





Original research

# Brain age gap in neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorders and multiple sclerosis

Ren Wei,<sup>1</sup> Xiaolu Xu ,<sup>1</sup> Yunyun Duan ,<sup>1</sup> Ningnannan Zhang,<sup>2</sup> Jie Sun,<sup>2</sup> Haiqing Li,<sup>3</sup> Yuxin Li,<sup>3</sup> Yongmei Li,<sup>4</sup> Chun Zeng,<sup>4</sup> Xuemei Han,<sup>5</sup> Fuqing Zhou,<sup>6</sup> Muhua Huang,<sup>6</sup> Runzhi Li,<sup>7</sup> Zhizheng Zhuo,<sup>1</sup> Frederik Barkhof,<sup>8,9</sup> James H Cole ,<sup>9,10</sup> Yaou Liu <sup>1</sup>

► Additional supplemental material is published online only. To view, please visit the journal online (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jnp-2022-329680>).

For numbered affiliations see end of article.

## Correspondence to

Professor Yaou Liu, Department of Radiology, Beijing Tiantan Hospital, Beijing, China; [yaouliu80@163.com](mailto:yaouliu80@163.com)

RW and XX contributed equally.

Received 27 June 2022

Accepted 12 September 2022

## ABSTRACT

**Objective** To evaluate the clinical significance of deep learning-derived brain age prediction in neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder (NMOSD) relative to relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS).

**Methods** This cohort study used data retrospectively collected from 6 tertiary neurological centres in China between 2009 and 2018. In total, 199 patients with NMOSD and 200 patients with RRMS were studied alongside 269 healthy controls. Clinical follow-up was available in 85 patients with NMOSD and 124 patients with RRMS (mean duration NMOSD=5.8±1.9 (1.9–9.9) years, RRMS=5.2±1.7 (1.5–9.2) years). Deep learning was used to learn 'brain age' from MRI scans in the healthy controls and estimate the brain age gap (BAG) in patients.

**Results** A significantly higher BAG was found in the NMOSD (5.4±8.2 years) and RRMS (13.0±14.7 years) groups compared with healthy controls. A higher baseline disability score and advanced brain volume loss were associated with increased BAG in both patient groups. A longer disease duration was associated with increased BAG in RRMS. BAG significantly predicted Expanded Disability Status Scale worsening in patients with NMOSD and RRMS.

**Conclusions** There is a clear BAG in NMOSD, although smaller than in RRMS. The BAG is a clinically relevant MRI marker in NMOSD and RRMS.

## INTRODUCTION

Age is an independent marker for disease progression in neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder (NMOSD)<sup>1</sup> and multiple sclerosis (MS),<sup>2</sup> two major inflammatory demyelinating diseases of the central nervous system.<sup>1,3</sup> However, ageing does not affect everyone in the same way, so researchers have sought biological markers of ageing processes that may explain some of these individual differences and are more reflective of age-related disease processes. The so-called 'brain age' paradigm has been designed to determine the brain's biological age,<sup>4</sup> which can be estimated from anatomical brain MRI scans. By analysing the similarity of a given brain scan with scans from a range of healthy individuals, machine-learning techniques can predict a person's brain age from neuroimaging features, providing a novel way of indexing deviations from normal brain ageing. Compared with calendar

## WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

- ⇒ The deep learning-derived brain age gap (BAG) is associated with various clinical risk factors and can be used for risk stratification of various neurological and psychiatric diseases, including multiple sclerosis (MS).
- ⇒ The clinical significance of BAG prediction in neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder (NMOSD) relative to relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS) is not known.

## WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

- ⇒ A deep learning model was able to estimate BAG from three-dimensional structural MRI scans and is robust across multiple centres and multiple scanners.
- ⇒ A significant BAG was found in patients with NMOSD compared with healthy controls, although it was less marked than in patients with RRMS.
- ⇒ Higher disability and advanced atrophy were associated with a larger BAG in both NMOSD and RRMS.
- ⇒ BAG was a predictive biomarker of Expanded Disability Status Scale worsening in NMOSD and RRMS.

## HOW THIS STUDY MIGHT AFFECT RESEARCH, PRACTICE AND/OR POLICY

- ⇒ BAG is a comprehensive and relevant disease marker in NMOSD and RRMS.

age, brain age may provide more comprehensive information for understanding disease impact in NMOSD and relapsing-remitting MS (RRMS).

The brain age gap (BAG) is the difference between calendar age and predicted brain age. BAG thus represents the deviation from an expected healthy ageing trajectory. This MRI biomarker integrates structural alterations across the brain associated with the ageing process.<sup>5,6</sup> Previous studies have suggested that BAG is associated with various clinical risk factors and can be used for risk stratification of various neurological and psychiatric diseases including MS.<sup>7</sup> However, no one has investigated BAG in patients with NMOSD and its ability to understand and predict Expanded Disability Status Scale (EDSS) worsening.



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**To cite:** Wei R, Xu X, Duan Y, et al. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* Epub ahead of print: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/jnp-2022-329680

In this study, we used a novel deep-learning brain age model to investigate the utility of BAG as a neuroimaging biomarker to predict EDSS worsening in NMOSD and RRMS in a large multicentre dataset.

## METHODS

### Participants

Data from patients with NMOSD and RRMS were retrospectively collected from six tertiary neurological centres in China covering the period between November 2009 and April 2018. Patients who fulfilled the following criteria were included: (a) confirmed diagnosis of NMOSD according to 2015 revised diagnostic criteria<sup>8</sup> or RRMS according to 2017 McDonald criteria<sup>9</sup>; (b) complete demographic and clinical information, including baseline EDSS score and disease duration and (c) good quality baseline three-dimensional (3D) T1-weighted structural images (T1WI). Clinical evaluation, diagnosis, treatment and follow-up assessments of the participants were conducted at each centre by local neurologists with expertise in demyelinating diseases. EDSS worsening was defined as an increase in EDSS score  $\geq 1.0$  for baseline EDSS  $\leq 5.5$  or an increase in EDSS score  $\geq 0.5$  for baseline EDSS  $> 5.5$ , as previously published.<sup>10</sup>

### Data for deep learning model training

Training data for our deep learning-derived brain age included MRI scans from healthy controls (HCs,  $n=9794$ ) from publicly available datasets, including Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI), The Australian Imaging, Biomarkers and Lifestyle (AIBL),<sup>11</sup> Brain Genomics Superstruct Project (GSP)<sup>12</sup> and Southwest University Longitudinal Imaging Multimodal (SLIM),<sup>13</sup> as well as a group of healthy people scanned at Beijing Tiantan Hospital from January to December 2019 (online supplemental table 1, online supplemental figure 1). After training, the model was tested on two further independent datasets. Internal validation data comprised another group of healthy participants ( $n=462$ ) scanned at Beijing Tiantan Hospital from January to April 2020 on two different scanners (see online supplemental table 1). The external validation dataset included HCs from the multicentre NMOSD and MS cohorts ( $n=267$ ).

### Image acquisition and data preprocessing

All the MRI scans of participants as well as the validation dataset were acquired using 3.0 T scanners at 1.0 mm isotropic resolution using Magnetization Prepared-Rapid Gradient Echo imaging (MP-RAGE) or similar sequences. Non-contrast 3D T1-weighted scans were affinely registered to Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI) space. Skull stripping was performed by HD-BET on the registered scans.<sup>14</sup> The signal intensity of the resulting images was normalised by dividing by the mean intensity within the cerebral mask. Scans were then resampled to 1 mm isotropic resolution using linear interpolation and served as the input of the proposed convolutional neural network (CNN).

Age at each scan was determined by either of two methods: (1) the demographic metadata (in years) provided by owners of the dataset; (2) calculated from the difference between date of birth and image acquisition date recorded in DICOM metadata, which was done in days and converted to years. Inconsistent data were omitted from the study.

### Brain volume measurement

Brain volume segmentation was performed using the automated recon-all procedure in FreeSurfer package (V.6.0.0) as described by Fischl *et al.*<sup>15</sup> The total brain volume was calculated

and normalised by dividing by the estimated total intracranial volume.<sup>16</sup>

### Model construction, training and prediction

We built a 3D CNN called the 3D Simple Fully Convolutional Neural Network (SFCN) network as per the work of Peng *et al.*<sup>17</sup> We modified the output structure so that the network could predict age across a larger range of 6–90 years. Model training and mathematical details are described in the online supplementary material.

BAG was calculated by subtracting chronological age from predicted brain age, with a positive BAG indicating an older-looking brain. To investigate the possible influence of brain lesions on age prediction, we performed a correlation analysis between raw and lesion-filled 3D T1WI images. Lesion filling was performed by default pipeline of Lesion Segmentation Tool (V.3.0.0, <https://www.applied-statistics.de/1st.html>).

### Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using R (V.3.6.3). Graphs were plotted with ggplot2 package. Intergroup comparison was conducted using the  $\chi^2$  test (for categorical variables), Wilcoxon signed-rank test (for EDSS) and Student's t-test or analysis of variance with Tukey's range test as post hoc analysis (for continuous variable). Survival analysis with Kaplan-Meier curve and Cox proportional hazards model were used to analyse time-to-progression data. Other details are described in the online supplementary material. All statistical tests were two-sided, and  $p < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

## RESULTS

### Participants

In total, 199 patients with NMOSD, 200 patients with RRMS and 269 age-matched and sex-matched HC subjects were included (table 1). Patients with NMOSD were older at baseline ( $41.0 \pm 13.0$  years vs  $37.1 \pm 11.4$  years,  $p=0.005$ ), had a longer disease duration ( $4.5 \pm 5.1$  years vs  $3.2 \pm 4.4$  years,  $p=0.006$ ) and had less severe disability measured by EDSS at baseline ( $2.0$  vs  $3.5$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than patients with RRMS. Of the patients with NMOSD included, 52 (26.1%) patients received disease-modifying therapy (DMT), others received immunosuppressants including cyclophosphamide and azathioprine. In the RRMS group, 86 (43.0%) patients received an MS-specific DMT, others received the above other treatment.

Follow-up data were available for 85 patients with NMOSD and 124 patients with RRMS (median follow-up duration:  $5.8 \pm 1.9$  years and  $5.2 \pm 1.7$  years, respectively). During follow-up, 31 patients with NMOSD and 42 patients with RRMS experienced EDSS worsening.

### Brain morphometry of the participants

Both the NMOSD and RRMS groups had lower brain volumes than the HCs ( $1080.1 \pm 121.5$  mL and  $1058.9 \pm 94.4$  mL vs  $1154.6 \pm 98.5$  mL, both  $p < 0.001$ ). While the NMOSD and RRMS groups were not significantly different in raw brain volume ( $p=0.108$ ), normalised brain volumes revealed less pronounced atrophy in patients with NMOSD ( $0.750 \pm 0.038$  vs  $0.731 \pm 0.045$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The lesion load in the NMOSD group was lower than that in the RRMS group ( $4.9 \pm 8.1$  mL vs  $12.7 \pm 17.9$  mL,  $p < 0.001$ ) (table 1).

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics, baseline status and deep learning-derived brain age of participants

	NMOSD	RRMS	HCs	P value
<b>Baseline</b>				
N	199	200	269	
Age at baseline, year (min–max)	41.0±13.0 (16.9–66.0)	37.1±11.4 (16.6–66.9)	38.5±12.7 (17.0–69.0)	NMOSD versus HC 0.071 RRMS versus HC 0.468 NMOSD versus RRMS 0.005
Female, n (%)	176/199 (88.4)	128/200 (64.0)	152/269 (56.5)	<0.001
Seropositive for AQP4-IgG, n (%)	84/132 (63.6)	–	–	–
First onset to diagnosis, year (min–max)	4.5±5.1 (0.0–35.0)	3.2±4.4 (0.0–21.0)	–	0.006
Baseline use of DMT, n (%)	52 (26.1%)	86 (43.0%)	–	–
EDSS at baseline, median (IQR) (min–max)	2.0 (2.0) (0.0–9.0)	3.5 (3.0) (0.0–9.0)	–	<0.001
Brain segmentation volume without ventricles, mL (min–max)	1058.9±94.4 (798.7–1390.1)	1080.1±121.5 (742.6–1484.5)	1154.6±98.5 (910.7–1434.0)	NMOSD versus HC <0.001 MS versus HC <0.001 NMOSD versus RRMS 0.108
Normalised brain volume (min–max)	0.750±0.038 (0.647–0.891)	0.731±0.045 (0.590–0.858)	0.765±0.030 (0.700–0.894)	<0.001*
Total volume of lesion, mL (min–max)	4.9±8.1 (0.0–43.9)	12.7±17.9 (0.0–134.0)	–	<0.001*
<b>Deep learning-derived brain age</b>				
Predicted brain age, year (min–max)	46.4±16.0 (18.8–77.5)	49.8±17.5 (19.5–77.8)	39.3±13.7 (14.8–73.8)	<0.001*
Brain age gap, year (95% CI)	5.4±8.2 (4.3 to 6.5)	13.0±14.7 (10.9 to 15.0)	0.8±6.2 (0.1 to 1.6)	<0.001*
Predicted brain age SD, year (95% CI)	6.0±3.0 (5.6 to 6.5)	7.2±4.2 (6.6 to 7.8)	4.8±1.1 (4.7 to 4.9)	<0.001*
<b>Follow-up</b>				
N with follow-up data, n (%)	85 (42.7)	124 (62.0)	–	
Mean follow-up time, year (min–max)	5.8±1.9 (1.9–9.9)	5.2±1.7 (1.5–9.2)	–	0.020
EDSS worsening, n (%)	31 (36.5)	42 (33.9)	–	0.764
Continuous variables other than EDSS are reported as the mean±SD. EDSS is reported as the median (IQR). *For all pairwise comparisons, that is, for NMOSD versus HC, RRMS versus HC and NMOSD versus RRMS. DMT, disease-modifying therapy; EDSS, Expanded Disability Status Scale; HC, healthy control; MS, multiple sclerosis; NMOSD, neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder; RRMS, relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.				

### Performance of the brain age prediction model

Model training (using 9794 HCs) was terminated at epoch 108. The mean absolute error (MAE) before inverse linear bias correction was 2.63 years in the developmental validation set, and this model was used as the final model for further analysis.

The model was then tested using 462 images for internal (across-scanner) validation and 267 images for external validation (across-centre). In the internal validation dataset, the MAE was 2.9±3.1 years, with no significant difference across scanner types ( $p=0.581$ ,  $n=2$ ). The Pearson's correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) between age and brain age was 0.957. In the external validation set, the MAE was 4.5±3.9 years, and the Pearson's  $r$  was 0.890. The MAE was not significantly different across different centres ( $p=0.660$ ,  $n=5$ ; online supplemental table 2).

### Increased BAG in NMOSD and RRMS compared with healthy controls

The difference in BAG among patients with NMOSD, patients with RRMS and HCs was relatively consistent across baseline chronological ages (figure 1A). At baseline, patients with NMOSD had a significantly higher BAG than HCs (NMOSD–HC=4.6 years, 95% CI 2.4 to 6.9,  $p<0.001$ ), but patients with RRMS had a markedly higher BAG than HCs (MS–HC=12.1 years, 95% CI 9.9 to 14.3,  $p<0.001$ ). BAG was lower in NMOSD than in RRMS (NMOSD–RRMS=–7.5 years, 95% CI 5.2 to 9.9,  $p<0.001$ ) (table 1, figure 1B).

Furthermore, we performed subgroup analyses of BAG in AQP4 seropositive versus seronegative patients with NMOSD, as well as in patients with NMOSD with versus without brain lesions. We observed that there was no significant difference in BAG between the AQP4 seropositive and seronegative subgroups

(5.8±8.8 vs 4.2±6.9 years,  $p=0.256$ ). However, the BAG in patients with brain lesions was significantly higher than those without (7.1±8.5 vs 3.4±7.2 years,  $p=0.001$ ) (online supplemental table 5).

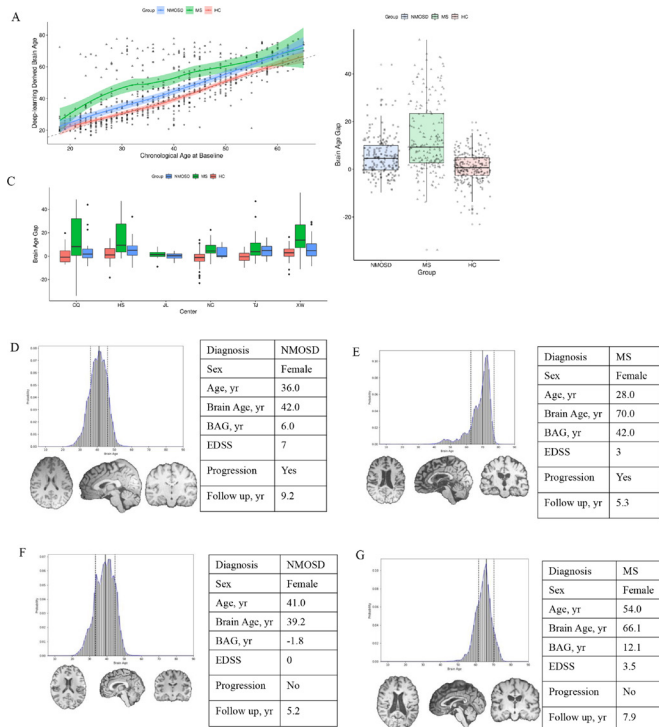
A significant difference in BAG across centres ( $p<0.001$ ) was noted, although post hoc analysis revealed consistent trends in disease effects on BAG in all six centres (figure 1C). Sample images and the corresponding output from both the NMOSD and RRMS groups were provided for better understanding (figure 1D–G).

The correlation between raw and lesion-filled 3D T1WI images was very high ( $R^2=0.984$ ,  $p<0.001$ , online supplemental figure 3A). A Bland-Altman plot showed that the mean difference between raw and lesion-filled brain age was 0.28±2.11 years with no apparent systematic bias (online supplemental figure 3B), indicating that the lesion filling process did not have a particular impact on the model.

### Correlation of BAG with clinical variables

At baseline, univariate linear regression analysis demonstrated that BAG was positively associated with EDSS in both the NMOSD and RRMS groups (NMOSD  $r=0.217$ ,  $\beta=0.86$ ,  $p=0.002$ ; RRMS  $r=0.268$ ,  $\beta=2.31$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; figure 2A). Normalised brain volume was inversely associated with BAG in both NMOSD and RRMS groups (NMOSD  $r=-0.202$ ,  $\beta=-48.5$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; RRMS  $r=-0.384$ ,  $\beta=-126.9$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; figure 2B). Multivariable linear regression found that BAG was positively predictive of baseline EDSS independent of normalised brain volume and disease duration (NMOSD  $p=0.030$ ; RRMS  $p=0.009$ ; online supplemental table 3).

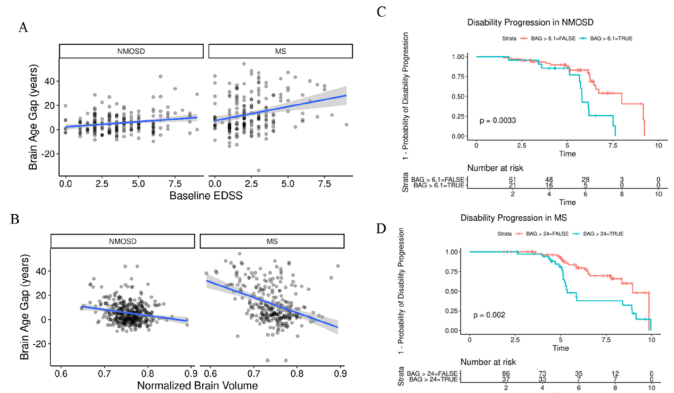




**Figure 1** Deep learning-derived brain age versus chronological age in neuromyelitis optica spectrum disease (NMOSD), multiple sclerosis (MS) and healthy control (HC). (A) Deep learning-derived brain age versus chronological age in NMOSD, MS and HC groups. Predicted brain age is consistently higher in NMOSD and MS groups compared with HC group. (B) Patients with NMOSD exhibits lower brain age gap (BAG) over MS and lower BAG over HCs. (C) The difference of BAG across centres in NMOSD, MS and HC groups. The tendency that MS BAG>NMOSD BAG>HC BAG remains consistent even if there are significant differences across centres. (D, E, F, G) A sample input and prediction result of patients with NMOSD and MS. Solid line indicates brain age estimation and dashed lines indicate SD of prediction. The predicted brain age was 42.0±5.1 years for (D) and 70.0±7.2 years for (E), yielding BAG of 6.0 years and 42.0 years namely. Both (D) and (E) experienced disability progression in follow-up sessions. Predicted brain age for (F) and (G) was 39.2±5.6 years and 66.1±4.4 years yielding BAG of -1.8 years and 12.1 years namely. These patients with lower BAG did not experience disability progression within follow-up period. EDSS, Expanded Disability Status Scale.

We performed 1:1 nearest neighbour propensity score matching (PSM)<sup>18</sup> to exclude the possible confounding influence of clinical variables on BAG. This matching yielded adequate balance for all included coefficients. The mean BAG was 5.0±7.1 years in NMOSD and 11.1±12.7 years in RRMS after adjustment for sex, age at diagnosis, baseline EDSS and normalised brain volume, with an estimated difference of -6.1 years (95% CI -8.7 to -3.4) years between NMOSD and RRMS (table 2).

The area under the curve of the receiver operating characteristic for BAG in predicting progression was 0.599 in NMOSD and 0.670 in RRMS. The optimal cut-off of BAG was 6.1 (sensitivity 38.7%, specificity 81.5%) for NMOSD and 24 (sensitivity 50.0%, specificity 80.5%) for RRMS (online supplemental figure 4). Kaplan-Meier survival analysis indicated that BAG was predictive of progression in both groups. For patients with NMOSD, the median time to progression for BAG >6.1 years was 5.79 years vs 7.99 years for BAG ≤6.1 years (p=0.003, figure 2C). The median time to progression for BAG >24.0



**Figure 2** Correlation of brain age gap (BAG) with clinical variables and its prognostic value. (A) Increased BAG was associated with more severe baseline disability status in both neuromyelitis optica spectrum disease (NMOSD), multiple sclerosis (MS), which was more prominent in patients with MS. (B) Normalised brain volume was strongly negatively associated with BAG both in NMOSD and MS indicating possible contribution of atrophy in increased BAG. (C, D) Survival curve of BAG predicting disability progression in patients with NMOSD and MS. Cut-off point was determined by 80% specificity. Operating cut-off point for NMOSD is set to BAG >6.1 (sensitivity 38.7%, specificity 81.5%), MS is set to BAG >24.0 (sensitivity 50.0%, specificity 80.5%).

years was 5.36 years vs 8.95 years for BAG ≤24.0 years in patients with RRMS (p=0.002, figure 2D).

We used the Cox proportional hazards model to investigate whether BAG could be used to predict time to EDSS worsening independent of age at diagnosis, sex, disease duration, baseline EDSS and normalised brain volume. In univariate models, normalised brain volume and BAG were significantly associated with EDSS worsening in both patients with NMOSD and RRMS (table 3, univariate model). In a multivariable model, BAG was associated with EDSS worsening in patients with NMOSD (HR=1.02 (95% CI 1.00 to 1.04)), p=0.027, table 3), independent of normalised brain volume (p=0.158). However, neither normalised brain volume nor BAG was significant in the RRMS group in multivariable analysis. Interestingly, we found baseline EDSS to be negatively associated with EDSS worsening in NMOSD (multivariable model p=0.001, table 3).

**Table 2** Patients with NMOSD exhibit lower brain age gap over RRMS adjusted for sex, age at diagnosis, baseline EDSS and normalised brain volume with propensity score matching

	NMOSD	RRMS	P value
N	119	119	—
Age at diagnosis, years	39.6±13.2	39.9±11.7	0.855
Female, n (%)	96 (80.7)	97 (81.5)	1.000
First onset to diagnosis, year	3.8±4.0	3.5±5.1	0.661
EDSS at baseline, median (IQR)	2.5 (2.0)	2.5 (2.0)	0.300
Normalised brain volume	0.745±0.038	0.742±0.042	0.538
Predicted brain age	44.5±15.5	50.0±16.9	0.008
Brain age gap	5.0±7.1	11.1±12.7	<0.001

Continuous variables other than EDSS are reported as the mean±SD. EDSS is reported as the median (IQR).

EDSS, Expanded Disability Status Scale; NMOSD, neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder; RRMS, relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.

**Table 3** Univariable and multivariable Cox proportional hazards model analysis for predicting EDSS worsening by BAG, age at diagnosis, sex, duration between first onset to diagnosis, baseline EDSS and normalised brain volume

	Univariable				Multivariable			
	NMOSD		RRMS		NMOSD		RRMS	
	HR	P value	HR	P value	HR	P value	HR	P value
N	85		124		85		124	
Number of events, n (%)	31 (36.5)		42 (33.9)		31 (36.5)		42 (33.9)	
Age at diagnosis, years	1.04 (1.00 to 1.08)	0.032	0.99 (0.96 to 1.02)	0.540	1.02 (0.98 to 1.06)	0.398	–	
Sex, male	0.52 (0.07 to 3.90)	0.527	1.23 (0.65 to 2.34)	0.523	–		–	
First onset to diagnosis, year	0.97 (0.89 to 1.05)	0.416	1.00 (0.91 to 1.11)	0.890	–		–	
EDSS at baseline	0.68 (0.54 to 0.85)	<0.001	0.91 (0.73 to 1.12)	0.364	0.65 (0.50 to 0.83)	0.001	–	
Normalised brain volume (%)	0.90 (0.81 to 1.00)	0.049	0.91 (0.85 to 0.98)	0.009	0.92 (0.81 to 1.04)	0.158	0.92 (0.85 to 1.02)	0.107
Brain age gap, year	1.06 (1.00 to 1.13)	0.031	1.02 (1.00 to 1.04)	0.029	1.07 (1.01 to 1.14)	0.027	1.02 (0.98 to 1.04)	0.633

EDSS, Expanded Disability Status Scale; NMOSD, neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder; RRMS, relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis.

### Analysis of predicted SD in brain age prediction

The predicted SD was positively associated with BAG in all three groups (linear model  $p < 0.001$  in HC and NMOSD,  $p = 0.011$  in RRMS, online supplemental figure 5A). The mean SD in NMOSD was higher than HC and lower than RRMS (online supplemental figure 5B), which was consistent with the trend seen in BAG, indicating a higher model uncertainty in those images with greater discrepancy between apparent and chronological age. We examined scans with high model uncertainty and found that some of them could be attributed to low image quality or incomplete anatomical coverage (online supplemental figure 5C), while others were not visually distinguishable from those with lower model uncertainty (online supplemental figure 5D). To analyse whether the difference in BAG was driven by the difference in predicted SD, we performed PSM with predicted SD added as a covariate. The difference in BAG between NMOSD and RRMS, as well as NMOSD and RRMS versus HC, remained statistically significant after PSM adjusted for age, sex, duration to diagnosis, baseline EDSS, normalised brain volume and predicted SD ( $p < 0.001$ , online supplemental table 4).

### DISCUSSION

In this study, we developed a deep learning model to accurately predict age from 3D structural MRI scans and demonstrated its robustness in the context of multiple centres and MRI scanners. Using this model, the BAG was estimated to be approximately +5 years in NMOSD and +13 years in RRMS. Baseline BAG was independently predictive of EDSS worsening in both NMOSD and RRMS, suggesting its additional clinical value as a non-invasive biomarker for early triage, stratified follow-up management and clinical trial enrolment.

Previous non-deep learning studies on age prediction tasks reported 2.9-year to 5.0-year MAEs on their validation sets<sup>7 19 20</sup> (some of which included multimodality-derived features, including functional MRI and diffusion tensor imaging), while deep learning studies reported validation MAEs as low as 2.14 years, such as in the original SFCN study.<sup>17</sup> We reached similar performance levels of MAE=2.5 years in the developmental validation set, and the performance was maintained in an internal test set, demonstrating the usefulness of our model and highlighting the versatility and potential of deep learning-based methods. We have also shown that the whole-brain CNN-based model was robust within scanners and centres, supporting the clinical use of the brain age paradigm.

BAG has been investigated extensively as a comprehensive biomarker for accelerated ageing. Increased BAG has been

observed in dementia,<sup>21</sup> epilepsy<sup>22</sup> and traumatic brain injury.<sup>23</sup> We report for the first time the meaningfulness of BAG in NMOSD as well as the difference between NMOSD and RRMS. We found a BAG of 5.4 (95% CI 4.3 to 6.5) years in patients with NMOSD, which, although lower than RRMS, is still marked compared with HCs. The degree of BAG increase in NMOSD is similar to what has been reported in epilepsy (4.5 years)<sup>22</sup> and traumatic brain injury (4.7 years).<sup>23</sup>

BAG in NMOSD was positively associated with baseline EDSS score and whole-brain atrophy, with associations comparable to those in RRMS but with a generally less steep slope. BAG was also predictive of EDSS worsening in NMOSD, which is in line with the idea that BAG is a composite marker of abnormal ageing and a disease-related brain. Furthermore, subgroup analysis of patients with NMOSD demonstrated that the BAG of patients with brain lesions was significantly higher than those without. This indicates that lesional brain involvement is associated with older appearing brains in patients with NMOSD. Future longitudinal studies are required to determine the possible causative factors.

In a recent study of brain age using Gaussian processes regression on MS, the authors reported 11.9 (95% CI 10.3 to 13.4) years BAG in patients with MS in the European Magnetic Resonance Imaging in Multiple Sclerosis (MAGNIMS) cohort,<sup>7</sup> which is consistent with our result of 13.0 (95% CI 10.9 to 15.0) years BAG in Chinese patients with MS. Furthermore, increased BAG was predictive of EDSS worsening in MS, also consistent with previous work.<sup>7</sup> Even though we used a fundamentally different methodology and datasets, these results provide additional evidence for the usefulness of BAG in the evaluation of patients with MS. Moreover, using deep learning can substantially shorten the runtime of the analysis pipeline. This acceleration in computation time is potentially of great benefit for widespread application in a clinical setting.

Comparing NMOSD and MS is difficult given the difference in confounding factors that may influence BAG. It has been reported previously that the atrophy patterns in NMOSD and MS are different. NMOSD exhibits more atrophy in the spinal cord but less atrophy in the brain,<sup>24</sup> which can partially explain the lower BAG in NMOSD given the strong association between BAG and brain atrophy. To address the influence of confounding effects such as demographics and brain volume, we used propensity score matching to sample a subset with matched baseline confounding factors. In this matched subset, the difference in BAG between NMOSD and MS was still significantly different even when matched for normalised brain volume. This finding

indicates that the brains of patients with RRMS appear older than those of patients with NMOSD even at the same level of atrophy, implying that BAG can be seen as a global estimation that integrates information beyond simple brain volumetry while being more accessible and informative than tables of volumetric measurements.

The uncertainty and distributional pattern of predicted brain age is an important field of research that has attracted little attention. A recent study modelled brain age uncertainty with a single-layer neural network that addressed aleatoric uncertainty with quantile regression and epistemic uncertainty with the Monte Carlo dropout technique.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to other studies that use quantile regression, the novel method in our study renders aleatoric uncertainty a natural derivative since the model output itself is a distribution instead of the point estimate used in previous studies.<sup>4</sup> Epistemic uncertainty was not derived in this study due to computational cost. Although the uncertainty correlated positively with BAG, the PSM analysis indicated that the BAG difference between NMOSD and RRMS remained statistically significant even after adjustment for predicted SD. We observed that the predicted SD were higher in those scans without enough information for brain age inference (ie, low image quality, etc), and in those with a greater discrepancy between predicted and actual age. This observation suggests a potential use case for the predicted SD. The quantification of individual-level uncertainty in this way could provide an integrated, intuitive metric for image quality control, especially in healthy people, as well as provide a measure of ‘confidence’ for applications in clinical contexts.

Our study has a few limitations. First, the follow-up duration was relatively short, and the sample size of patients with follow-up was small, which may have introduced selection bias. Second, although previous studies have suggested the longitudinal utility of brain age in healthy cohorts<sup>6</sup> and accelerated ageing measured by BAG has been observed in MS cohorts,<sup>7</sup> our cohort lacked sufficient follow-up assessments for this type of analysis. Finally, the interpretability of the results needs to be further improved; specifically, the anatomical meaning of brain age remains ill-defined. Deep learning-based methods have been cast as ‘black boxes’; however, tools such as class activation mapping, guided backpropagation and occlusion analysis are emerging that aim to extract mechanistic information from the network.<sup>26</sup> However, the translation of these methods to 3D data is complex, and they have yet to be validated for use in interpreting medical imaging data. Additionally, our study relied on 3D T1WI MRI, which is not always available in clinical contexts. Future work will take advantage of brain age models developed to work on routine clinical two-dimensional scans.<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, NMOSD demonstrated a significant BAG compared with HCs, although less marked than RRMS. BAG is a predictive biomarker of EDSS worsening in both NMOSD and RRMS.

#### Author affiliations

<sup>1</sup>Department of Radiology, Beijing Tiantan Hospital, Beijing, China

<sup>2</sup>Department of Radiology and Tianjin Key Laboratory of Functional Imaging, Tianjin Medical University General Hospital, Tianjin, China

<sup>3</sup>Department of Radiology, Huashan Hospital Fudan University, Shanghai, China

<sup>4</sup>Department of Radiology, The First Affiliated Hospital of Chongqing Medical University, Chongqing, China

<sup>5</sup>Department of Neurology, China-Japan Union Hospital of Jilin University, Changchun, China

<sup>6</sup>Department of Radiology, The First Affiliated Hospital of Nanchang University, Nanchang, China

<sup>7</sup>Department of Neurology, Beijing Tiantan Hospital, Beijing, China

<sup>8</sup>Department of Radiology and Nuclear Medicine, Neuroscience Campus Amsterdam, VU University Medical Centre Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>9</sup>Centre for Medical Image Computing, Department of Computer Science, University College London, London, UK

<sup>10</sup>Dementia Research Centre, Queen Square Institute of Neurology, University College London, London, UK

**Twitter** James H Cole @JamesCole\_Neuro

**Acknowledgements** Data collection and sharing for this project was funded by the Alzheimer’s Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) (National Institutes of Health Grant U01 AG024904) and DOD ADNI (Department of Defense award number W81XWH-12-2-0012). ADNI is funded by the National Institute on Aging, the National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering and through generous contributions from the following: AbbVie, Alzheimer’s Association; Alzheimer’s Drug Discovery Foundation; Araclon Biotech; BioClinica; Biogen; Bristol-Myers Squibb; CereSpir; Cogstate; Eisai; Elan Pharmaceuticals; Eli Lilly and Company; EuroImmun; F. Hoffmann-La Roche and its affiliated company Genentech; Fujirebio; GE Healthcare; IXICO; Janssen Alzheimer Immunotherapy Research & Development; Johnson & Johnson Pharmaceutical Research & Development; Lumosity; Lundbeck; Merck & Co, Inc; Meso Scale Diagnostics; NeuroRx Research; Neurotrack Technologies; Novartis Pharmaceuticals; Pfizer; Piramal Imaging; Servier; Takeda Pharmaceutical Company and Transition Therapeutics. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research is providing funds to support ADNI clinical sites in Canada. Private sector contributions are facilitated by the Foundation for the National Institutes of Health ([www.fnih.org](http://www.fnih.org)). The grantee organisation is the Northern California Institute for Research and Education, and the study is coordinated by the Alzheimer’s Therapeutic Research Institute at the University of Southern California. ADNI data are disseminated by the Laboratory for Neuroimaging at the University of Southern California.

**Collaborators** Data used in preparation of this article were obtained from the Alzheimer’s Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) database ([adni.loni.usc.edu](http://adni.loni.usc.edu)). As such, the investigators within the ADNI contributed to the design and implementation of ADNI and/or provided data but did not participate in analysis or writing of this report. A complete listing of ADNI investigators can be found at: [http://adni.loni.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/how\\_to\\_apply/ADNI\\_Acknowledgement\\_List.pdf](http://adni.loni.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/how_to_apply/ADNI_Acknowledgement_List.pdf)

**Contributors** RW and XX: conception and design of the study, acquisition and analysis of data and drafting the manuscript. Y Liu acts as the guarantor of the study and takes full responsibility for the work. YD, NZ, JS, HL, Y Li, FB, JHC: conception and design of the study, acquisition and analysis of data. Y Li, CZ, XH, FZ, MH, RL, ZZ: acquisition and analysis of data. All authors revised the manuscript and approved the final draft.

**Funding** This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 81870958), the Beijing Municipal Natural Science Foundation for Distinguished Young Scholars (No. JQ20035), Beijing Young Scholarship and the Capital’s Funds for Health Improvement and Research (CFH2022-1-2042). FB is supported by the NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at UCLH.

**Competing interests** FB acts as a consultant for Combinostics, Biogen-Idec, Janssen, IXICO, Merck-Serono, Novartis and Roche. He has received grants, or grants are pending, from the Amyloid Imaging to Prevent Alzheimer’s Disease (AMYPAD) initiative, the Biomedical Research Centre at University College London Hospitals, the Dutch MS Society, ECTRIMS–MAGNIMS, EU-H2020, the Dutch Research Council (NWO), the UK MS Society and the National Institute for Health Research, University College London. He has received payments for the development of educational presentations from IXICO and his institution from Biogen-Idec and Merck. He is co-founder of Queen Square Analytics. He is on the editorial board of Radiology, Neuroradiology, Multiple Sclerosis Journal and Neurology. JHC is a scientific consultant to and shareholder in BrainKey and Claritas Healthcare, as has worked as a consultant to Queen Square Analytics.

**Patient consent for publication** Not applicable.

**Ethics approval** This study was approved by Ethics Committee of Beijing Tiantan Hospital, Capital Medical University (No. KY-2019-050-02). Participants gave informed consent to participate in the study before taking part.

**Provenance and peer review** Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement** Data are available on reasonable request.

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## ORCID iDs

Xiaolu Xu <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9963-529X>Yunyun Duan <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8753-0260>James H Cole <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1908-5588>Yaou Liu <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9930-0331>

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