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Constructing old age: How Newspapers Use Bias and Persuasion to Shape the Aging Discourse

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Parmi les questions sociales abordées sous un prisme idéologique, le vieillissement revêt une importance particulière, les représentations médiatiques jouant un rôle central dans sa construction discursive. Cet article analyse la manière dont la vieillesse est construite à travers l'usage d'un langage idéologiquement marqué et de stratégies d'encadrement du discours journalistique. En appliquant une analyse critique du discours à des articles du Guardian, l'étude met en lumière la façon dont les récits sur le vieillissement reflètent et renforcent les normes sociales, les présupposés culturels et les interprétations politiques. L'étude fait ressortir des thématiques centrales telles que la médicalisation, le fardeau économique, le vieillissement actif et les tensions intergénérationnelles. En valorisant certaines identités tout en marginalisant d'autres, le discours journalistique ne fait pas que refléter les attitudes à l'égard des personnes âgées, mais participe activement à leur construction.

Mots-clés : vieillesse, discours journalistique, construction de l'identité, analyse critique du discours.

Among the many social issues examined through an ideological framework, aging appears to be particularly significant, with media representations playing a pivotal role in its discursive construction. This paper examines the construal of old age using ideologically charged language and framing strategies in newspaper discourse. Applying the methodology of critical discourse analysis to The Guardian articles, the study illuminates how narratives about aging reflect and reinforce societal norms, cultural assumptions, and policy interpretations. By analyzing the use of expert opinions, older adults' voices, and intertextual references, the paper identifies dominant themes such as medicalization, economic burden, active aging, and intergenerational tensions. Moreover, the study argues that newspaper discourse not only mirrors public attitudes towards older adults but actively participates in shaping them, privileging certain identities, while marginalizing others.

Keywords: old age, newspaper discourse, identity construction, critical discourse analysis.

Entre las cuestiones sociales abordadas desde un prisma ideológico, el envejecimiento reviste una importancia particular, ya que las representaciones mediáticas desempeñan un papel central en su construcción discursiva. Este artículo analiza la manera en que se construye la vejez a través del uso de un lenguaje ideológicamente marcado y de estrategias de encuadramiento del discurso periodístico. Mediante la aplicación de un análisis crítico del discurso a artículos publicados en The Guardian, el estudio destaca cómo los relatos sobre el envejecimiento reflejan y refuerzan las normas sociales, los supuestos culturales y las interpretaciones políticas. El estudio destaca temas centrales como la medicalización, la carga económica, el envejecimiento activo y las tensiones intergeneracionales. Al valorizar algunas identidades y marginar a otras, el discurso periodístico no solo refleja las actitudes hacia los ancianos, sino que participa activamente en su construcción.

Palabras clave : vejez, discurso periodístico, construcción de la identidad, análisis crítico del discurso.

Introduction

The examination of language and discourse through an ideological lens has become a common practice in the humanities and social sciences (van Dijk, 2016, p. 135). Within this framework, ideologies are understood as multidimensional concepts that encompass social, cognitive, and discursive components. Among various social phenomena examined through this perspective, the discourse of aging has emerged as a particularly significant area. Like other identity categories, old age is discursively constructed and context dependent. Media portrayals of aging often reflect social attitudes and ideologies, with recent academic studies revealing a range of contradictory approaches. Aging is depicted simultaneously as a time of wisdom and dignity as well as a life stage, marked by decline and vulnerability (Salvador & Sampietro, 2020, p. 2). Despite these conflicting views, scholars broadly agree that aging is a socially, culturally, and contextually mediated phenomenon. As one of the leading voices in aging studies, Margaret M. Gullette, asserts, "how we discuss age depends on the context and the underlying ideology" (Gullette, 2004, p. 7).

Media discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding of aging and old age by communicating academic knowledge from fields such as medicine and gerontology to wider audiences (Grebe *et al.*, 2013, p. 91). Moreover, these interdiscursive representations do more than simply represent expert information, they actively construct and circulate culturally and socially resonant interpretations of aging within a specific historical moment (Grebe *et al.*, 2013, p. 91). In doing so, media portrayals contribute to the formation of public perceptions of social groups by associating them with attributes, capacities, or concerns (van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). Thus, media discourse not only mirrors but also actively participates in the production and reinforcement of societal norms surrounding aging.

Accordingly, this paper aims to investigate how old age identities are discursively constructed in newspaper discourse through the strategic use of language. It offers a critical overview of key discursive elements that contribute to shaping public models and perceptions of aging. The main objective of the paper is to analyze how newspaper articles published between 2022 and 2024 in *The Guardian* construct and reinforce the dominant narratives of "aging", promoted by journalists. These discursive constructions shape the representations of older individuals as well as reflect and propagate broader ideological worldviews.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The Concept of "Old Age" as a Social and Discursive Construct

Social representation is widely regarded as an important element, particularly within the political domain. In this context, the visibility and portrayal of older individuals in the media can be interpreted as a reflection of their communication rights and their political rights (Bergström & Edström, 2021, p. 195). When older adults are underrepresented or stereotypically portrayed, it raises concerns about their inclusion in public discourse. Conversely, fair and diverse media representation contributes to the recognition of older people as active participants in democratic life.

Drawing on Salvador and Sampietro (2020, p. 1), certain recurring themes surrounding aging resonate across cultures and help shape the collective imagination about it in societies. Age has

long been recognized as a key variable in sociolinguistic research. However, being often considered together with other demographic categories such as social class, gender, and ethnicity, age has often received comparatively limited analytical attention (Andrew, 2007). This underrepresentation highlights the need for more focused inquiry into how old age is constructed and interpreted within discourse.

Some scholars argue that conceptualizing aging as a distinct, bounded stage of life is by itself a form of ageism (Gullette, 2004). This perspective challenges the conventional, linear life-course model and emphasizes the ideological underpinnings of how aging is framed. In contrast, other academics maintain that age retains a biological foundation, even though it is deeply mediated by social, cultural, and institutional factors. The central question, as Gilleard (2025, p. 507) suggests, is whether social representations of age simply reflect biological reality or actively shape how aging is experienced, both individually and collectively.

Drawing on the principles of social constructivism, according to which discourse is socially constitutive (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), many researchers argue that age identity is not a fixed or inherent trait but is, instead, socially constructed, performed, and continually negotiated through language and interaction (Kiełkiewicz-Janowiak, 2011). Interpreted through this methodological lens, aging should not be regarded merely as a biological inevitability. It emerges as a dynamic and multifaceted process that is deeply shaped by cultural narratives, societal expectations, and discursive practices.

Consequently, defining old age solely in scientific or biological terms proves quite problematic, as this concept is inherently subjective and marked by considerable heterogeneity. The accumulation of personal experiences across the life course results in highly diverse aging trajectories, which challenge reductive or universal definitions. As van Leeuwen *et al.* (2024, p. 5) note, this diversity gives rise to a rich and varied landscape of later life.

The social construction of old age is shaped by three main discursive domains: regulatory discourses (legal and institutional frameworks), endogenous discourses (narratives by older individuals or advocacy groups), and exogenous discourses (representations in literature, media, and the arts by external sources) (Salvador & Sampietro, 2020, p. 14). These overlapping narratives reflect the complexity and contradictions in how aging is understood and portrayed.

Furthermore, the discursive construction of aging varies significantly across different historical periods, geographic locations, and social contexts, often leading to both individual and collective tensions (Salvador & Sampietro, 2020, p. 10). Present-day discourse about aging differs significantly from that of past centuries, as does the aging process itself (Gleason, 2017, p. 3). Before the "medicalization" of aging, old age and frailty were largely accepted as inevitable realities for the relatively few individuals who reached advanced years. However, with the dramatic increase in life expectancy, the concepts of "successful aging" or "active aging" have emerged in academic and popular narratives (Fraser *et al.,* 2016; Köttl *et al.,* 2022). This new perspective suggests that the strongest predictor of well-being in old age is a sense of control and mastery, rather than physical health (Gleason, 2017, p. 4).

As Lynott and Lynott (1996) observed, the social construction of age became a central focus in social gerontology in the late 20th century, linking old age to social and political factors rather than biology. Accordingly, old age tends to be seen as a marginalized status shaped by institutions

like welfare systems, enforced retirement, and inadequate support, leading to cultural invisibility rather than being defined by chronological age (Gilleard, 2025, p. 504).

If aging is understood as a social construct, then ageism is similarly co-created by both society and individuals (van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2024, p. 5). Ageism can be defined as the negative co-construction of aging through shared beliefs held by people and society, which may be explicit or implicit. This definition highlights the powerful role of representation in influencing the aging experience, as people's views on aging are shaped by the images and ideas they encounter. Self-directed ageism emerges when individuals internalize and embody these societal expectations (van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2024, p. 5).

Chronological age, usually organized by calendar years, reflects the structured nature of industrial society, where social systems assign status based on age (Eckert, 1997, p. 155). Although it has commonly become recognized that biological and social development may not always correspond to chronological age, this remains the most widely accepted criterion in many societies (Andrew, 2007). Historical studies on aging indicate that old age is not necessarily becoming more unpleasant, but rather that the challenges associated with aging have changed (Gleason, 2017, p. 1). Additionally, perceptions of old age depend on the age of the person making the judgment and whether they are categorizing themselves or others.

Although the boundaries of old age are established based on institutional markers such as retirement (Salvador & Sampietro, 2020, p. 15), a critical review of the scientific literature shows that chronological age remains the main factor for defining old age, especially in media studies focused on later life (Iversen & Wilin´ska, 2020). As Eckert (1997, p. 154) points out, "to the Western social scientist, chronological age is age". This dominant reliance on fixed chronological markers has been widely criticized for oversimplifying the diverse experiences of older adults and ignoring the heterogeneity within this population. The wide range of experiences among older adults has prompted researchers to distinguish different stages of aging, acknowledging that the elderly are not a uniform group (van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2024, p. 5). Laslett (1996) introduced the notion of the "third age" as a new chronological identity in modern life. This stage is characterized by an active, healthy, and productive phase of aging, whereas the "fourth age" is understood as a period defined more by its limitations than its possibilities (Higgs & Gilleard, 2016, p. 1)

Framing Age: Media Representations of Later Life

The media play a powerful role in shaping the public agenda by influencing what we think about and consider important. The images and narratives they present about older adults directly impact societal ideas about aging and shape how older people are perceived (Bergström & Edström, 2022, p. 191). Researchers emphasize that a fundamental media value is the right not to be harmed, humiliated, or misrepresented through communication (2022, p. 193). Whether later life is depicted as a looming crisis of apocalyptic demography or as the rise of an over-entitled baby-boom generation, these contrasting portrayals underscore the ongoing fragmentation of old age as a cohesive social category.

Eisenberg (2023) notes that while media coverage has begun to address demographic aging more thoughtfully and stories about generational conflict have declined, some journalists still rely on demeaning stereotypes about older adults, echoing what Margaret M. Gullette (2018) calls the "decline narrative". Media portrayals of aging often frame it as a disease, a disaster, especially when intersecting with gender, because society "continues to denigrate older women who do not agree

with the conventions of youthful appearance and lifestyle" (Shevchenko-Hotsuliak & Casado-Gual, 2025, p. 3).

In this respect, language plays a central role in constructing social reality and reinforcing power dynamics (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). Discourses are circulated in ways that create idealized identities, shaping how individuals view themselves and what they wish to become. Consequently, such discourses profoundly influence how older adults are represented as well as how they perceive their own identities (Fraser *et al.*, 2016, p. 414). The language used to discuss aging impacts not only interpersonal interactions but also broader policymaking and decision-making processes (Bergström & Edström, 2022, p. 197). Although the terms like "elderly" and "senior citizens" are still commonly used in media coverage of people aged 60 and above, their prevalence has radically declined in recent years (Eisenberg, 2023).

Ultimately, media portrayals of aging often reduce older adults to a homogenous group, emphasizing either vitality or frailty. This oversimplification erases the diversity of later life and similarly reinforces ageist stereotypes. Researchers claim that when older people are depicted passively or negatively, it can normalize age discrimination, limit their visibility and voice, and even discourage careers in elder care (Bergström & Edström, 2022, p. 196).

Methodology

In this section, we will first outline the data collection method, followed by a description of the sample, data analysis process, and some limitations of the study.

It is well established that news outlets guide public attention toward selected topics, which in turn helps shape how people think and form their opinions (Weaver, 2007, p. 195). This study analyzes 25 articles selected from the newspaper *The Guardian* (online edition), published between 2022 and 2024. Using a critical discourse analysis approach, it explores the dominant narratives of "aging" constructed by journalists. The selected timeframe reflects the post-COVID-19 period, an era that significantly affected older populations, and captures recent trends in the portrayal of aging in public discourse. Articles were identified using keywords such as "elderly", "aged", "aging," "old age", and "older persons/adults". The procedure involved careful selection of articles that were representative of a range of topics related to aging, ensuring a diverse sample.

To gain a deeper understanding of the narratives and ideologies embedded in media texts, this study employed CDA. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Fairclough (1995), van Dijk (1993), Wodak (2001), Wodak and Meyer (2009), and Ainsworth and Hardy (2004), CDA was used to explore how language constructs social meanings around aging and how these meanings may reinforce or challenge societal power structures. CDA offers a powerful framework for deconstructing media discourse as a site of ideological struggle. By situating language within its socio-political context, it reveals how discourse can maintain or subvert inequalities. The analysis focused on discursive strategies, lexical choices, tone, and intertextual references to identify how age-related stereotypes and assumptions are communicated, and how they contribute to broader age-based inequalities.

This study used a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative CDA with content analysis to explore the topics, actors, and references to older adults, focusing on terminology, tone, rhetorical strategies, recurring themes, and dominant narratives. These elements are key to understanding

how the media construct social meanings around aging and influence public attitudes. Drawing on qualitative approaches, the analysis centers on how meaning is constructed through individual and contextual interpretation. Specifically, qualitative content analysis was used to examine selected texts in detail, uncovering underlying themes, perspectives, and implicit meanings that might not be immediately visible. Discourse analysis, in this context, enables the identification of both overt and subtle linguistic cues that shape public perceptions of older people. It helps to determine how media narratives may either normalize ageist ideologies or offer more nuanced, empowering representations of aging.

However, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study is limited to one newspaper outlet (*The Guardian*), which may not fully represent the diversity of media perspectives on aging. Second, while the analysis covers a three-year period, the decision to analyze only 25 articles was guided by both practical and methodological considerations. CDA requires an in-depth, qualitative examination of texts, focusing on linguistic features, discursive strategies, and underlying ideologies. Such detailed analysis is time-intensive and best suited to a manageable number of texts to ensure depth over breadth. Additionally, the goal of the study is not to generalize across the entire media landscape but to identify and interpret dominant narratives and recurring patterns in the representation of aging. A carefully selected sample allows for meaningful insights while maintaining analytical rigor. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into how media discourse of aging contributes to the construction and reinforcement of social power dynamics related to age.

Deconstructing Aging Discourses: A Critical Approach to Media Narratives

The first stage of the analysis focused on the on the language used to refer to older people in news articles, recognizing that these word choices significantly influence how narratives are framed. The study revealed that definitions of older age and older people varied across articles, applying terms such as standard descriptors ("elderly", "pensioners", or "retirees"), as well as a range of metaphorical constructions that carry strong connotative meanings. E.g.,

> 1. *"While the rest of Europe worries about a 'silver tsunami' or 'demographic bomb', the cities of Wroclaw and Kraków are treating their ageing populations as an opportunity rather than a burden – with remarkable results".* (Sep 18, 2024)

Expressions like "silver tsunami", "demographic bomb", "old age is a massacre" or "face the monster" exemplify a pattern of framing ageing as a looming crisis or societal threat. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, these collocations frame the ageing population in terms of natural disaster (tsunami), warfare (bomb, massacre), impending societal collapse, or rebellion (defying stereotypes, breaking the rules of ageing). This resonates to the previous studies which highlight that in much of the media discourse, older adults, especially the generation of aging baby boomers, are frequently metaphorically treated as a natural disaster (Eisenberg 2023; Sloane 2023). Such portrayals reflect both fear and resistance, reinforcing dual narratives of decline and defiance.

> 2. *"Keeping horrors of old age at bay': octogenarian workers defy stereotypes".* (Dec 27, 2023)

The metaphorical expression "*defy stereotypes*" does not merely describe demographic changes, but constructs older people as a threat, invoking fear, burden, and urgency, thus contributing to an

ageist discourse that positions older adults as a demographic problem rather than as individuals with agency and diversity. Moreover, phrases such as "*young at heart*", "*you're as old as you feel*", and "*60 is the new 40*" reflect metaphorical elasticity in defining aging, not only promoting positive reframing but also contributing to denial of aging as a natural process. These expressions reframe aging not as a biological or inevitable process, but as something that can be redefined subjectively, based on emotion, attitude, or activity. From a discursive perspective, this can be empowering, since it resists rigid age-based categories and promotes agency and vitality in later life, as seen in example 3. E.g.,

3. "Today's seniors say they feel younger than ever – thanks to their hobbies of puzzle-solving, videogames and, er, kitesurfing". (Feb 9, 2022)

However, this reframing also has ideological implications. It can mask the realities of physical aging or illness. In other words, while such metaphors explicitly promote positive aging, they may also implicitly deny the challenges that come with aging by individualizing responsibility ("feel young, stay young"), as in example 4 below, and marginalizing those who cannot or do not want to conform to the ideal of perpetual youth.

4. "*That we're feeling younger and younger, for longer and longer, and that has to be reason to celebrate*". (Feb 9, 2022)

While the use of labels like "*elderly*", "*frail*", and "*invisible*" reinforces the negative tone and stereotypes of vulnerability and decline, euphemisms like "*juvenile geriatric*" and "*pre-old adults*" signal cultural discomfort with old age, often disguising ageist undertones. E.g.,

5. "*But in 2023, how do we redefine and recategorize "late life"? I'd like to propose a new category for pre-old adults, for those beginning their ageing journey: what about "juvenile geriatric"?*" (Apr 2, 2023)

Moreover, terms such as "*pensioner*", "*octogenarian*", and "*older adults*" are often applied indiscriminately, flattening diversity within older populations. E.g.,

6. "[…] *you will be called "grandmother" or "pensioner", a meaningless identifier when pensioners are even more socially divided than the rest."* (May 4, 2024)

The research findings show that public discussions in newspapers are increasingly focused on fundamental and policy-related issues: "*Is living longer always a blessing, or can it become a challenge?*" And is the conventional idea of retirement as withdrawing from society still desirable, or should it be reconsidered as a shift toward new ways of contributing and finding meaning? One perspective that challenges ageist stereotypes is expressed in the contemplation below:

7. "When are you old? When you stop dreaming of what you can do" (April 22, 2023).

This statement rejects the deterministic view of aging as inevitable decline, instead promoting a resistant identity that embraces continued agency, ambition, and self-definition regardless of chronological age.

Newspaper discourse does not only reflect external societal attitudes toward aging, it also reveals how older individuals absorb and reproduce ageist ideologies. The use of the term "crone" in example 8 is especially charged, as it draws from mythic and gendered archetypes that cast old age (particularly in women) as unpleasant, grotesque, or repellent. The dual perception exposes

the tension between internal identity and external markers of age, where the visual discourse of ageing (e.g., wrinkles, physical decline) can obscure or even displace the recognition of continuity in personhood. E.g.,

8. "*When old people look at other old people they've known for a long time, they see a weird hybrid of the young person they once knew and the improbably wrinkled crone before them*". (June 8, 2022)

At the grammatical level, older individuals are often positioned as grammatical objects rather than active agents, frequently appearing in passive constructions such as "*being put into a home*" or "*called pensioners*". These syntactic choices mask the actors responsible for these actions (e.g., family members, care institutions, or policymakers), thereby naturalizing the power imbalance and reinforcing the perception of older people as dependent and acted upon rather than autonomous decision-makers. From this perspective, the choice of language not only reflects but actively shapes perceptions of ageing by reinforcing notions of powerlessness and exclusion, what Gullette (2018) critiques as the internalization of ageism within everyday language practices.

Furthermore, research findings indicate that pronoun usage in news discourse plays a crucial role in shaping group identities and establishing social distinctions. Collective pronouns such as "we" or "our" (like in "our generation") are frequently employed to evoke a sense of unity or shared experience. However, such linguistic strategies can simultaneously erase individual diversity and reinforce generational distinctions. By invoking a collective "we", the discourse may implicitly contrast "us" with "them", often positioning older people as the out-group, or as Gullette (2004, p.111) names it "a different difference".

The discursive structure of newspaper articles demonstrates a complex interaction between authoritative and personal voices. To reinforce a biomedical perspective on aging, these texts frequently cite medical professionals, gerontologists, and public health experts. Such references lend institutional legitimacy to narratives that pathologize aging or frame it as a condition to be "treated" or prevented.

Another significant insight from the analysis is the hybrid nature of narratives about older adults. Instead of adhering to distinct journalistic genres, these articles often blur the boundaries between factual reporting, editorial commentary, and personal reflection. As a result, the texts shift between objective description and subjective interpretation, complicating the reader's ability to clearly differentiate empirical observation from evaluative judgment. This blending of genres can function ideologically by inserting subjective viewpoints into content that appears to be objective reporting, thus subtly shaping public opinion while maintaining a face of neutrality. Furthermore, the texts frequently employ intertextual references to enhance their discursive credibility, drawing on scientific studies or governmental policy documents. E.g.,

9. "*A recent German study asked people over the age of 40 that same question eight times over a period of 25 years, and it found "old" gets older as we age*". (May 4, 2024)

Similarly, allusions to familiar aspects of popular culture are employed to ground the narratives in sources that seem credible or culturally significant. E.g.,

10.   "*How old are we, exactly? I can feel like Methuselah, mentioning to some bright young spark that the first election I covered as an Observer reporter was in 1970, or that I remember the old king's funeral, or that I had a doll's ration book (sweet rationing lasted until 1953), or how the great smog*

of London of 1952 that killed 4,000 knocked me down with bronchitis, inhaling Friars' Balsam under a towel." (May 4, 2024)

Expert voices, such as those of gerontologists, medical professionals, and public health officials, serve to legitimize biomedical and policy-oriented perspectives on aging. By invoking these authorities, media provide scientific legitimacy and institutional weight to aging narratives that are largely shaped by biomedical and policy-oriented perspectives. For instance, excerpts 11 and 12 signal deference to expertise and reinforce the construction of ageing as a matter of medical management or social classification. E.g.,

11.   *"Luisa Dillner […] advises us against sitting if we want to be healthy in old age".* (May 30, 2022)
12.   *"Old people are not a homogeneous group," says Jolanta Perek-Białas, an associate professor at Kraków University's Institute of Sociology".* (Dec 27, 2023)

These expert citations function as intertextual markers, incorporating the discourses of science, public health, and policy into journalistic narratives. While such references have the potential to counteract age-related stereotypes by emphasizing the diversity and autonomy of older adults, they may simultaneously reinforce ageist ideologies. This tension becomes especially apparent when aging is framed in medicalized or problematizing terms. For example, in excerpt 13, the depiction of old age as a diagnostic category not only legitimizes ageist assumptions but also deflects attention from the broader socio-political and environmental factors that shape health in later life. E.g.,

13.   *"A broad coalition of gerontologists and ageing and human rights groups strongly object to the use of old age or ageing as a diagnostic factor because it legitimizes and magnifies ageism, bolsters the false claims of the anti-ageing industry, obscures the multiple causes of later-life ill health, and detracts from treatment and prevention".* (Oct 3, 2022)

Older adults' voices are also present in newspapers. The use of emotionally charged or negative language means (*"horror,"* *"being put into a home"*) evokes fear and vulnerability. Such language serves to elicit empathy and bring attention to social anxieties that are frequently marginalized in more clinical or policy-oriented discourses. These personal testimonies are often strategically juxtaposed with expert commentary or idealized narratives of aging, thereby illustrating the diversity of aging experiences and foregrounding discursive tensions (e.g., between vitality and decline, independence and dependence).

14.   *"Emma Beddington (Opinion, 13 October) is right about the many frightening prospects of ageing, but she did not mention the one prospect people of my age (76) speak about together with horror most often: "having to go into a home", or "being put into a home" by one's children."* (Oct 20, 2024)

Moreover, media texts frequently incorporate personal anecdotes that foreground the voices of older individuals, thus adding a humanizing dimension to broader societal narratives on aging. These narratives frequently convey resilience or humorous self-awareness, as in the ironic remark in excerpt 15 *"Then I realized there were just mirrors everywhere"*, which is a playful commentary on the shock of recognizing one's own aging body (*"a stooped, wizened man")*. However, these stories are typically positioned as anomalous or exceptional, implicitly reinforcing ideologies of individual responsibility. Rather than challenging structural inequalities or advocating collective entitlements, they may sustain the notion that "successful aging" is a personal triumph, achieved

through optimism, lifestyle choices, or inner strength, rather than a socially supported right or outcome of equitable policy.

15. *"A few years ago, when I was shopping, I became aware of a stooped, wizened man following me around the mall. Then I realized there were just mirrors everywhere."* (June 8, 2022)

This humorous but unsettling narrative again illustrates the difficulty many older adults face in reconciling their self-perception with the visible signs of aging, especially in a society that stigmatizes those signs.

Another discursive strategy demonstrates that social media excerpts and public comments are occasionally incorporated into journalistic texts to expose intergenerational tensions and forms of casual or overt ageism. These citations often reflect more unfiltered, emotionally charged attitudes towards aging, contrasting with institutional or expert discourse. For instance, in example 16 the surge of the so-called "feel-good" literature on aging is dismissed as surface-level trendiness, with the narrative adopting a blunt and provocative tone: "*the truth is, it sucks – please let's stop the lyin*g". Such comments exemplify what may be described as discursive resistance to dominant positive aging narratives, serving both as a critique of cultural denial and as expressions of age-related disillusionment. When featured in mainstream media, these remarks dramatize the contested cultural meanings of aging and highlight the endurance of ageist sentiment in public discourse. This resistance often manifests through sarcasm, online trolling or expressions of generational antagonism.

16. "Why we can't tell the truth about ageing", an article in the New Yorker, Arthur Krystal sneers at the recent proliferation of "feel-good" books about getting older. It's sheer trendiness to put a positive spin on growing old, Krystal grouches: the truth is, it sucks – please let's stop the lying."

News media frequently incorporate quantitative data to lend an air of objectivity and credibility to their narratives. For example, recent statistics from the UK Office for National Statistics, cited by Restless, a platform aimed at older adults, are presented in the excerpt below:

17. *"New data from the ONS commissioned by Restless, a website for older people, found 13,255 women aged 80 and above across Great Britain were working in 2022."* (May 20, 2023)

While on the surface such data might appear neutral, their selection and framing tend to be inherently ideological. In this context, the statistical emphasis on working women over 80 can serve multiple discursive functions. It may be used to celebrate resilience and redefine the boundaries of economic productivity in later life, framing ageing as active rather than dependent. Conversely, it can also be deployed to underline systemic issues such as financial insecurity or pension inadequacy, subtly reinforcing narratives of vulnerability. The way such figures are embedded in the broader discourse, what is emphasized, omitted, or contextualized, reveals much about the underlying values and social messages concerning older age.

At the macro level, the aging discourse in The Guardian reflects such prevailing ideologies as neoliberalism, medicalization, and ageism. Firstly, contemporary narratives of aging are heavily shaped by neoliberal ideology, which emphasizes productivity, autonomy, and self-regulation during later life. Within this framework, older adults are encouraged to remain active, independent, and engaged in continuous self-improvement, whether through physical fitness, cognitive stimulation, or ongoing participation in the workforce or volunteerism. This emphasis on self-care

and lifelong activity aligns aging with the values of individual responsibility and market-oriented citizenship, framing successful aging as a personal achievement rather than a social or structural concern. While this discourse can be empowering for some, it also risks marginalizing those who are unable or unwilling to conform to these expectations. E.g.,

18.   *"We know from the research that when people go into retirement seeing it as an opportunity to reinvent themselves, that's when we see better adjustment and more engagement … Retirement should be an opportunity to reinvent, re-evaluate, re-engineer your life, repurpose your time. You're not at the end of anything."* (Apr 22, 2023)

Secondly, ageism in media discourse often takes the form of either stigmatizing old age or idealizing youth. These patterns of discourse sustain age-based social hierarchies, portraying older individuals as objects of fear, neglect, or mild mockery, while elevating youth as the standard and ideal. Newspaper articles and commentaries frequently use irony or exaggeration to conceal ageist attitudes behind humor or provocation. For example, the statement *"the young should wish us all dead, though polls show them amazingly magnanimous"* (May 4, 2024) hides a strong intergenerational hostility beneath a layer of satire. While apparently humorous, this discourse contributes to a symbolic distancing between age groups, portraying generational relations as inherently strained or hostile.

Furthermore, the pervasive use of euphemisms and metaphors in reference to aging reflects cultural discomfort and avoidance. Phrases like "treating ageing as a monster we want to see only out of the corner of our eye" illustrate a discursive strategy of othering, where aging is framed as something to be denied, feared, or controlled. E.g.,

19.   *"In a way, it is not surprising that euphemism dominates our approach to ageing. We have long treated it as a monster we want to see only out of the corner of our eye. The opposite of the fear of death is apeirophobia – the fear of eternal life – and I wonder whether a version of this, too, enters our approach to anti-ageing."* (May 21, 2023)

This aligns with what Fairclough (1995, p.38) describes as particular "ways of seeing, or ideological norms", i.e., the framing of difference, language choices that maintain the invisibility or marginalization of certain social groups, in this case, older adults.

20.   *"Shaped by pervasive cultural narratives that equate ageing with loss, invisibility, and decline, many older adults experience fear of aging. Though not always consciously articulated, this fear is discursively produced and reinforced through media, policy, and everyday language that subtly devalues later life and glorifies youth. As a result, ageing becomes something to be dreaded rather than embraced, internalizing ageist ideologies at the personal level. "Others have FOGO (Fear of Growing Old) but haven't articulated it."* (April 2, 2023)

At the same time, the intense focus on anti-ageing treatments and technologies reflects a deeper cultural obsession with youth. This fear of living indefinitely highlights the ambivalence central to anti-ageing narratives. Society both rejects ageing and fears losing it altogether, creating a paradoxical story where ageing is simultaneously dreaded and anxiously extended. These contradictions show the ideological struggle embedded in discourse: the effort to reconcile the inevitability of aging with a cultural system that devalues or denies its significance.

21.   *"This could have to do with the fact that many people do not want to be old, so they postpone the onset of old age," said Wettstein, adding that that could be related to age stereotypes."* (Apr 22, 2024)

Another recurrent theme in media discourse on aging is the medicalization of later life, i.e., portraying ageing primarily as a physiological problem to be controlled, delayed, or prevented. This discursive framing aligns with biomedical ideologies that portray the aging body as a site of dysfunction, decline, and pathology. Through repeated rhetorical constructions, aging becomes a problem to be "managed". Typical formulations include deterministic expressions such as, "as the years tick by, we become less active," or "muscle fibers slowly atrophy," reinforcing an image of inevitable deterioration.

22.   *"Many of us become progressively inactive as the years tick by, which exacerbates any age-related changes already taking place. As a result, if our muscles are not being stressed, their fibers slowly atrophy, and we grow progressively weaker."* (Jan 1, 2023)

This kind of language normalizes the belief that physical decline is inevitable and partly caused by one's own actions, subtly encouraging individuals to take moral responsibility by monitoring themselves and making lifestyle changes. Likewise, the claim that "*age is a driver of disease*" reinforces a direct connection between aging and illness, diverting focus from social or structural factors affecting health and instead portraying aging itself as the main issue. E.g.

23.   *"Age is a driver of disease; it makes no sense to ignore it while bemoaning the ravages of dementia or cardiovascular disease."* (May 20, 2023)

These biomedical narratives create a sharp contrast between youth and old age, portraying youth as a time of energy and potential, and old age as a phase marked by decline and suffering. Such portrayals not only reinforce ageist beliefs but also legitimize interventionist approaches, positioning anti-ageing medicine and technology as remedies for what is framed as an inherently undesirable stage of life. From a critical discourse perspective, this medicalization narrative both reflects and sustains prevailing power dynamics, with the management of aging serving as a form of biopolitical control. The emphasis on "successful" or "positive" aging privileges autonomy, productivity, and youthfulness, marginalizing those who experience physical decline, poverty, or dependency. Such discourse resonates with elite dominance in knowledge production, where the views of experts and policymakers often overshadow the lived experiences of marginalized older adults. As a result, many individuals choose to conceal their chronological age in professional settings (see example 24) due to anticipated age-based stigma.

24.   *"Some people hide their age because they worry about negative judgment in the workplace."* (Sep18, 2024)

Government policies are discussed in ways that reveal both systemic neglect and political ambivalence. Articles highlight contradictions such as the rising pension age alongside unmet care needs, or the economic power of older voters contrasted with the precarity of low-income pensioners. The framing of policy debates is emotionally charged, often using persuasive techniques such as hyperbolization, fear of institutionalization, and criticism of social care systems. E.g.,

25.   *"But 1.6 million pensioners have an unmet care need and many die waiting, with no government daring to skim property wealth from the old to fund universal social care. Pensioners are powerful voters, installing one Tory government after another."* (May 4, 2024)

Many articles adopt a contradictory stance by simultaneously critiquing systemic failures, such as unmet care needs, the erosion of public services, and the rising pension age, while also promoting narratives that emphasize individual responsibility for aging well. This framing shifts the burden of aging from a shared social obligation to an individual one, leading to discursive inequality, marginalizing or erasing the voices and experiences of resilient, active, or defiant older people. Ultimately, this fosters a dominant discourse that values youth, productivity, and self-reliance. This occurs alongside a persistent policy gap in social care funding and a political unwillingness to tackle the issue of concentrated property wealth among pensioners. E.g.,

26. *"With more than 2 million older people living in poverty, people in later life must have an adequate income, including access to the financial support they are entitled to, to give them the opportunity to retire if they need or choose to," she added. (*Dec 27, 2023*)*

Journalists often shift between praising older adults for "working on" as a sign of vitality and purpose, and presenting more sobering perspectives that highlight economic pressures behind their continued participation (see example 27). While some voices call for redefining later life as a period of ongoing engagement and agency, challenging stereotypes of older people as passive or disengaged, others recognize that many are driven back into the workforce by rising living costs and insufficient pensions. E.g.,

27. *"People resign inwardly in their older age because it's what they're expected to do – to shut down and focus on their hobbies – but working on is entirely natural," he said. "We need to readdress what older age is and what many of us are still capable of. We need to move expectations of older people from being passive spectators to active participants".* (May 20, 2023)

Cultural beliefs about aging are similarly conflicted. While there are efforts to depict older adults as active and vital (e.g., Polish cities celebrating aging populations), ageist attitudes remain pervasive. In contrast to dominant Western European discourses that frame demographic ageing in alarmist terms, using metaphorical expressions, like "*an existential threat to Europe's economic prosperity and welfare state model*" (Sep 18, 2024), that evoke crisis and unmanageability, the cities of Wroclaw and Kraków are treating their ageing populations "*as an opportunity rather than a burden – with remarkable results*" (Sep 18, 2024). This discursive strategy reflects a more affirmative ideological orientation toward later life, the one that challenges the ageist undercurrents typical of other European media and policy narratives.

28. *"We want to give the seniors of Wroclaw a chance to show a different face: not grey and sad, but dignified and elegant," says Robert Pawliszko, the head of Wroclaw's senior centre".* (Sep 18, 2024)

These contrasts make clear that media representations are not ideologically neutral but culturally constructed and value laden. Growing concern also surrounds the increasing reliance on institutional eldercare in many Western societies, which may signal a broader cultural shift away from traditional models of family-based support. However, in numerous Asian contexts multigenerational co-residence remains common with strong kinship ties forming the foundation of social protection for older adults. Within this framework, failing to care for aging parents or relatives is not simply seen as a personal shortcoming, but as a source of communal shame, reinforcing collective norms around intergenerational responsibility. E.g.,

29.   *"In Kashmiri society, elderly people usually live with their children. Beyond the immediate family, extended relations and strong kinship ties have offered a safety net to people as they age. Failing to support parents or relatives is seen as shameful".* (Jul 11, 2023)

This tension highlights the discursive negotiation between cultural continuity and institutional modernization**,** where the very notion of "care" is being redefined.

Conclusions

Through the analysis of linguistic choices, tone, and narrative framing, this study revealed that representations of aging in the media are complex and often contradictory, simultaneously reflecting and shaping societal attitudes toward older populations. Research findings indicate that while some articles aim to challenge ageist stereotypes and highlight the agency, resilience, and individuality of older people, many others subtly reinforce narratives of decline, dependence, and marginalization. Several lexical choices or references to older adults underscore the loss of autonomy often associated with later life. Moreover, the emphasis on individual responsibility in "successful aging" discourses can obscure the structural and systemic challenges faced by older populations, framing aging as a personal achievement rather than a collective concern.

At the same time, examples of more positive portrayals illustrate emerging counter-narratives that seek to reframe aging as a diverse and dynamic process. Personal anecdotes and voices of older individuals often inject nuance, irony, and insight, humanizing their experiences. However, these moments are frequently framed as exceptions rather than the norm, reinforcing the idea that "positive aging" is atypical. Often, portrayals are ambivalent, blending vitality with a denial of aging, which reinforces the notion that growing older is acceptable only when mask by youthful behavior.

The study also highlights the influential role of expert discourses in legitimizing biomedical views of aging. While these voices provide authority and scientific credibility, they may also contribute to a medicalized and depersonalized image of later life.

Finally, further research could provide insights into how different media platforms, such as television, social media, or digital news outlets construct old age, particularly in non-Western contexts. Such comparative studies across different cultural or linguistic media landscapes may demonstrate tendencies in how ageism is manifested and resisted globally.

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