

Redefining older Australians: moving beyond stereotypes and consumer narratives in print media representations

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Australian print media shape the identities of older individuals through their use of language and reporting techniques. By examining newspaper articles published between 2011 and 2021 through the lens of critical discourse analysis, the study highlights the societal, economic, and journalistic factors that influence the media's portrayal of older persons. The findings reveal that economic discourses dominate the construction of identities, with the financial reliance of older individuals on the government being a significant factor in their representation. The study demonstrates how newspapers create and disseminate narratives that appear to exonerate the government of accountability for providing aged care. Through the application of Fairclough's three-dimensional approach, this study shows how media constructs older individuals as either consumers or a burden in Australia. This study emphasises the need for print media to reflect critically on their representations of older people, avoiding harmful stereotypes and promoting positive and diverse images of ageing.

Keywords

ageing, identities, Australian newspapers, journalism, aged care, stereotypes

Introduction

This paper critically examines how Australian print media discursively construct identities for older persons.¹ The global population is rapidly ageing, and the number of older people is increasing more rapidly than any other cohort (United Nations, 2020). Sixteen per cent of the total Australian population consists of older Australians, generally understood to be people 65 years or above (United Nations, 2020, p. 5), which is projected to increase to twenty-three per cent of the total population by 2066 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). This demographic shift is likely to exacerbate the use of age-related stereotypes, or ageism, which is a widespread

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phenomenon and constitutes a significant threat to older people's well-being (Marques et al., 2020). Media discourses are a powerful tool in constructing social identities, and they play an essential role in shaping societal views on ageing (Iversen and Wilinska, 2020). As a particular form of social and institutional practice, media representations of ageing are important sites of investigation to understand the ways in which older people are portrayed and defined in society (Van Dijk, 2013).

The manner in which individuals are named in news articles can significantly impact the way others perceive them in society (Richardson, 2007, p. 49). Negative and stereotypical portrayals of ageing can have harmful effects on older individuals, reinforcing negative attitudes towards ageing and perpetuating age-related discrimination (Levy et al., 2014). Conversely, positive and diverse images of ageing can help to challenge ageism and promote a more inclusive and respectful society (Bytheway, 2007; Higgs and Gilleard, 2017).

There is a growing body of literature on the construction of age-related identities as a social construct (Spedale et al., 2014). While age is a chronological phenomenon, societal perceptions of ageing are largely constructed. The age of sixty-five as a definition of older person, for example, is a social construction and has been linked to the introduction of a rudimentary pension in Prussia for people aged sixty-five years (Phelan, 2018). Like other social identities, age-related identity is multidimensional, multi-layered, and differentiated (Sztompka, 2004, pp. 493-494). It is constructed contextually through discursive work rather than being innate in consciousness at birth (Coupland, 2009; Hall, 1996, p. 608). While news media representation of aged care and older persons provides a window into what it is like to grow older and to live in aged care settings (Gilbert, 2021). Studying the representation of the ageing population in media is crucial because it shapes our understanding and attitudes towards ageing and aged care, as highlighted by Thomson et al. (2023). There is a need for further research on the mediated construction of aged identities in Australian news media. Therefore, this study aims to critically examine how Australian newspapers discursively construct identities for older individuals in the context of aged care in Australia. The analysis indicates that economic discourses dominate the construction of identities, with the financial reliance of older individuals on the government being a significant factor in their representation. The paper begins with a review of the relevant literature about ageing in Australia and the portrayal of ageing and aged care in the media, before moving into a discussion of the Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse analysis – theoretical framework and methodology used in this study. Next, I discursively analyse newspaper representations of ageing in the context of aged care in Australia and present findings, discussion and conclusion of the study.

Ageing in Australia

Australia has a high average life expectancy of 81.2 years for men and 85.3 years for women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). Aged-care services in Australia are mainly funded by the Commonwealth Government and delivered by local and State governments (Jeon and Kendig, 2017). In 2021, approximately 67% of older Australians received a pension (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021), which includes benefits such as rent assistance and a concession card (Bateman et al., 2017). The Australian aged-care policies aim to promote "individualisation and independence" by providing community care, an old-age pension, and aged-care homes (Gray and Heinsch, 2009). In 2016-17, older people paid approximately \$4.4 billion, excluding lump sum accommodation deposits, towards their living expenses, care, and accommodation in residential care (Aged Care Financing Authority, 2018).

The foundation of Australia's current aged-care system was laid in the mid-1980s with the establishment of the Residential Care Program and Home and Community Care Programs by the

government (Jeon and Kendig, 2017, p. 240). However, in the 1990s, the government introduced economic rationalist approaches, including means-testing, to regulate public funding for care (Kendig, 2017, p. 23). The subsequent years, from 1996 to 2007, witnessed further shifts in aged-care policies. Over the past decade, numerous significant changes and events have transformed the landscape of aged care in Australia. These include Prime Minister Julia Gillard's introduction of more rigorous means testing in April 2012. The 'Living Longer, Living Better' report proposed amendments to the Aged Care Act of 1997, later incorporated into the Aged Care (Living Longer Living Better) Act of 2013, with the goal of empowering older Australians with greater choice, control, and flexibility in their aged care options (Federal Register of Legislation, 2016). Additionally, there was the establishment of the Aged Care Workforce Strategy Taskforce (Department of Health, 2021a), an increase in home care packages (Department of Health, 2018), the introduction of Aged Care Quality Standards by the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (2021), and the pivotal Aged Care Royal Commission (Royal Commission into Aged Care Safety and Quality, 2019).

Furthermore, in 2021, the Australian government announced a significant \$17.7 billion funding boost for the aged care sector, which included measures aimed at enhancing the capacity and skills of the aged care workforce (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021; Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, 2019). In 2022, reforms were made to the Aged Care Funding Instrument (Department of Health, 2022). Notably, there was a substantial infusion of funding for dementia care provided by Dementia Australia in the same year (2022). The Residential Aged Care Medication Management Review program, initiated by the Department of Health in 2021, also played a crucial role.

Research on ageing in Australia has focused on various aspects, including older people's health, income, ethnicity, gender, and care policies (Borowski et al., 2007), aged care and health care workers (Minichiello and Coulson, 2005), and problems of older Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds (Teshuva and Wells, 2014). The literature emphasises the need for cultural awareness and sensitivity in fulfilling the needs of older Australians. The Australian Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ALSA), based at the Flinders Centre for Ageing Studies, Flinders University, Adelaide, collected and analysed data about demographic details, health, depression, morbid conditions, hospitalization, gross mobility, physical performance, activities of daily living, lifestyle activities, social resources, exercise, education, and income and found that the majority of participants reported ageing as a positive process (Luszcz et al., 2014, p. 8).

Ageing and media

While research on the portrayal of ageing in media remains active, it is widely acknowledged that media representations of older individuals and ageing populations are often narrow and prejudicial (Syvertsen, 2011; Torben-Nielsen and Russ-Mohl, 2012). These depictions tend to under-represent older people, framing them in terms of dependence and passivity rather than as active participants in society (Fealy et al., 2012; Imran and Bowd, 2023; Coupland, 2009). This limited portrayal can exacerbate negative perceptions of ageing and contribute to the marginalisation of older individuals. Furthermore, the media's framing of older persons tends to lean towards the negative. Numerous studies have found that older individuals are often missing from media discourses, and when they do appear, it is usually in a predominantly negative light (Amundsen, 2022; Bai, 2014; Morgan et al., 2021). They are depicted as financially dependent, and discussions surrounding ageing often centre on the escalating costs associated with aged care (Wilisńska, 2013). This trend is observed not only in Western countries but also

in Asian nations, as popular media perpetuates negative and stereotypical images of older individuals (Bai, 2014).

In terms of representation, a consistent deficiency is noted. Weicht (2013) reported a lack of representation and the presence of negative imagery of older people in Australian newspapers, while Chen (2015a) found that negative stereotypes of older individuals were predominant in Taiwanese newspapers. Similarly, Fealy et al. (2012) found that Irish media often portray older people in Ireland with a negative tone. Robinson et al. (2007) documented the negative portrayal of older people in a majority of American media content. However, there are exceptions. Studies from Taiwan and Hong Kong indicate positive portrayals of older individuals, with Chan (2009) attributing this to Asian values such as Confucianism, compassion, and filial piety (Chan, 2009; Kuo, 2009). Chen (2015b) argues that while stereotypes persist in both Taiwanese and British advertisements, the concept of filial piety distinguishes the portrayals of older adults in Taiwanese adverts from those in the UK.

Ainsworth and Hardy (2007) argue that older people are constructed as dependent and a burden on the community due to their utilization of social services. The negative tone for the increasingly ageing population in Canadian newspapers is also noted by Rozanova (2006), a phenomenon referred to as 'apocalyptic demography' (Adams and Dominick, 1995; Gee and Gutman, 2000), which is defined as 'the gloomy forecasts of the collapse of the social security system as a result of the growing proportion of seniors in society' (Lascelles, 2004; Rozanova, 2006, p. 127).

Furthermore, researchers also focused on the media depictions of older people in the context of care systems, for instance, Thomson et al. (2022) argued that older individuals are more likely to be depersonalised and de-identified compared to other demographics in media coverage of aged care in Australia. Imran and Bowd (2023, 2022) extensively discussed the commodification of care within the Australian press, as well as the influence of media power on older people in Western and non-Western contexts. Moreover, Imran (2022) highlighted the role of Malaysian newspapers in reviving familism, which absolves the government from the costs associated with caring for an increasingly ageing population. Connolly (2019) reported that Australian journalists frequently present older people in stereotypical or disempowering ways. Similarly, in their study, Miller et al. (2017) investigated newspaper articles in the United States that discussed nursing homes over a decade. They discovered that most of these articles portrayed negative or neutral perspectives rather than positive ones. This prevalence of negative stories contributed to the development of unfavourable perceptions regarding aged care among the American public. American newspapers primarily emphasised issues such as elder abuse, negligence, fraudulent providers, and substandard service quality, while rarely featuring positive accounts of satisfied elderly individuals or successful care approaches and initiatives (Miller et al., 2018).

This literature underscores the importance of investigating how the media constructs ageing identities in Australia in the context of aged care, as well as the need for further research to better understand how media representations of ageing affect societal views of older people. While prior scholarship has explored the representation of older people in various media formats in different parts of the world, including Australia, there remains a dearth of research specifically focused on Australian media representations of ageing, considering the context of media ownership, political economy, and the state of aged care during the demographic shift. Studying media discourses about older persons enhances our comprehension of the dominant narratives and cultural patterns surrounding ageing that are prevalent in society, rather than solely relying on individual experiences of growing older (Hamilton and Hamaguchi, 2015). This study aims to address part of the gap by critically examining how Australian print media, within the context of media ownership and aged care, construct identities for older persons in the last ten years. By examining the prevalence of economic identities and the marginalisation of social identities in Australian

newspapers, this study sheds new light on the influence of media ownership and political economy on the construction of ageing identities. The application of Fairclough's three-dimensional approach enables a comprehensive analysis that uncovers the underlying ideologies, power dynamics, and cultural values that shape media portrayals of older individuals (Fairclough, 2013). Ultimately, the study aims to promote more positive and inclusive images of ageing in Australian society by highlighting the need for media to reflect critically on their representations of older people and avoid harmful stereotypes.

Methodology

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate articles published in Australian newspapers. As stated by Wodak and Meyer (2009, p. 10), CDA can be utilised to analyse both opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language. Critical discourse analysis aims to explore the role of discursive practices in perpetuating "unequal power relations" (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 63), including the construction of identities within broader social structures. While Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, and Ruth Wodak are pioneering scholars who have made significant contributions to discourse analysis, specifically CDA (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 3), each scholar brings unique perspectives and insights to the study of discourse. Their work explores the intricate relationship between language, power, ideology, and social structures, highlighting the role of language in constructing and reproducing social inequalities, and providing insights into the complexities of communication across different modes and contexts. For instance, van Dijk examines social cognition and the role of discourse in maintaining social dominance (Van Dijk, 2001); Wodak's research focuses on issues of racism, nationalism, and discrimination, examining language in the construction and challenge of social hierarchies (Wodak, 2011); Kress and Leeuwen (2006) contribute to multimodal discourse analysis, exploring visual and spatial dimensions and Fairclough (1995) underscores the relationship between language, power, and ideology.

This study focuses specifically on the work of Norman Fairclough (1995), who asserts that critical discourse analysis is an examination of the relationship between text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. Text may be presented in the form of written or spoken words, while discourse practice encompasses the process of text production by media professionals, text consumption by audiences, and its social distribution. Sociocultural practice, on the other hand, includes the social and cultural activities — including the domination of political, ideological, and cultural domains, as well as situational, institutional, and societal practices of a society surrounding the communicative event. In this study, the communicative event pertains to texts in the form of newspaper articles.

By adopting this approach, the study can analyse the construction of older people within the context of the text, the discursive practice, and sociocultural practice. According to Fairclough, power is entrenched in language, and the construction of identities must be critically interrogated for the inequalities and ideologies they reflect. This necessitates close examination, as "ideological representation" is often not explicit, but instead is embedded in texts and language use in a naturalised way for audiences along with "taken-for-granted assumptions" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 44-45).

The primary components of Fairclough's approach that the study employs include (a) description of the linguistic properties of texts, (b) interpretation of discursive practice, which entails the relationship between the text and its production process, and (c) explanation of discursive practices and social practice (Fairclough, 1995). The three-dimensions approach of Fairclough is useful at a micro-level in identifying the lexicon used to construct identities for older persons that are linked to

institutional practices at a meso-level, as well as to political, ideological, and cultural practices at the macro level.

Research time frame

The time frame selected for this study is from 2011 to 2021. During this time, Australia implemented several reforms to improve the quality and accessibility of aged care (details in the previous section *Ageing in Australia*). Since newspaper reports are considered public data, obtaining ethics approval for this study was not required. As noted by Carvalho (2008), most media discourse studies typically focus on news discourses over a short period of time, whereas this study spans over a decade and encompasses significant amendments to aged-care policies in Australia. This extended timeframe enables a comprehensive investigation of various stages of issues related to aged-care policies. The policy changes implemented during this period received considerable media attention, which shed light on important issues concerning older individuals that are often overlooked by the press (Kononova et al., 2019).

Sampling

This study focuses on the representation of older persons in Australian newspapers, drawing from a sample of articles extracted from eight major publications. The sample comprises state-based metropolitan and national broadsheets and tabloids, with efforts made to achieve broader spectrum of readership. In Australia, mainstream newspapers are predominantly published by News Corp Australia and Nine Entertainment Co (formerly Fairfax Media Limited), and thus the dataset is composed of newspapers from both media groups to facilitate consideration of the influence of ownership on the portrayal of older people.

Fairfax and News Corp are ‘archrivals’ and typically prosecute different and opposed social and political agendas through their newspapers (Hobbs and McKnight, 2014). Relative to one another, News Corp Australia, is pro-neoliberal (Wagner et al., 2022) and Rupert Murdoch has history of promoting neoliberal ideology (McKnight, 2012) and exerting its centre-right ideological agenda, however, Fairfax Media has traditionally showcased centre-left perspectives (Sinclair, 2017). These divergent editorial orientations between News Corp and Fairfax Media exemplify the contrasting political inclinations within the Australian newspaper landscape, shaping public discourse and providing alternative perspectives (McKnight, 2013).

The study includes *The Australian*, *The Herald-Sun*, *The Courier Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Advertiser* from News Corp Australia, and *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The Canberra Times* from Fairfax Media Limited. To construct the dataset, a rigorous process was followed, which involved a keyword search on the online archives of selected newspapers. The global database provider of digital information resources, ProQuest, was utilised for the online search. The keywords “older person,” “aged care,” “ageing,” and “elderly” were selected based on the results of the literature review discussed in the preceding section.

Initially, a total of **1006** articles were returned from the selected newspapers, based on the keywords. Subsequently, all the reports were meticulously examined and evaluated to ascertain if they addressed ageing and older people within the context of aged care. As a result, **219** articles were deemed irrelevant to the research and were excluded from the dataset. The remaining articles were then systematically categorised based on their mastheads, and a second round of review was conducted to eliminate any instances of duplication. At this stage, **98** identical items were detected, which were the same story by the same reporter, published in multiple newspapers.

Only the first version of the story in the search results was included in the dataset, while the rest were removed. The final dataset consisted of **689** articles that were included in the analysis and distributed across various mastheads. Figure 1 shows the sampling process and Table 1 shows the distribution of mastheads according to ownership.

Findings

The examination of news articles suggests that the Australian press predominantly revolves around the economics of aged care, depicting older Australians as consumers of nursing and residential homes. The media discourse centres on funding for care and care-related costs, while vulnerabilities associated with old age, such as health issues, gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the least discussed themes were families and social life of older Australians, indicating a gap in media coverage.

The study analysed a sample of **689** news articles, out of which **408** were related to nursing homes, residential homes, and funding means; health-related issues, including COVID-19, dementia, hospitals, and palliative care, were discussed in **233** articles — all centred around the allocation of financial resources and financial implications of care. On the other hand, only **48 out of 689** articles covered families and family life, revealing a significant disparity in media attention. News outlets often address older individuals in nursing and residential homes from an economic perspective, portraying them primarily as customers of these facilities rather than acknowledging their status as valued members of society and citizens with unique needs and concerns. Therefore, it can be argued that the dominant identities constructed and reported for older people in the Australian press are economic identities, with familial identities receiving inadequate representation, please see Figure 2 for details. In terms of media ownership, News Corp published more reports on ageing and older populations than Fairfax – 407 compared with 282 – News Corp newspapers portray older Australians as a burden three times more often than Fairfax papers, which

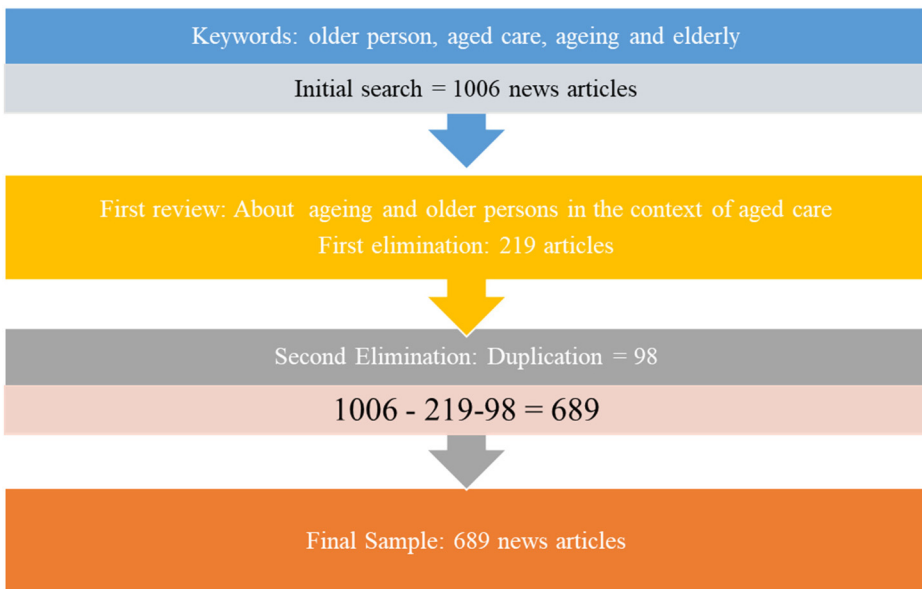
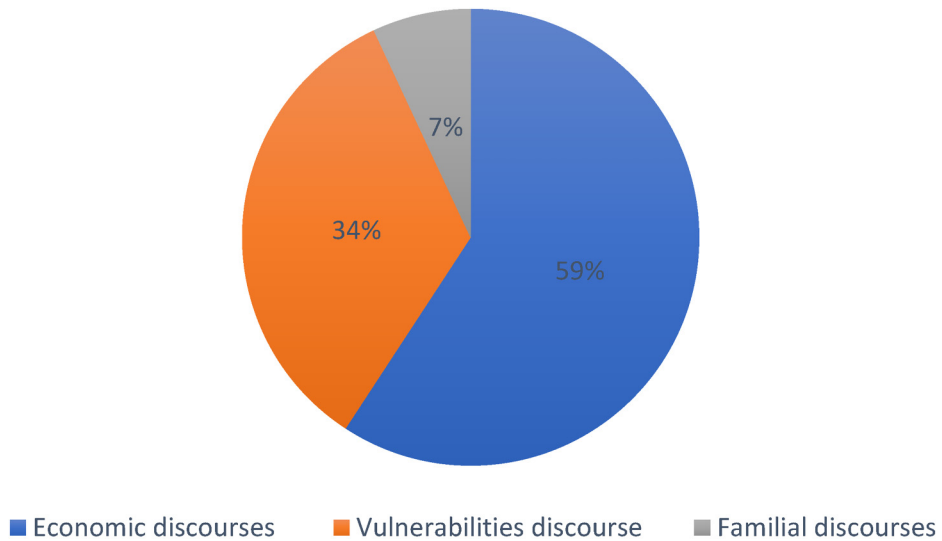


Figure 1. Sampling process.

Table 1. Australian newspapers and their ownership 2011–2021.

January 2011 – December 2021				
Newspaper Title	Quantity	Ownership	National/State	Type
<i>The Australian</i>	102	News Corp Australia	National	Broadsheet
<i>The Courier-Mail</i>	90	News Corp Australia	Queensland	Tabloid
<i>The Advertiser</i>	121	News Corp Australia	South Australia	Tabloid
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	101	Fairfax Media Limited	New South Wales	Compact
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	42	News Corp Australia	New South Wales	Tabloid
<i>The Canberra Times</i>	84	Fairfax Media Limited	Capital	Broadsheet
<i>Herald Sun</i>	52	News Corp Australia	Victoria	Tabloid
<i>The Age</i>	97	Fairfax Media Limited	Victoria	Compact

**Figure 2.** Media discourses in the Australian Press 2011–2021.

reflects the expected support for free markets and neoliberalism by News Corp (McKnight, 2012) and support for social support by Fairfax (Fenech and Wilkins, 2019).

It is important to highlight that the media coverage regarding aged care and older individuals is not uniformly distributed. Instead, the coverage varies over time, such as during significant events like the COVID-19 pandemic, the Royal Commission on Ageing, and the implementation of aged care reforms etc. Also, it's worth noting that news coverage gradually shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with more articles discussing vulnerabilities associated with older people and aged care, while familial identities remained recessive throughout the decade, implying a persistent gap in media coverage. However, this paper only focuses on one element of the findings — economic identities.

Economic identities

As discussed above the dominant identities constructed for older Australians are economic identities as nearly 60% of the sampled news articles reported and described older Australians in

economic terms. Depending on the language use and reportage, economic identities are categorised as (a) consumers or (b) vulnerable.

Consumers

Throughout the last decade, the most prevalent identity constructed for older Australians in the Australian press has been that of “consumers of the aged-care system,” who, according to newspapers, are affluent and able to pay for aged-care services. The identity of consumer is linked to the utilisation or purchase of aged-care services and reinforces the prevalent discourse of marketization of aged care in Australia (Imran and Bowd, 2022). The newspapers often describe these consumers as affluent, creating a distinction between pensioners and non-pensioners, and emphasizing the ability to pay for aged-care services. However, the portrayal of less affluent older Australians as consumers also exists, albeit to a lesser extent. The language used to construct this identity varies among media outlets. The prevalence of this identity suggests that market-oriented discourse and economic considerations are essential in the representation of older Australians in the media. For example, the lead paragraph of *The Australian* (2012) portrayed older Australians as consumers:

The Gillard government’s decision to pour an additional \$1.2 billion over the next five years into overcoming workforce shortages in the aged-care sector was welcomed by providers and consumers as an important move to improve services and help handle future increases in demand (Lunn, 2012).

Fairclough (1995) argues that naming individuals or groups is a choice that reflects a preference for one identity over another. Naming older people as consumers normalises consumerism and demonstrates how newspapers perpetuate capitalist narratives of neoliberalism and the privatisation of aged care. *The Australian* (2012) explicitly positioned aged-care services as a commodity and older Australians as customers by using the dichotomy “providers” and “consumers.” Describing aged-care providers and older people as businesses and consumers, respectively, reinforces the marketization of aged care in Australia.

The portrayal of older Australians as consumers of aged care is evident in various news reports, including below excerpts from *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2012):

MORE self-funded retirees are likely to pay the full cost of about \$136 a day... The government describes it as ‘fair means testing’ of aged care, and this is expected over five years to yield savings to the taxpayer of \$561 million - at the expense of the consumer. And that amount can be expected to grow steadily. But users will have more choice about how they can pay - either by lump sum or by periodic payments - and whether they are cared for in a nursing home or in their own home” (Metherell, 2012)

To fund their care, people can pay with a lump-sum bond, periodic payments, or a combination. If needed, they can sell their home, rent it out, or take out a reverse mortgage with a private lender. To prevent people being forced to sell their house to secure a scarce aged care spot, there will be a statutory cooling-off period allowing them to take the spot and then work out how best to pay for it (Coorey, 2012).

This extract demonstrates how language can be used to normalise and propagate broader discourses about consumerism in Australia. These findings align with Rozanova’s (2010, p. 221) study of older Canadians, which argues that the normalisation of consumerism legitimises social inequalities among different components of society. In Australia, older people are portrayed not only as consumers of aged care but also as saviours who contribute to taxpayers’ savings, as aged care is expected to yield \$561 million in savings for the government. The language used by journalists and media outlets constructs the identities of older Australians and shapes public discourse around ageing and aged care.

The language used in these news reports constructs a particular view of the aged care system and older people in Australia. By referring to older adults as consumers of aged care, newspapers reproduce and propagate capitalist narratives about neoliberalism and the privatisation of aged care. The discourse of marketisation reinforces the view that aged care is a commodity and older Australians are customers who must pay for the services they receive. The use of language that highlights the individualistic nature of aged care arrangements also suggests that older people may have to choose between their family home and care, and that the family home is a commodity that can be sold to fund care. Similarly, Herald Sun (2021) reported about the cost of aged care and loss in communal residential aged care homes in Australia:

Australia spends \$26bn a year on aged care, \$21bn of which is in the form of government-subsidised care, and the remainder funded by individuals themselves. The inescapable fact is Australia spends less than half of what comparable countries do on aged care, at 1.2 per cent of GDP versus an OECD average of 2.5 per cent. This begs the question of what sort of aged-care system do Australians want for our parents and grandparents, our uncles and aunts? The funding squeeze helps explain why 64 per cent of communal residential aged-care homes operated at a loss in 2020, almost double the medium-term average of 33 per cent (Sparrow, 2021)

While the economic costs of providing social support for older people, reflect a neoliberal discourse of austerity and limited government spending, Australia spends significantly less on aged care than comparable countries, with only 1.2% of GDP compared to the OECD average of 2.5%. This raises questions about the type of aged care system Australians want for their loved ones. However, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2020) reported a critique of neoliberal policies that prioritise individual responsibility over collective welfare in the discussion about the affordability of social support for vulnerable older Australians:

Currently about one million older Australians receive aged care at home. By 2050 that number will be 3.6 million. The forecast is that numbers in residential care will rise from 200,000 now to 600,000, Mr Fitzgerald estimated. Many people living with dementia may increasingly live at home. Yet Australia would not be able to afford to fund the social supports necessary to minimise risk for vulnerable older people without re-engaging the community, said Mr Fitzgerald. “The notion that the community itself is part of the solution is something that Australia has lost. COVID has demonstrated, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that a society doesn’t function well when that’s gone. In the case of older people ... neighbourhood connectedness is very important” (Power 2020).

The prevalence of economic and neoliberal discourses in media reflects subtle institutional strategies and the influence of media ownership. News Corp papers, particularly influenced by Murdoch’s pro-neoliberal ideology (Wagner et al., 2022), tend to amplify economic identities by constructing and propagating narratives aligned with neoliberalism. This ideological stance is also observable in Murdoch’s media outlets in the United States and Britain (Curran and Seaton, 2003). In contrast, Fairfax Media exhibits a different approach by providing critique of neoliberal policies, although not proportionally to the support given by its counterpart. While the dataset may not contain as many examples overtly criticizing the neoliberal approach, these instances offer a counterpoint to the dominant discourses presented by News Corp. Inman & Bowd (2023) similarly argue that Fairfax papers provide a platform for marginalized groups, including older individuals. These observations highlight the influence of media ownership on the construction and dissemination of discourses, particularly regarding economic and political ideologies. The differing approaches of News Corp and Fairfax Media reflect their respective editorial policies and perspectives, contributing to the diverse landscape of media representation and discourse surrounding older individuals and other marginalized groups.

In sum, the language used in most news reports promotes and normalises neoliberal policies, which emphasise independence and choice for older people, while also reducing the financial burden on the government. However, these policies may also contribute to social inequalities among different components of society, including older adults. The lack of critical engagement with official discourses and the absence of comments from older adults themselves in these news reports demonstrates journalistic practices of avoiding conflict with government departments. These findings highlight the need for critical analysis of media representations of older people and aged care and suggest the importance of considering alternative discourses that challenge the normalisation of consumerism and marketisation of aged care.

Vulnerable

While the identity “consumers of aged care” is prevalent in most newspapers, the study also found examples that depict older people as vulnerable. The discussion about the vulnerabilities associated with old age increased gradually during the last ten years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following examples from *The Advertiser* (2020) and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2019) demonstrate the typical language used in the construction of such identities:

Aged-care elderly feel vulnerable. Three-quarters of elderly Australians living in nursing homes or having at-home care feel their needs are not always met, according to surveys conducted during the pandemic. Unanswered calls for help, high staff turnover, inadequate training, and staff not knowing residents, were among the top concerns for respondents (Rose, 2020)

Commissioner to stick up for neglected and abused... “We will not tolerate the abuse, neglect and exploitation of our most vulnerable citizens, which is why we have introduced a new Ageing and Disability commissioner,” she said. Mr Fitzgerald, who was one of six commissioners to oversee the five-year royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse, said he had spent his career “helping to protect vulnerable people” (Visentin, 2019)

The headline “Aged-care elderly feel vulnerable” implies that older people are at risk and in need of protection. However, the use of the phrase “aged-care elderly” suggests that older Australians are primarily defined by their status as recipients of care, rather than by their social and familial identities or life experiences. This framing may perpetuate stereotypes that older persons are helpless and dependent. Moreover, the issues point to systemic problems in the aged care system, rather than individual failures on the part of staff members. However, the use of passive language in the phrase “unanswered calls for help” obscures the responsibility of specific individuals or organisations for failing to respond to older people’s needs.

The data suggests that there is a difference in the way the media reports on the ageing population depending on the context. When discussing the dependency of older people on taxpayers, a negative tone is often used, perpetuating ageist values in society. Plath (2008) argues that this construction of older people as dependent is not a natural process of ageing but rather a product of societal attitudes towards ageing. This is exemplified in the excerpt from *The Courier-Mail* (2013) where the writer questions the use of the term “burden” when referring to the ageing population, highlighting the offensive nature of such language and challenging negative stereotypes about older people:

Could there be a more offensive phrase to older Australians who are anything but lazy, useless and dead-weights in their communities ... One reason for the negative stereotyping is that favoured tool of the

economists and demographers: the dependency ratio. It calculates the percentage of the population under 15 and over 64 against the percentage of working age ... yet when it comes to discussions on Australia's future we're blithely accepting of the "burden of an ageing population" (Lang, 2013)

The quoted text highlights the offensive nature of negative stereotyping of older Australians as "lazy, useless and dead-weights in their communities." The writer suggests that one reason for this negative stereotyping is the use of the "dependency ratio" by economists and demographers. This ratio calculates the percentage of the population under 15 and over 64 against the percentage of working-age individuals. The author argues that despite the flaws in this approach, discussions on Australia's future continue to perpetuate the idea of the "burden of an ageing population." This language and framing imply that older Australians are a burden on society, rather than valuable members of their communities who contribute in various ways.

Thomson et al. (2023) argue that media influence our knowledge of and perspectives toward ageing and aged care, therefore negativity propagated by the mainstream newspapers about aged care and older people can have negative impact on older persons, their relatives and wider community. In sum, it can be argued that the language and framing used in the construction of identities for older Australians can reinforce negative stereotypes and obscure systemic issues. Furthermore, the use of the "dependency ratio" perpetuates ageist values by implying that older Australians are a burden on society. The above examples highlight the need for more nuanced portrayals of older people that recognise their contributions to society and challenge negative stereotypes.

Discussion

The discourse surrounding the construction of identities in Australia reveals that various social, cultural, journalistic, and economic forces have a significant impact on how the media portrays older individuals. According to Coupland (2009, p. 853), age-related identities and attributions are contextualised and constructed in relation to social norms and assumptions within communicative roles and relationships, genres, and purposes. As such, newspapers construct identities for older individuals through lexical choices, reporting on specific angles of news stories, prioritising certain news actors, and amplifying particular voices over others. While in Australia, the financial burden of aged care is either borne by older people themselves or the government, nursing homes are constructed as businesses, and residents are referred to as consumers of care, normalising the consumer identity for older Australians. Similarly, this study found that Australian newspapers often use negative language when describing older people and ageing populations and tend to represent them as a burden. Rather than engaging in critical analysis of official discourses, especially regarding the marketisation of aged care, news outlets often promote official rhetoric – encouraging neoliberal and individualistic approaches to keep the burden away from the government.

The findings of this study suggest that macro-level issues are communicated to the micro-level using language and discursive practices, as revealed by the application of critical discourse analysis. The construction and propagation of economic and negative identities for older individuals and aged care by newspapers, particularly those owned by Murdoch and considered pro-neoliberal (Wagner et al., 2022), reinforce neoliberal and capitalist policies. Gille et al. (2017) argue that media plays a role in circulating institutionalized expectations and perceptions about the aged-care system. Consequently, for many Australians without direct experience with aged care, their knowledge and perception of old age and aged care are shaped by media discourses. However, due to concentrated news media ownership (Dwyer and Koskie, 2021), Australian newspapers lack plurality in their discourse on older individuals and aged care, often presenting overtly negative

portrayals. This overtly negative and economic framing of ageing and aged care by the media can contribute to the spread of ageist attitudes and avoidance of contact with aged-care users (Phillipson, 2013).

These findings suggest that this phenomenon is not unique to Australia. Miller et al. (2017) reported overwhelmingly negative stories about older people in American newspapers, leading to negative attitudes towards aged care among the American public. Cuddy and Fiske (2004, p. 17) argue that older Americans experience a paternalistic form of prejudice, being pitied but not respected. Similarly, British newspapers construct older people as an economic problem (Bristow, 2016), Swedish papers depict them as a financial burden, and Polish newspapers portray them as dependent (Wilisńska, 2013). Moreover, Teodorescu and Chiribuca (2018) reported the undermining of social identities of older individuals in Romanian media. It can be argued that contemporary portrayals of older individuals reflect a shift in societal and cultural attitudes, resulting in a lower perceived status compared to their predecessors in history.

Vasterman (2005, pp. 509–512) argues that journalists do not merely report news, but they also “create news” and construct reality through their selection of facts, statements, and context. Despite the Western model of journalism, which assumes relative autonomy of news organisations from the state and independence of journalists, Australian journalists see themselves primarily as watchdogs on the government (Nerone, 2012, p. 446). The coverage of aged-care issues demonstrates broad support for government policies, reflecting a lack of scrutiny and exclusion of relevant voices. It’s worth noting here that 3 out of 4 prime ministers during this study (2011–2021) belonged to the Liberal party; previous studies, such as McKnight (2013), have reported the support of Murdoch’s newspapers for the political interests of the Liberal-National Party coalition. However, Fairfax newspapers occasionally criticised the neoliberal policies. Fairclough’s three-dimensional approach helped to explore the language use associated with identities for older Australians at the organisational level of newspapers (meso-level) and the marketisation of aged care at the macro-level.

Conclusion and way forward

In conclusion, economic identities are prevalent, while social identities are recessive in Australian newspapers. It demonstrates that the financial contribution of older people significantly influences how older individuals are perceived and constructed by the media. The study explored how the media constructs older individuals as a burden in Australia, and the application of Fairclough’s three-dimensional approach facilitated linking language use to media ownership and broader social practices. The emphasis on economic identities undermines the social and familial significance of older persons and can have negative impact on individuals, including older people and family caregivers. It can be argued that older Australians could have been portrayed as social/familial units rather than just being characterized as customers or burden.

The results of this study highlight the importance of critically examining language-use in media discourse, particularly in relation to issues affecting older people. By analysing the ways in which newspapers construct their narratives and frame their stories, we can gain deeper insights into the socio-cultural values, power dynamics, and ideological perspectives that shape public opinion and policy decisions. Ultimately, this approach can help to promote more accurate, diverse, and respectful portrayals of older people in the media, and foster greater understanding and empathy towards this often-marginalised population.

It is important to recognise the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of ageing and to challenge negative stereotypes and discriminatory practices that perpetuate ageism. This can

be achieved through promoting positive and diverse representations of older people, prioritising their voices and perspectives in media discourse, and encouraging critical reflection on the role of the media in shaping cultural attitudes towards ageing. Taken together, these findings underscore the need for the media to reflect critically on their representations of older people, avoiding harmful stereotypes and instead promoting positive and diverse images of ageing. Media outlets should strive to create a more accurate and nuanced portrayal of their experiences, contributions, and challenges. This is especially important in the current context of ageing populations worldwide, where older people are often overlooked and undervalued in social, economic, and political spheres.

This study contributed to the understanding of the role of news media in shaping identities of older individuals through an analysis of news articles from two major media organizations, Fairfax and News Corp. The study sheds light on how media ownership and the political economy influence the construction of ageing identities, revealing a clear connection between language use, media ownership, and broader societal practices. To further this, future studies should expand their scope by incorporating regional newspapers, known for their distinct reporting styles and audience preferences, offering a nuanced understanding of how identities are constructed for older individuals across different regions. Additionally, examining the discursive practices of influential news outlets like *The Guardian Australia* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) would shed light on their role in shaping public perceptions of older people. Including additional news sources in analyses would facilitate comparative insights, deepening our understanding of media ownership's influence on journalistic practices. Longitudinal studies could reveal evolving perspectives on older individuals in media, reflecting changing societal attitudes towards ageing. An intersectional analysis, considering factors like gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status alongside age, would provide a more comprehensive understanding. Finally, incorporating audience reception studies would offer valuable insights into how media portrayals of older individuals are interpreted by the public, enriching our understanding of media's impact on societal perceptions of ageing.

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Note

1. Older persons, older people, older individual and alike are used interchangeably in this article.

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