

Abstract

Introduction: Facing the digital age, it is elementary to involve older adults actively in digitalisation. This was the subject of the KommmiT project, which offered older adults training in digital skills. Subsequently, they trained on a voluntary basis with a peer-to-peer-approach technology-inexperienced older adults. Since digital training and volunteer work contribute to a higher sense of well-being and increased cognitive abilities, which in turn can influence subjective age, the present study investigates whether digital training in older adults with subsequent volunteering has a positive effect on subjective age.

Method: Subjective age was assessed in a written survey using two instruments. The first was a single-item question, the second was the Awareness of Age-Related Change (AARC) 10-SF questionnaire, based on the eponymous concept by Diehl and Wahl, differentiated into gain- and loss-based changes in the perception of ageing. After a descriptive analysis, a multilevel analysis was conducted over three measurement points, each 70 days apart, taking into account the covariates age, sex and voluntary time investment.

Results: A total of 135 older adults participated in at least one measurement point. Descriptively, the two AARC dimensions improved at T2, while they worsened at T3. Subjective age indicated a higher value at T2 (mean = -0.13; SD = 0.10) and T3 (mean = -0.11; SD = 0.10). The multilevel models showed a slight significant deterioration in AARC losses and subjective age, while the gain-based awareness could not detect a significant effect. Also, the covariates age, sex and time investment were not significant.

Discussion: The significant slight deterioration of loss-based awareness towards age related change and subjective age indicates that the digital training and the subsequent volunteer work result in negative changes, which does not confirm the hypothesis. Potential age stereotypes could play a role here, that are closely linked to the AARC and can be provoked by the interaction with digital devices.

Summary and implications: The present study shows that contrary to expectations, the intervention was not accompanied by an improvement in subjective age, but the results reveal a negative trend and hint that digital training followed by voluntary, so technology-associated activity could be a potential risk factor for subjective age. It is important to expand the studies in this area and to conduct further research on the age-related changes that result from digital training and volunteering.