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Co-developing an educational platform against ageism with older adults: A use case from Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Despite urgent calls for action to counter ageism, research-based initiatives in Switzerland are still scarce. To close this gap, the authors of this paper are building an interventional online platform aimed at (1) raising awareness and providing educational materials about ageism, (2) collecting real-life experiences from older citizens, and (3) fostering a community to combat ageism, leveraging the advantages of scalability and accessibility of digital solutions. This research note reports on a co-development process with a sounding board of seven retired adults (M_{age} = 69.71; four women), highlighting needs and concerns with regard to each of the online platform's aims. Across June–October 2024, four focus group meetings and an online survey was conducted. Qualitative framework analysis identified major needs and concerns for the platform's aims: For aim (1), empowerment of older adults and linking educational resources to actionable guidelines was highlighted. Moreover, avoidance of victimization was identified as a major need. For aim (2), needs for sharing ageism experiences, such as anonymous reporting, were brought up. Difficulty of recognizing ageism in everyday life was found to be a key concern. For aim (3), the need for various online and offline interaction opportunities and active involvement in working toward educational and social objectives, including fostering intergenerational exchanges was stressed. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating older adults' perspectives to address needs and concerns in developing digital intervention approaches combating ageism. We discuss raised issues regarding implications for real-life data collection and educational initiatives.

Introduction

Ageism encompasses stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination based on an individual's age, predominantly affecting older adults (Iversen et al., 2009). It can be examined 'subjectively', as an individual's perception of age-related biases or disadvantages, or 'objectively', through observable instances, for example violations of laws and policies (Voss et al., 2018). Ageism has detrimental effects on physical, psychological, and social health, contributing to premature mortality (Levy et al., 2002) and decreased life quality. Further, ageism has negative effects on societies and economies, such as increased healthcare costs (Chang et al., 2020). Despite the World Health Organization's urgent call for action to combat ageism, Switzerland has yet to establish a research-driven and structured national initiative to counteract ageism. While 19.3% of Switzerland's population is aged 65 and older, the prevalence of age discrimination in Switzerland can only be roughly estimated, as there is no comprehensive monitoring or specialized office (Federal Statistical Office of Switzerland, 2023a).

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Several research studies have demonstrated the negative impact of ageism across societal domains. For instance, one-third of older Swiss adults report age-based discrimination in healthcare (Rehbert & Moser, 2012), perceiving that age-related factors affect the quality of healthcare (Castelli Dransart et al., 2022). Research further highlights disadvantages regarding access to digital technology, and lower likelihood of being employed (Oesch, 2019; Repetti & Fellay-Favre, 2024).

The WHO proposes three strategies to tackle ageism: (1) policy and legislations; (2) education to enhance empathy and provide accurate information about older age; and (3) intergenerational contact to reduce intergroup stereotypes (WHO, 2021). Educational and intergenerational contact interventions (e.g., workshops, e-learning modules, and joint activities), or their combination, have been found to be effective in counteracting ageism (for reviews, see Apriceno & Levy, 2023; Burnes et al., 2019). The WHO thus calls for scaling up interventions, investing in research on ageism, and fostering community movements to reshape aging narratives (WHO, 2021). With increasing digitalization, online platforms build the foundation of new virtual public spheres (Dokhanchi et al., 2019). In 2023, 98% of the Swiss population aged 16–74 used the Internet at least once a week (Federal Statistical Office of Switzerland, 2023b). Thus, online platforms may offer efficient and cost-effective ways to combat ageism through accessible education (Sobral & Sobral, 2021; Zeng & Chen, 2020) or novel options for monitoring real-life experiences by reaching a wide range of people (Rafaeli et al., 2019). Furthermore, online platforms enable large-scale engagement and dialogue beyond specialized approaches such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs; Dokhanchi et al., 2019). Several countries worldwide, such as Australia and the UK, have already implemented anti-ageism online platforms offering various activities and educational resources (e.g., Age Without Limits, n.d; EveryAGE Counts, n.d.).

Key to designing a platform to combat ageism is engaging its users, particularly older adults, as 'co-developers', i.e., active participants who contribute their perspectives, ideas, feedback, and experiences throughout a participatory design process. Co-development promises to identify preferences and overcome barriers, resulting in more robust and sustainable digital solutions (Duque et al., 2019; Mannheim et al., 2023).

The current study

To bridge the existing gap in Switzerland regarding national intervention and data collection initiatives to combat and understand ageism, the authors of this paper are building an interventional online platform with the aim to (1) raise awareness and provide educational materials, (2) collect real-life experiences from older citizens, and (3) foster a community. The platform, envisioned as a multi-section website (e.g., including e-learnings, surveys, and community forums), is planned to be launched in the Spring of 2025. A sounding board of older individuals was formed to be involved as active 'co-developers' throughout the development process. Comparable research highlights the benefits of participatory approaches with advisory groups, enriching ageism intervention designs and fostering a sense of impact among participants (Dahlke et al., 2024).

The current paper aims to highlight the needs and concerns of older individuals involved in the co-development of the interventional online platform on ageism. Specifically, we explored the following questions:

(RQ1) What are the board members' needs and concerns regarding the platform's aim to raise awareness and provide educational materials on ageism?

(RQ2) What are the board members' needs and concerns regarding the platform's aim to collect real-life experiences of ageism from older citizens?

(RQ3) What are the board members' needs and concerns regarding the platform's aim to build a community to combat ageism?

Methods

Participants: sounding board members

Participants were recruited offline (e.g., University of the Third Age) and online (e.g., mailing lists) in German-speaking Switzerland in May 2024. Out of 11 interested individuals, nine attended the first online meeting. Two participants dropped out after the subsequent survey due to personal reasons, leaving seven adults aged 62–75 years ($M = 69.71$; four women) in the final sample. All participants but one are retired. Three indicated to be married, two were separated, one widowed, and one single. Their sociodemographic characteristics are displayed in Table 1. All participants reported their life quality to be 'good' ($n = 2$) or 'very good' ($n = 5$) and their general health to be 'good' ($n = 3$), 'very good' ($n = 3$) or 'neither nor' ($n = 1$) on a 5-point scale ('very poor' to 'very good'). All participants volunteered their time. As compensation, they were offered networking opportunities during (i.e., coffee breaks) and after meetings (i.e., receptions) and free of charge access to lectures on ageism at the university.

Procedures

In gerontological research, participatory methods are essential for conducting research with, rather than on, older adults, ensuring practical relevance and active involvement (Seifert et al., 2020). Thus, this study employs a participatory, co-development design with four workshop-style focus groups and an online survey (see Figure 1 for overall procedures; see Table 2 for online survey questions). Focus groups were employed for their ability to generate concentrated data of direct relevance to the research topic (Morgan, 1997). All meetings were attended by members of the sounding board and moderated by the first two authors (researchers in Psychology and Gerontology), and the fourth author (citizen scientist 60+). The focus groups combined guided discussions, brainstorming sessions, and collaborative tasks to gather feedback on the platform's three aims. Data were gathered in various formats, such as handwritten and digital protocols, posters, and Miro boards. All participants gave informed consent to take part in the project and completed a sociodemographic questionnaire.

Data analyses

The multimodal qualitative data sources were digitized and integrated for analysis. We employed Framework Analysis, a method developed for applied or policy-relevant qualitative research to support the development of action strategies (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). This approach has been shown to effectively generate concise summaries for decision-makers and software developers (Rosen et al., 2023). Our initial analytical framework was deductively structured around the three predefined aims of the platform. In a second step, we applied inductive coding to identify sub-themes corresponding to needs and concerns (Klingberg et al., 2024). The first two authors independently reviewed the data to ensure accuracy and consistency. The coded data were systematically summarized, mapped, and organized into thematic structures. To facilitate agile teamwork with platform designers

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sounding board ($N = 7$).

	Age	Gender	Educational level	Highest professional position (current/former)
1	68	woman	higher vocational education / training[a]	executive management level
2	67	man	higher vocational education / training[a]	business owner / management / board of directors
3	75	woman	higher vocational education / training[a]	executive management level
4	62	woman	higher vocational education / training[a]	middle / executive management level
5	74	woman	higher vocational education / training[a]	middle management level
6	70	man	higher vocational education / training[a]	business owner / management / board of directors
7	72	man	vocational training with vocational baccalaureate	executive management level

[a]vocational and higher professional examinations / degree of higher technical colleges.

Meeting 1, June 2024 online	
Informing participants about the project	Defining the role of the sounding board

Online Survey (see table 2)		
Personal experiences with ageism	Sharing real-life experiences with ageism	Rating of existing anti-ageism platforms

Meeting 2, July 2024 on-site
Ideas and visions regarding the platform

Meeting 3, July 2024 on-site	
Community building	Platform users' motivations

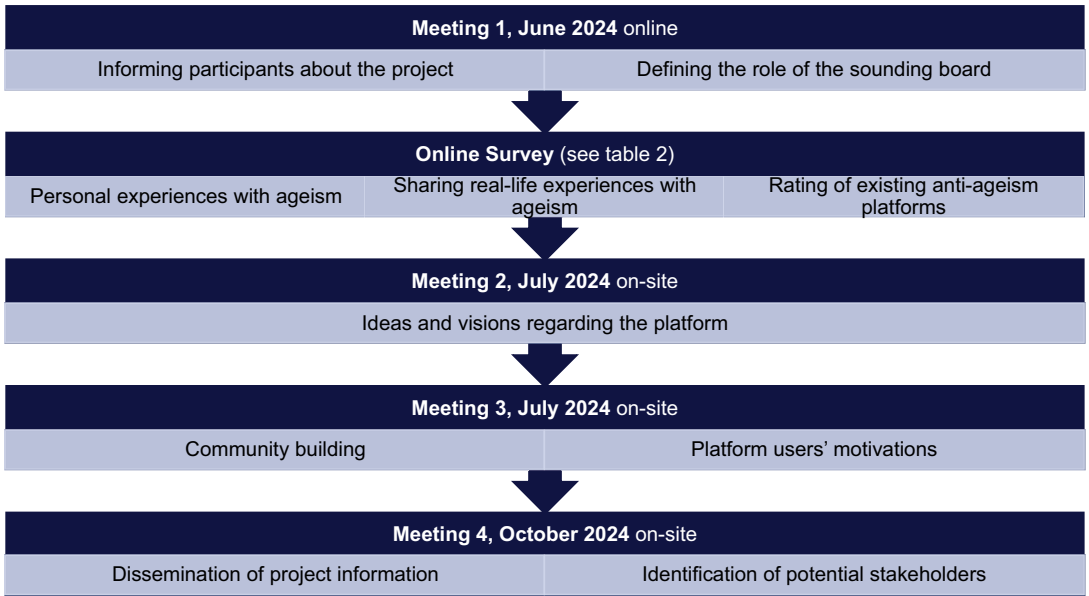| **Meeting 4, October 2024** on-site	
Dissemination of project information	Identification of potential stakeholders

Figure 1. Overview of the schedule and agenda of the first phase of the co-development process. Note. Meeting 1 included $N = 9$ participants (seven sounding board members; two individuals who dropped out after the online survey). The online survey included $N = 5$ participants (four sounding board members; one individual who dropped out after the online survey). Meeting 2–Meeting 4 included only participants of the $N = 7$ members of the sounding board.

and IT developers, the online collaboration tool *Trello* was used. We exemplify data mapping procedures in Figure 2.

Results

(RQ1) needs and concerns regarding raising awareness and providing educational materials

Participants emphasized that educational materials should be motivating, clear, present positive visions for the future, and provide opportunities for self-reflection. They raised the topic of empowerment by giving hands-on guidelines on how to fight ageism in everyday life, shifting the focus from informational to actionable materials directed at older adults. Moreover, they highlighted positive contributions of older adults to society and avoiding victimization. For instance, one participant stressed that the information provided should not raise the impression that 'we want to stigmatize everything' or make older adults 'feel forced' into a victim role.

Participants emphasized the need for a simple language, which is not 'elitist' or including accusatory tones, but rather conveying a positive attitude, e.g., using humor. Concerns regarding terminology use on the platform were further raised. The German term for 'ageism' (*Ageismus*) was unfamiliar to 37.5% of the participants and disapproved for mixing English and German. While 'age discrimination' (*Altersdiskriminierung*) was known to all, it was criticized for its negative connotations, potentially having deterrent effects.

Participants expressed a preference for a mix of online (e.g., short, voluntary e-learning modules with videos, quizzes, and summaries) and offline learning options (e.g., workshops and conferences) on topics such as origins of ageism, self-directed ageism, and societal expectations.

Table 2. Online survey questions.

Section	Question
Personal experience with ageism	Have you ever encountered ageism / age discrimination yourself? If so, what did you experience?
	In what context?
	How did you experience it?
Rating of existing anti-ageism platforms	Off the top of your head, what would you expect from a website that aims to educate people about ageism and raise awareness?
	What is your general first impression of the websites you looked at?
	Which categories / menus do you like?
	Which website do you like best?
	Why do you like this one best?
	Do you have any other comments?
	What do you think is important for a Swiss website?
Sharing real-life experiences with ageism (data collection)	What would encourage you to share an experience of ageism / age discrimination?
	On the website, we will use a text or video to 'convince' visitors to to share their experiences by means of a 'narrative'/'explanation'/'storytelling'. What storyline would motivate you to share your experience?
	What would stop you from sharing an experience?
	Would you be willing to set up a personal profile on the website to share your experience? (Yes/No)
	Which of the following (potentially mandatory) information would you be willing to share with your experience report? • E-mail address • First name • Last name • Year of birth • Gender • Canton of living
	Which of the following additional information would you be willing to share with your experience report? • Highest educational qualification • Place of residence or city • Current profession, with 'retired' as an option • Civil status (e.g., married) • Living situation (e.g., alone, with partner, etc.) • Number of own children
	What would encourage you to set up a profile (e.g., knowledge of added value, guarantee of data protection. . .)?
	What would stop you from setting up a profile?

Survey questions were administered in German and translated into English. All questions were presented as open-ended questions (free-text input), except for the section 'Sharing real-life experiences with ageism (data collection)', where a mix of open-ended and close-ended questions was asked.

(RQ2) needs and concerns regarding collecting real-life experiences with ageism

Participants stated that personal ageism experiences might seem too trivial to be shared compared to more objective forms of age discrimination. A proposed solution was to provide resonating examples that evoke relevance and empathy. Some noted that recognizing ageism in everyday life can be challenging and discriminatory behavior may be seen as 'social etiquette' (i.e., socially accepted behavior). When asked to recall personal ageism experiences, most could not report specific episodes. One participant noted that she is mostly unaware of ageism in her everyday life, except for structural disadvantages, such as the shift to online-only sale of train tickets.

Participants were concerned about the sensitivity of personal experiences and the need for data privacy and control over personal information. Knowing that experience reports contribute to research, raise awareness, and are reviewed by a team were major motivators for sharing experiences, as this ensures professionalism and authenticity. Moreover, the need for anonymous sharing of experiences was also emphasized.
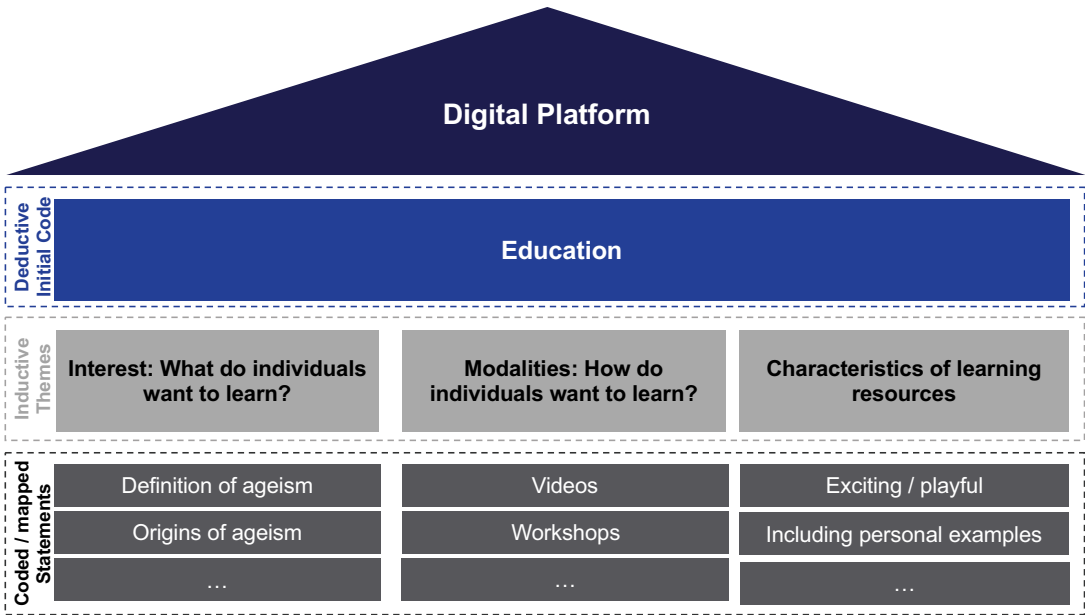
Figure 2. Example of a data mapping scheme for needs and concerns relating to the platform aim 'education'. Note. Exemplary, not exhaustive illustration of the data mapping procedure of the platform aim 'education'. Mapping schemes were created analogously for the other two platform's aims 'community building' and 'data collection'.

(RQ3) needs and concerns regarding fostering a community to combat ageism

Participants emphasized the relevance of solidarity and participation in creating a sense of community. They underlined the need for individuals to feel their involvement has a social impact. Active participation in the community (e.g., roles as taskforce members, ageism ambassadors, or blog authors) should be made possible to boost motivation and engagement. Additionally, activating elements (e.g., surveys, chat function, and on-site workshops) were recommended.

Concerns of how to unite a highly diverse group of individuals from different age groups and backgrounds into a cohesive community were noted. Questions were raised about the potential for subgroups (e.g., employers and affected individuals) and the risk of promoting discrimination by creating sub-communities. Finally, participants stressed the importance of including younger people and creating intergenerational connections on the platform as well as diverse stakeholders (e.g., NGOs, cantonal administrations, and advocates).

Discussion

Data from the sounding board of older adults provided key insights for developing an anti-ageism educational online platform, envisioned as a multi-section website, highlighting major needs and concerns of older individuals regarding its three main aims.

(RQ1)

Major needs and concerns regarding awareness raising and educational activities on the online platform were detected. Key insights of our study, such as reducing the stigma associated with ageism and highlighting positive aspects of aging, have been recommended before for successful educational interventions (WHO, 2021). In terms of message framing, participants recommended a positive, solution-oriented tone and avoidance of victimization of older adults. Research shows that using humor and non-accusatory language improves receptivity in public health campaigns (e.g., Blanc &

Brigaud, 2014). Activist movements such as the *Raging Grannies*, which employ satire, protest songs, and street theater, exemplify the impact of a playful approach in addressing social justice issues such as ageism (Raging Grannies, n.d.). Furthermore, our findings align with scientific literature suggesting that framing ageism as oppression may obscure the complexity of later life by oversimplifying diverse experiences and structural dynamics. Instead of emphasizing victimhood, shifting the focus to expanding opportunities and reducing barriers for older adults is recommended (Higgs & Gilleard, 2022).

Based on the identified needs of the sounding board, inclusion of hands-on strategies into educational efforts to combat ageism is crucial for empowerment. Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) underscores that fostering confidence is key to enabling individuals to challenge discrimination effectively. Promoting self-efficacy has also been identified as one strategy to reduce the negative impact of self-directed ageism among older adults (Henry et al., 2023). Findings further align with principles of critical educational gerontology, which focuses on transformative learning, encouraging older adults to critically examine social inequalities and reclaim agency (Formosa & Galea, 2020). Education programs should, therefore, also include practical recommendations for older individuals on counteracting ageism. Highlighting older adults' contributions to society can further counterbalance negative stereotypes and reinforce their agency, challenging internalized ageism (Levy, 2009).

Finally, findings suggest that culturally relevant and familiar terminology, such as 'age discrimination' instead of 'ageism', is vital for resonance and engagement. This corresponds to the evidence from other German-speaking countries (Kessler & Warner, 2023) and raises the issue of lacking vocabulary regarding ageism (Minichiello et al., 2000). It points to hermeneutical injustice, which suggests that having appropriate terms and hermeneutical resources enhances understanding of prejudices, and systemic inequality (Fricker, 2007). Thus, educational initiatives should use familiar terms to initially attract learners but introduce nuanced terms reflecting the spectrum of age-related biases and behaviors to describe personal experiences appropriately.

(RQ2)

Regarding data collection on the online platform, findings suggest that the sensitivity of sharing personal experiences necessitates a design prioritizing privacy and psychological safety. Anonymity and clear guidelines can be recommended for data collection endeavors to encourage participation. These measures align with findings from participatory research, where transparent communication was found to be critical for engagement (Seifert, 2023).

A key issue identified is the challenge of recognizing and naming ageism in daily life. As awareness is a prerequisite for sharing experiences, this impedes real-life data collection. Despite evidence indicating that ageism is widespread, its subjective perception varies. Research underscores the great variety of perceived ageism episodes, such as lack of respect or incorrect assumptions (Chasteen et al., 2021). Moreover, ageism, unlike sexism or racism, is often socially accepted which, combined with its unconscious nature, complicates recognition (WHO, 2021). Raising awareness and education on ageism may, thus, facilitate reporting of experiences. Instructions for data collection should emphasize the value of subjective perspectives and encourage sharing personal narratives, including various forms (subjective vs. objective) and aspects of ageism (stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination).

As the ageism literature is dominated by questionnaire data with a significant lack of research capturing real-life experiences of ageism (Chasteen et al., 2021), sharing experiential narratives via online platforms could provide deeper insights into individual perspectives.

(RQ3)

Finally, significant needs and concerns relating to the creation of a community on the platform were found. Community-building efforts must address the challenges of heterogeneity (i.e., regarding age distribution), while leveraging the strengths of diversity of its members. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that creating a shared identity around combating ageism can foster solidarity

across diverse groups. Encouraging active participation, such as taking on roles or contributing content, can enhance engagement and strengthen mutual understanding (Ng, 2010). Besides online opportunities, offline workshops may be valuable for building trust and bridging gaps between age groups. This is further key for fostering inclusivity and considering everyone, regardless of their access or choice to engage online. As intergenerational contact can be an important pathway for reducing ageism, intergenerational exchange should be encouraged within anti-ageism platforms (Drury et al., 2017).

Limitations and future directions

The data from the Swiss sounding board offer valuable insights, and the co-development approach is regarded as both beneficial and transferable to other ageism-related initiatives. However, future research is needed.Our sounding board includes community-dwelling, healthy, highly educated Swiss adults aged 62–75 with a strong interest in ageism, excluding individuals of the older-old age group, other ethnic backgrounds, or low socio-economic status. Research indicates that intersectionality, i.e., the compounding inequalities by multiple characteristics, such as gender, disability, or socioeconomic status, greatly affect life experiences and chances across the life course (Holman & Walker, 2020). Thus, our findings are only applicable with respect to a restricted population group. It is essential to further validate these findings and to refine the online platform's design by capturing other perspectives, considering the various intersecting life chances and choices of (older) Swiss adults.

The semi-structured approach of the focus group meetings not only gathered data on the three main aims but also revealed additional, unconsidered topics. Future projects could benefit from the inclusion of more diverse methodologies, such as interviews with platform developers from other countries. Furthermore, the use of more comprehensive data analysis methods, including coding schemes, may be advisable.

Conclusion

We obtained valuable feedback from a sounding board of older adults throughout the co-development of an anti-ageism interventional online platform to be launched in the Spring of 2025. Needs and concerns relating to the platform's aim to (1) raise awareness and educate, (2) collect real-life experiences from older citizens, and (3) foster a community to combat ageism were identified. Participants emphasized empowerment by linking education to actionable guidelines and addressing challenges, such as limited awareness of ageism. Anonymous data reporting and options for active participation were highlighted. This study contributes to the literature on data-informed, user-centered approaches addressing socially relevant issues through digital technology. It underscores the importance of integrating older adults' perspectives in designing anti-ageism platforms to ensure effective educational interventions and data collection endeavors.

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Ethics statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Zurich (approval number 24.12.16). All procedures performed are in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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