linked to the enterprise's image, older individuals are seen as a meaningful and important resource in terms of knowledge accumulation, organizational memory, and continuity in trust relationships. This finding is consistent with the attitude toward the behavior and subjective norm dimensions of the theory of planned behavior. Enterprise owners attribute positive value to the experience of older individuals within the framework of environmental expectations (such as customer satisfaction and corporate trust), which leads to age being perceived not as a limiting factor, but rather as an element that affects the nature of the job. In this context, previous studies have also shown that the experience-based contributions of older individuals are considered important, particularly in the service sector, in terms of corporate trust and continuity. (Vasconcelos, 2018; Wilckens, Wöhrmann, Adams, Deller and Finkelstein, 2019). In this regard, the findings also demonstrate structural factors rooted in the expectations of the sector, professional requirements, and the nature of customer relations.

This study reveals that some enterprise owners have positive assessments of the contributions older individuals make to their enterprises. Participants indicated that the knowledge base, work discipline, and customer relations experience possessed by older individuals provide significant advantages, particularly in service-oriented sectors. These findings can be directly explained in relation to the “attitude toward the behavior” dimension of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to this theory, individuals' intentions to engage in a specific behavior (e.g., hiring older individuals) are shaped by their overall evaluations of that behavior. Thus, these positive evaluations of older individuals adding value to the enterprise can be seen as an indication of positive attitudes that reinforce enterprise owners' hiring intentions. These positive attitudes overcome individual prejudices while also causing the creation of flexible practices at the organizational level aimed at retaining older individuals. This situation is also consistent with the “perceived behavioral control” dimension of planned behavior theory. The positive characteristics of older individuals, such as experience, reliability, and knowledge sharing, facilitate the hiring and task allocation processes for enterprise owners. For example, the report *The Ageing of the Manufacturing Workforce: Challenges and Best Practices* (The Manufacturing Institute, 2020) shows that many enterprise owners find the knowledge base of older individuals valuable and meaningful and have developed mentoring programs to retain these older individuals as much as possible. Similarly, the literature also indicates that the experiential contributions of older individuals have a positive impact on organizational performance, particularly in the service and manufacturing sectors. For example, Van Dalen, Henkens, and Schippers (2010) found that the characteristics of older individuals, such as reliability, loyalty, and sense of duty, are particularly valued in roles requiring customer relations and social skills. Wilckens and colleagues (2019) emphasize that positive practices for older individuals are not limited to individual contributions and create strategic benefits in terms of organizational knowledge management, mentoring, and long-term workforce planning. Furthermore, the Eurofound (2010) report, which focuses on the manufacturing sector, states that the experience and expertise possessed by older individuals are of considerable importance to enterprises; hence, many enterprises tend to actively retain older individuals within their workforce. Sliter, Chen, Withrow and Sliter (2013) found that older individuals' high levels of emotional intelligence make it easier for them to prefer emotional labor strategies, particularly in the service sector. These findings are shaped by positive attitudes, as predicted by the theory of planned behavior, in conjunction with individual assessments and environmental norms. Hence, hiring intentions regarding older individuals are grounded in a comprehensive attitude structure influenced by personal value attributions and the organization's strategic interests.

Within the framework of this study, it was identified that some enterprise owners adopt a cautious and restrictive approach in their hiring decisions regarding older individuals. This finding appears to be related to the “subjective norm” dimension proposed by the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). According to this theory, individuals' intentions to engage in a particular behavior are based not so much on personal attitudes as on the expectations of the social environment (subjective norms) and perceptions of the other party's practical competence (perceived behavioral control). When evaluated within this scope, enterprise owners' cautious attitudes toward older individuals are influenced by age-based stereotypes existing at the societal level and perceptions regarding the management of older individuals' job performance. Negative attitudes are often justified by stereotypes that older individuals are resistant to change, closed to training processes, tired, or costly (Maurer, Yoh, Carden,

and Carr, 2023). Such assessments become more noticeable and palpable in situations where they involve indirect age-related exclusion in some enterprises (National Academies of Sciences, 2022). Moreover, this situation reveals that subjective norms guide the behavior of enterprise owners: As age-related negative norms are adopted within the enterprise or sector, individual attitudes are also shaped in line with these judgments. In this context, enterprise owners' perception of hiring older individuals as difficult or risky may similarly stem from perceptual limitations. Findings in the literature indicating that older individuals contribute to experience, organizational memory, and organizational commitment (Howe, 2022; Svensson and Nilsson, 2017) suggest that they hold significant potential for transforming these prejudices and perceptual limitations. Thus, the findings of this study reveal that enterprise owners' cautious and restrictive attitudes are fueled by perceptual and normative environments that go beyond rational assessments of older individuals. This situation demonstrates that perceptual and cultural barriers must also be transformed in order to develop equitable policies in the hiring processes of older individuals.

The findings obtained within the scope of this study reveal that the perceptions of micro and small enterprise owners toward older workers are shaped around certain stereotypes and expectations. This situation highlights a broader debate conceptualized in the literature as the “perceptual gap.” The perceptual gap indicates that there may be a potential mismatch between employers' assessments of older workers and older workers' self-assessments of their own competencies, motivation, and willingness to work (Choi, 2019; Van Dalen et al., 2010). This study focused on the perceptions of enterprise owners and therefore did not directly address the perspectives of older employees. However, previous studies reveal that employers mostly perceive older workers as disadvantaged in terms of technological adaptation, flexibility, and productivity, while older workers see themselves as a fundamental resource in terms of experience, reliability, and knowledge transfer (Chou and Choi, 2011; Man and Man, 2018; Meisner, 2012; Ng and Feldman, 2012; Van Dalen et al., 2010). Therefore, the current findings in this study reveal the perceptions of enterprise owners in the context of micro and small enterprises and open up a discussion on the existence of a possible perceptual gap for future studies.

6. Practical implications

The findings from this study reveal different dimensions of enterprise owner perceptions and attitudes toward hiring older individuals and suggest various implications for practice. First, enterprise owners' attitudes toward sectoral dynamics demonstrate that the hiring of older individuals is considered in a contextual manner. In labor-intensive sectors, experience is considered an added value, while in technology-intensive sectors, expectations regarding adaptability and learning speed come to the fore. Considering this, it is clear that policymakers and professional organizations need to develop sector-specific strategies (Nagarajan and Sixsmith, 2023; Walwei and Deller, 2021). To be more specific, support programs aimed at improving the digital skills of older individuals in technology-intensive sectors can reduce enterprise owners' concerns and hesitations, thus increasing opportunities for re-hiring (Chang et al., 2023). Given the importance of training, it seems particularly important for companies to focus on designing and delivering training related to the use of new technologies. If new technologies are introduced in an engaging way and are perceived as meaningful by older individuals, these individuals can adapt more easily to their professional roles and contribute to improving work quality.

Another point is that some enterprise owners' positive attitudes toward the contribution potential of older individuals have been reflected in bringing positive benefits to enterprises. Interviews reveal that older individuals stand out for their knowledge-based experience, commitment to work, composure in times of crisis, and ability to mentor younger individuals. In particular, forming intergenerational teams can positively influence different generations to work in harmony and to share information with each other. Enterprises need to generate the time and space necessary for age cohorts to collaborate and to think about and work on how to leverage each other's capabilities and variations (Graystone, 2019). Hence, enterprise owners' effective inclusion of older individuals in the workforce will enhance the economic and psychosocial well-being of older individuals. Additionally, it will support advancing organizational learning, improve team cohesion, and preserve organizational memory (Burmeister et al., 2020; Rui and Ju, 2022; Rupčić, 2018). Enterprise owners play a considerable role in this respect, and

as Marcus and Fritzsche (2016) argue, enterprise owners must foster an organizational collectivist culture and climate that fosters reciprocal understanding, collaboration, sharing, and regard.

In addition, the findings also show that cautious and restrictive attitudes toward hiring older individuals persist today (Baert, Norga, Thuy, and Van Hecke, 2016; Batinovic, Howe, Sinclair, and Carlsson, 2023). In micro and small enterprises, enterprise owners' individual biases influence hiring decisions. In light of this, it is considered crucial to communicate the added value that older individuals bring to enterprises to enterprise owners through high-level awareness-raising training organized by public institutions, professional associations, and civil society organizations. At the same time, increasing the visibility of successful older individuals' experiences through the media, sectoral events, and best practice examples can reduce biases and encourage positive role models (Kroon, Trilling, Van Selm, and Vliegthart, 2019; Loos and Ivan, 2018). In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that enterprise owners' perceptions and attitudes toward older individuals are not one-dimensional, but are shaped by the interaction of sector structure, perceived gains, and biases. Moreover, these findings provide guidance to enterprise owners and policymakers in developing practices that will enable them to benefit more effectively and efficiently from the potential of older individuals.

7. Limitation

This study has several limitations. First, the research data is based on interviews with owners of micro and small enterprises. In such enterprises, the fact that hiring decisions are mostly made directly by the enterprise owner may have increased the impact of personal experiences on perceptions and attitudes. Thus, the findings obtained may more clearly reflect the aspects of perceptions toward older individuals that are shaped within the framework of individual decision-making processes. The study only took into account the narratives of enterprise owners. Since the perspectives of other actors (such as other individuals involved in human resources processes) were not included, the findings may not fully capture the multidimensional nature of the issue. Future studies collecting data from various stakeholder groups (other individuals within the enterprise) could contribute to developing a more comprehensive understanding of the hiring of older individuals. The fact that only interview data were used in this study may have limited the exploration of the phenomenon from different perspectives. In future studies, the combined use of different data collection methods (e.g., observation, document review, or visual materials) may contribute to a multidimensional understanding of perceptions and attitudes toward older individuals.

Author statement

Research and publication ethics statement

This study has been prepared in accordance with the ethical principles of scientific research and publication.

Approval of the ethics board

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University Ethics Committee (Decision No. 2025/221, dated 28 May 2025).

Originality statement

This manuscript is an original work and has not been derived from, nor is it a continuation of, any previously published or ongoing study.

Author contribution

This study has one author.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest arising from the study for the authors or third parties.

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