Understanding the feeling of being overwhelmed by the internet: The role of digital literacy among older adults

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Purpose The digital transformation creates new opportunities for older adults to improve their well-being. In particular, this includes the opportunity to stay in the home environment for longer, e.g. through ambient assisted living, as well as digital health applications and telemedicine for better health management. In order to be able to use these services successfully, digital literacy is required. It is a multifactorial concept that integrates various areas of competence. However, older adults have lower digital literacy compared to society as a whole (Stürz et al., 2022). Digital technologies can also cause a feeling of being overwhelmed. This results above all from the wealth of information on the internet, which is perceived as challenging when it comes to health issues, for example, and became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ware et al., 2017). However, the user can also be overwhelmed during the learning process itself due to the wide range of possible applications (Borghouts et al., 2022). As a consequence, this can lead to knowledge of digital technologies not being expanded (Finkelstein et al., 2023). Previous studies have barely addressed the association between digital literacy and the feeling of being overwhelmed. This study therefore examines which specific areas of digital literacy, based on the DigComp 2.1 competence model, are required in order to avoid feeling overwhelmed by the internet. **Method** A representative cross-sectional survey of 3,782 German adults aged 65 and over (average age = 74.18 ± 6.10; 56.2% female) was conducted between August and September 2021 by the Bavarian Research Institute for Digital Transformation. **Results and Discussion** Using a logistic regression model adjusted for age, gender, education, and income, we found that the dependent variable feeling overwhelmed was significantly positively associated with the competence areas of information and data literacy (OR=1.20, CI 1.06-1.35), safety (OR=1.36, CI 1.18-1.56) and problem-solving (OR=1.70, CI 1.50-1.94). Older adults with higher education were more likely to feel overwhelmed (OR=0.64, CI 0.40-0.85). There was no significant association between this feeling and the ability to communicate, collaborate, and produce creative content on their own. The results suggest that there are specific areas of digital literacy that are linked to the absent feeling of being overwhelmed when using the Internet. A limitation is the use of a single item to measure the feeling of being overwhelmed, which does not allow for a differentiated analysis. As existing studies have identified overwhelming feelings as a barrier to Internet use, the results can broaden the debate on reducing this barrier by including individual competencies. Educational programs relating to digital technologies should therefore focus on these competencies in order to counteract the feeling of being overwhelmed and to enable and motivate people to acquire in-depth knowledge of digital services. Similarly, developers of digital technologies are called upon to integrate intuitive and comprehensible options into their products that make them safer and empower older adults to solve problems independently. This allows older adults to participate in and benefit from the digital transformation.

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