

TECHNOLOGY FOR OLDER ADULTS: INTERACTION INSTEAD OF SENSORS

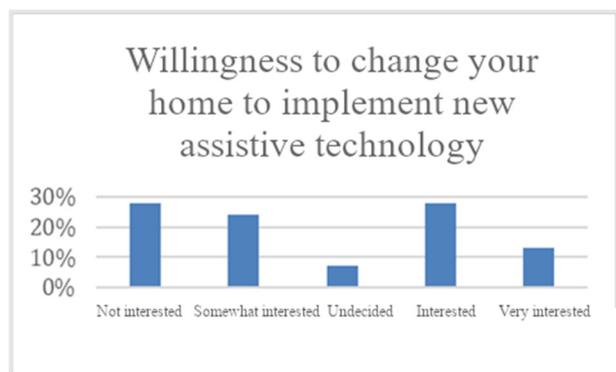
IN BRIEF

- Older adults interviewed in Vienna have a strong desire to spend their lives in their own homes, even in case of potential health issues.
- Older adults we asked associate living at home with autonomy, privacy, and dignity; this represents an important part of the perceived quality of life.
- To provide adequate support for aging people at home, technical aids as well as a good care infrastructure are needed.
- But under what conditions are technical aids considered useful by older people and what influence do technical aids have on their users' quality of life?

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Since 2008, assistive technology has been systematically promoted within the framework of European research. The main aim is to enable older people over the age of 60 to live autonomously in their homes for longer and to significantly increase their quality of life by providing support in the most important areas of daily life, e.g. mobility, health, and social integration. What is required for technical aids to be accepted by older adults? Numerous studies have shown that ease of use and handling are important. However, it is important to be sensitive to peoples' "perceived age" and to avoid relating assistive devices to helplessness.

Although the life phase of getting older includes just as much diversity as all other stages of life, it is not perceived as such by many and often prone to simplifications. Consequently, assistive technology is usually not considered desirable because it is associated with a predominantly negative concept of "being old". If growing older is characterised by deficits, this may then lead to a reluctance in dealing with the emerging changes connected to this stage of life. This represents a significant obstacle to the successful use of products specifically designed to help older people. Yet, because they appeal to an older target audience, they are rejected



Four out of 10 people questioned would alter their familiar environments for an adequate technological system.

by the very same audience.

Over 40% of the people questioned would alter their living environment to implement appropriate assistive technology (e.g. aids for everyday life or sensors designed to detect irregularities in daily routines). However, to achieve successful implementation of technology in households, the various connections between life circumstances and social environment, experiences with ageing, and technology use must be considered.

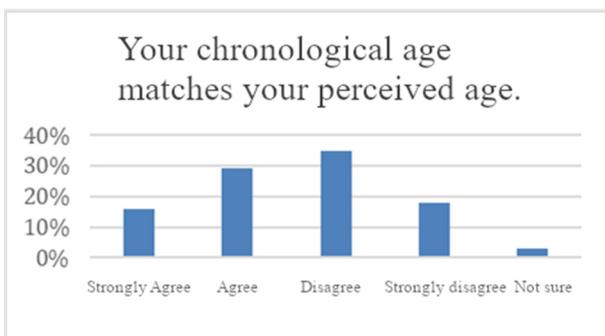
KEY DATA

Project title: Quality of Life in Vienna
Project team: Bechtold, U., Stauder, N., Seifert, M.
Duration: 05/2018 – 07/2019
Supported by: City of Vienna

KEY RESULTS

We questioned 245 Viennese citizens who (in 2018/19) were older than 65 and lived independently in their own homes. The majority of respondents rated their quality of life as good, 15% rated it as average, with only two per cent reporting poor quality of life. We found that neither actual age nor income had a significant influence on the perceived quality of life. This highlights the importance of perceived age compared with chronological age. However, the former fluctuates significantly for 55% of respondents: on some days they feel older, on others much younger.

The results also show that technology use does not, as might be expected, automatically lead to a higher quality of life. Instead, it is the other way round: a stable social environment and good quality of life are predictive prerequisites for people's interest in technical aids. Living together with other people turned out to be the strongest factor in predicting high quality of life and an interest in technology use.



The chronological age differs from perceived age for 53% of the respondents.

Almost all respondents believe that assistive technology can, in general, lead to an increase in quality of life. Nevertheless, changes to a familiar environment for the sake of installing a helpful technical system is also viewed with scepticism (Fig. p.1). The degree of willingness to integrate a specialised system into their life is predominantly related to the hope of living in their own homes for longer and being able to postpone moving to care or nursing institutions.

Despite this optimism and a generally positive attitude towards technical aids in theory, acceptance of technical solutions in practice is often still lower than assumed by policymakers or the health industry. People often perceive aids marketed as being convenient or beneficial to them as a form of forced gratification, fearing that they are being patronised by technology.

WHAT TO DO?

We found that older people's quality of life depends on the vibrancy of people's social environment and the level of education. Another significant contributing factor was the existence of a life partner. As a result, when developing assistive technology, it is important to focus on human needs and real-life relationships.

- An existing social environment promotes interest in technology use and good quality of life (and not the other way round) – the scientific and political agenda should therefore clearly aim at improving quality of life. Investment in social relationships and human contact should be closely linked to investment in technology.
- Technology should not replace human contact in any care setting or institution, but be supportive and complementary.
- Ageing is a complex process and older people often do not see themselves as “old”. As a result, technical aids specifically marketed for older people do not appeal to them. A rethink in conceptualising and marketing assistive technology is therefore needed.
- Deconstructing deeply rooted taboos associated with ageing and prevalent in language, the economy, and the public sphere is necessary. Generalisations about the group of “older people” should be avoided; instead, individuality and sometimes contradictory traits should be consciously acknowledged.
- Further research regarding this multiplicity and the use of assistive technology adapted to and impacting people's everyday lives is needed.

FURTHER READING

Peine A. et al. (ed.) *Socio-gerontechnology: Interdisciplinary Critical Studies of Ageing and Technology*. Routledge, Oxon and New York. 2021. [routledge.com/Socio-gerontechnology-Interdisciplinary-Critical-Studies-of-Ageing-and/Peine-Marshall-Martin-Neven/book/9780367230821](https://www.routledge.com/Socio-gerontechnology-Interdisciplinary-Critical-Studies-of-Ageing-and/Peine-Marshall-Martin-Neven/book/9780367230821)

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