

Images of formal home care in Finnish newspapers – a social representations approach

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Abstract

Media representations play an essential role in how older adults are perceived in society. The aim of the study is to examine what kind of understanding newspaper images construct of home care and older adults as care recipients by utilizing social representations theory.

The data consist of 95 images published in Finnish newspapers in 2022 and 2023. The images were analysed using visual rhetorical analysis. The media images constructed four social representations of formal home care: (1) vulnerable older adults as objects of care, (2) efficient care workers in a hurry, (3) lonely older adults at home, and (4) vital and content older adults. The images represented care workers as active agents, while the older adults were mainly presented as passive and lonely objects of care.

The study shows that the images used in newspapers as depictions of home care reinforce the prevailing perceptions of older adults as a burden.

Keywords: care recipients, formal home care, images, social representation

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Introduction

Media representations occupy a central role in shaping people's understandings of social reality (Couldry & Hepp 2017; Martikainen & Sakki 2024), and the images used in newspapers and advertisements therefore contribute to how ageing and older adults are perceived in society. Generally, ageing is often perceived either in a rather negative light (Gullette 2015) or seen as an over-positive and unrealistic era of success and activity (Ylännä 2022). Through an ageist lens (e.g. Prieler 2020; van Leeuwen et al. 2024) older adults are typically represented and understood as being dependent rather than productive members of society (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer 2018). Also, older adults' own perceptions of later life are often associated with loss of social relations, esteem and autonomy, as well as fear of disabilities (Brunton & Scott 2015). This kind of narrow perception of ageing and older adults does not do justice to the fact that the reality of ageing is multifaceted and older adults represent very diverse experiences and social locations in society. One-sided cultural beliefs regarding older adults, also communicated through images, may further narrow the perception of ageing (Featherstone & Hepworth 2005) and may even produce age discrimination (Loos & Ivan 2018) and reinforce social exclusion (Torres 2021). While there are an increasing number of studies on media representations of older adults (e.g. Varjakoski 2023; Williams et al. 2010; Ylännä 2015, 2022), little is known on how older adults living at home with care needs are portrayed in media images. This study aims to fill this gap by examining images of formal home care in Finnish newspapers.

By formal home care we refer to care provided in people's own homes by professionals (see Genet et al. 2011). The purpose of older adults' home care has originally been to enhance and maintain care recipients' quality of life and functional health status, and to reduce institutional care for cost saving reasons (Thomé et al. 2003). When home care is delivered by professionals, it is based on a formal assessment of needs (Genet et al. 2011). In addition to individual benefits, home care has also been seen as a means to reinforce the ethos of 'ageing-in-place' (see Pani-Harreman et al. 2020; Vasunilashorn et al. 2012). In Finland, as in many other European countries, this has been implemented in policies and legislation emphasizing the aim of supporting older adults to live in their private homes for as long as possible (Finnish Act for ElderCare and Services 980/2012,

Section 14). In the Finnish context, formal home care includes personal or virtual home care visits and support services such as a safety phone or meal-on-wheels service. Formal home care is organized by wellbeing services counties (Finnish Act for ElderCare and Services 980/2012), although the providers of home care or other eldercare services may also be private companies or third sector organizations.

During recent years, public discussion on eldercare services has focused on how to reduce costs of services and improve their efficiency to address the challenges of the demographic change (see Ishikawa 2020; Varjakoski 2023). Concurrently, research has shown that cuts and reductions in long-term care, has led to a situation where many older have unmet care needs (Kröger 2022; Rostgaard et al. 2022). Negative public discourses (Torres 2021) and the reality of inadequate care may increase feelings of insecurity, isolation and not belonging to a place even when living in one's own home (Sihto & Van Aerschot 2021) and lead to diverse forms of social exclusion (Ristolainen et al. 2024). Interestingly, living at home is seen as the most desirable living arrangement at least at the policy level, but older adults' own experiences are not always heard (Barken 2019). This raises concern about whether older adults, as individuals and as care recipients, are overshadowed by efficiency aims.

As the organization of eldercare battles and balances between marketization and efficiency (Karsio 2024) and the provision of good care and a meaningful life at home (Finnish Act for ElderCare and Services; see also Haex et al. 2020), it is important to consider on whose terms the eldercare is primarily provided. Ageing and older adults are often seen as a burden (Ishikawa 2020), challenging their possibility to be equal members of society. Moreover, when delivering home care services the home becomes an intersection of private and public, where the older adults have the right to live their own private life, and where care workers carry out their caring role with a mandate from the public service system (see Roxberg et al. 2020). As a result, older home care recipients live in a situation where they have little to no control over what happens in their own homes or how they are perceived in public discourse, compounding the risk that their existence and lives are determined by other people. Also of interest is the way in which the public debate and the debate within the service system shape the perception of older adults' home care and of older adults as the recipients of care, and how these perceptions are reflected in the images

used in newspapers to portray formal home care and older home care recipients.

A wide range of studies have examined how older adults are portrayed in the media (see Loos & Ivan 2018; Ylänné 2015, 2022). Here, we focus on studies of visual images of older adults or ageing used in the media. These studies have found that images of older adults are as ambiguous as attitudes to ageing in general; on the one hand, ageing and old age is portrayed as a problem while, on the other hand, successful or active ageing is highlighted (e.g. Varjakoski 2023: 45–51; Williams et al. 2010; Ylänné 2015; see also Martin 2015). For example, Williams et al. (2010) found in their study that images of older people in magazine advertising in the United Kingdom represented four types of portrayal: frail and vulnerable, happy and affluent, mentors, and active and leisure-oriented older adults. In contrast, in Swedish authority-managed social media images (Xu 2022) and public organizations' websites across a range of European countries (Loos et al. 2022) older adults were represented mostly as socially engaged and physically capable.

To our knowledge, there is no prior research on media images of formal home care. However, some studies have examined news coverage of older adults' home care and institutional care contexts, such as nursing homes and residential care facilities. A study in Canada showed that in newspaper articles related to home care, the home was created as an idealistic place of dignity and safety, while older adults were positioned as passive and vulnerable recipients of care (Yamamoto et al. 2023). Moreover, in a study of articles published in American newspapers, older nursing home residents were described, largely depending on their financial situation, as either frail and dependent or successful and independent (Rozanova et al. 2016). Another study from the US over a ten-year period found that half of newspaper articles were negative towards nursing homes, 40% were neutral and 10% were positive (Miller et al. 2013).

Although a large amount of research has been conducted on media representations of ageing and older adults in general, more detailed analysis is needed on how specific groups of older adults are portrayed in the media. As older adults in need of care are increasingly living in their own homes and home-based eldercare has become a common service in many countries, it is important to explore what kind of understanding media images construct about formal home care. In this study, we examine

images of formal home care in Finnish newspapers utilizing the theoretical framework of social representations. This theoretical frame allows us to study media images as part of social meaning construction focusing on their contents and societal functions. We ask: What kind of understanding do newspaper images construct of formal home care and older adults as care recipients?

Theoretical Framework: Social Representations Theory

Social representations theory is a theory of social knowledge, of how people construct knowledge about the social world together in social interactions (Moscovici 1961/2008). To clarify the social and co-creative nature of social representations, Moscovici presented his semiotic triangle, according to which people's understanding of an object is constructed in dialogue between the Ego (self) and the Alter (other people) (Moscovici 1972, 1984). However, the Ego and Alter do not only refer to negotiation between an individual with other people in face-to-face interactions, but the position of alter can also be occupied through mediated others, such as the news and media. As for the present study, we understand social representations of formal home care to be constructed both in face-to-face interactions between people and through media representations influencing people's understanding of home care and of the older adults receiving home care services.

Moscovici (1973) defined social representations as socially shared 'systems of values, ideas and practices' that create social order and make it possible for people to communicate about the social and material world (p. xiii). He also stated that attitudes are parts of social representations (Moscovici 1961/2008). Hence, social representations can be understood as socially shared knowledge about a particular phenomenon that includes evaluative and moral dimensions (Moscovici 1961/2008, 1984).

Social representations are constructed in three processes of knowledge creation: anchoring, objectification, and naturalization. Anchoring refers to a process where (new) social phenomena are made familiar by interpreting them based on prior social knowledge. Objectification, in turn, refers to a process where abstract ideas are concretized through verbal and visual expressions. Finally, naturalization refers to a process where certain conceptions of a social object gain an unquestionable status of 'the

reality' through, for instance, frequent repetition in media (Flick & Foster 2010; Moscovici 1961/2008, 1984). Our study focuses on the processes of objectification and naturalization. From the objectification point of view, media images are understood as a means of showcasing and constructing culturally shared understandings of formal home care and older home care clients. In terms of naturalization, we sought to identify any recurrent patterns of how formal home care and older home care clients are presented visually in Finnish newspapers.

Since the beginning of the theory, Moscovici paid attention to the power of images to construct social representations; on the one hand, social representations have a figurative basis (themata) that includes visual images and associations related to the topic of social representation (Martikainen 2019; Moscovici 1984; Sakki et al. 2014); on the other hand, visual images disseminate and construct social representations (de Rosa & Farr 2001). Prior research has identified three functions of social representations related to images; they can activate, articulate and circulate social representations (de Rosa & Farr 2001; Martikainen 2020). The power of images to influence people's conceptions about social issues is also due to their ability to appeal to emotions, prior experiences and shared memories (Rose 2016).

Social representations are not neutral (Voelklein & Howarth 2005), but as Moscovici himself stated, social representation is 'a battle of ideas' actively involved in the formation of ideas (Moscovici & Markova 1998: 403). Some social representations gain a hegemonic status, whereas others are marginalized (Höijer 2011; Moscovici 1988). These different statuses of social representations do not simply emerge, but as Moscovici's notion of the battle of ideas suggests, social actors (e.g. media) foreground certain social representations and downgrade others. Hence, social representations are political in terms of promoting certain understandings of social phenomena and marginalizing – even silencing – others (Howarth & Andreouli 2015; Voelklein & Howarth 2005).

From the perspective of social representations theory, news images do not only reflect common sense understanding of eldercare but rather construct it (Martikainen 2019). Since social representations shape people's views of and behaviour towards social phenomena, objects and people, news images of older adults' formal home care may not only influence lay people's understanding and expectations of formal home care but

also impact professionals' and politicians' decisions related to it. In addition, studying media images of formal home care is also important from the point of view of the older adults themselves; for them, newspaper images can function as a basis for forming meta-representations (older adults' beliefs regarding how other people perceive formal home care) and meta-meta-representations (older adults' beliefs regarding how other people perceive them as recipients of home care) (Elcheröth et al. 2011; Wagner 2021) contributing to the way older adults perceive themselves and their role in the context of formal home care.

Methods

Data

The data used in this study consist of newspaper images used in articles on older adults' formal home care in Finland published in Finnish newspapers in 2022 and 2023. While Helsingin Sanomat is circulated nationwide, the other newspapers included in the study (Aamulehti, Kainuun Sanomat, Kaleva, Karjalainen, Keski-suomalainen, Lapin Kansa, Savon Sanomat, and Turun Sanomat) are the main local newspapers circulated in different parts of Finland. Collecting images of formal home care from all of these newspapers provided a comprehensive dataset for our study. We included in the data all photographs related to news articles that explicitly dealt with formal home care published in the aforementioned newspapers between 1st January 2022 to 31st December 2023.

Data searching was carried out via the digital platform of the National Library of Finland [Kansalliskirjasto], which is responsible for the collection, description, preservation, and accessibility of Finland's printed heritage. Our searching strategy included the formulation of the search statement and defining the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The main search terms were 'home care' and 'older person' with their synonyms. The search was carried out on 22nd January 2024 with the search statement: Kotihoi* AND (vanhu* OR ikäihmi* OR ikäänty* OR asiak*). The inclusion criteria for the articles were: (1) had to include an image, and (2) had to deal with older adults' formal home care. Home care had to be an essential part of the article, thus stories dealing only with round-the-clock care were excluded. However, if the article was about eldercare in general including the aspect of home care and the image was related to

home care or an older person receiving care, it was included in the study. We accepted all images except personal photos of managers of eldercare services or politicians who had been interviewed for the article. In total, the data consisted of 95 news images. The contents of the news articles were excluded from the data, so the analysis focused solely on images.

Analysis

We used visual rhetorical analysis to examine the newspaper images. Three key principles form the foundation of visual rhetorical analysis. First, images are not considered as neutral records of reality but constructed from different rationales and using certain means of visual expression (Hook & Glăveanu 2013; Rose 2016). Even though it is not possible to know the explicit rationales of photographers and newspaper publishers for publishing certain kinds of images, assumptions about them can be made based on analysis of the structure and content of the photographs. Second, the visual composition of the images directs the ways viewers perceive the images and interpret them using their cultural knowledge and prior experiences as a resource for sense making (Kjeldsen 2017; Martikainen 2023). For this reason, news photographs have the power to structure people's understanding of formal home care. Third, images are understood as visual arguments that derive from and must be studied in relation to their social, political, and cultural contexts (Danesi 2017; Foss 2005; Kjeldsen 2017). In this study, we examine the images in the context of eldercare policies in Finland.

Visual rhetorical analysis allows researchers to examine the form, content and functions of images (see Martikainen 2019; Martikainen & Sakki 2024). In other words, visual rhetorical analysis provides tools to study how visual choices used in the photographs (form) are used to construct certain meanings of the topic of the image (content) and how these meanings relate to the social, political and cultural context (function). We operationalized visual rhetorical analysis using compositional analysis, content analysis and socio-semiotic analysis as analytic tools (see Martikainen 2019; Martikainen & Sakki 2021, 2024). Whereas content analysis focuses on studying the people, objects and environments depicted in images, compositional analysis focuses on scrutinizing the means of visual expression (e.g. colour, proximity,

viewing angle) used in depicting people, objects and environments (Bell 2012; Martikainen 2019; Rose 2016). Socio-semiotic analysis, in turn, provides tools to make sense of the visual constructions based on a culturally shared matrix of meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006).

In terms of the concrete analytical procedure, we first examined who were depicted in the images. Based on this stage of analysis we identified three categories: images with only older adults, images with only care workers and images featuring both older adults and care workers. We then paid attention to the activities – what older adults and/or care workers were doing in the images – as well as the environments in which people were situated. This was followed by analysing the poses, gestures and facial expressions of the people as well as the objects included in the images. The afore-described content analysis was followed by compositional analysis, where we examined the means of visual expression – namely, colours, proximity/framing, viewing angle and direction of movement (compositional analysis). Finally, the findings of content analysis and compositional analysis were analysed together and interpreted based on culturally shared meanings (e.g. bright colours communicate joy, dark colours communicate sadness, close-ups communicate intimacy and approachability, and long-shots communicate distance) (see Jewitt & Oyama 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In the analysis we also paid attention to what was excluded from the newspaper images, since the absence of certain types of imagery narrows the scope of visual representation and prevents their entry into public debate (Barreiro & Castorina 2017) – and, hence, influences the formation of social representations of formal home care.

From the social representations perspective, we understand the news photographs as visual objectifications of social representations of formal home care that give the phenomenon a concrete, visual form and make it observable (Sammut et al. 2015). On the other hand, we refer to the process of naturalization, whereby the repetition of similar images may naturalize certain kinds of understanding of older adults' formal home care (see Martikainen 2019). Through their visual concreteness as well as their ability to appeal to emotions (Rose 2016), images serve as powerful means of constructing common sense understanding of formal home care and older adults as recipients of home care.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study the national guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK) have been carefully followed. According to the guidelines ethical committee evaluation and approval was not needed for this type of research. The Finnish Copyright Act (404/1961) allows the use of media images as visual references for research purposes without additional permission. However, in the analysis phase we carefully considered the images selected to represent the identified social representations so that the older adults who can be identified in the images are not presented in an offensive manner. It is also important to note that our analysis focuses on examining social representations of formal home care and how older home care recipients are represented visually in this context and not the older adults themselves.

Results

Based on our analysis, we identified four types of images of formal home care in the newspapers: images of older adults alone; images of care workers alone; older adults and care workers in the same image; and images of older adults' hands. The images were classified into four categories representing the main results of the study: (1) vulnerable older adults as objects of care (44 images), (2) efficient care workers in a hurry (17 images), (3) lonely older adults at home (17 images), and (4) vital and content older adults (12 images). Three images could not be included in these categories. The newspaper images also did not depict older adults outside the home, moving around, or engaging in leisure activities. Moreover, different ethnicities were not represented, and there were only a few images where family and friends of the older adults were represented. In the next sections, the results regarding the social representations of formal home care and older adults as its clients are presented along with the images selected for detailed analysis for each category.

Vulnerable Older Adults as Objects of Care

This social representation is based on images where care workers are depicted together with older adults. Typically, care workers are

depicted helping older adults with daily routines or visiting them at home. A notable number of images portrayed care workers holding older adults' hands.

In this image (see Figure 1), a care worker is depicted offering food to an older adult. The image portrays the care worker as active and the older person as a passive recipient of care. The activity of the worker is constructed through the composition with the worker positioned in front and the older person behind her. In addition, the worker is closer to the viewer as well as occupying the golden section of the image (torso vertically, arm horizontally), which positions her as the main figure of the image (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In addition, she is depicted performing an activity, which is reinforced by the diagonal axis formed by her body as well as its orientation to the right typically associated with energy, activity and determination (Jewitt & Oyama 2012).

Figure 1. *Savon Sanomat* 24.2.2022 (photo: Henna Kokkonen)



In the image, the care worker is positioned higher than the older person, placing her in a higher power position. The bright colours and stripes of the worker's clothes can be interpreted as reinforcing her agency. The older person's face is in the middle of the picture – both vertically and horizontally – which portrays her as the focus of the care (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In contrast, the older adult sits still and her facial expression lacks communicativeness, which creates an impression of passivity and lack of initiative. Compared to the bright colours of the worker's clothes, the dark colour of the older woman's dress may be understood as reinforcing the impression of her inactivity (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The ordinary interior of the kitchen portrayed in the image provides little indication of the personality of the older person. The care worker wears a mask and disposable gloves, which, in our interpretation, reinforces the sense that the personal needs of the older person are not the focus – rather, the encounter between the care worker and the older person is conveyed as routine.

Image two (see Figure 2) represents two home care workers visiting an older woman's home. The woman is lying in bed, and she is covered with a duvet. The austere interior of the room, the drab colour of the wall, the bed with rails reminiscent of hospital beds as well as the work uniforms and disposable gloves worn by the home care workers resemble a hospital rather than the older adult's home. These visual elements make the home care appear very similar to an institutional care setting. The position of the woman and the fact that she is lying in bed may signal that she is not in good health. On the wall, there appears to be some sort of 'patient card' providing instructions for the workers, possibly suggesting that the same workers do not take care of the older person consistently, but the workers may change from day to day.

In image two, both home care workers are depicted standing higher than the older woman lying in the bed, and they both look downwards to her. This means of depiction creates an asymmetrical relationship between the workers and the older woman (Jewitt & Oyama 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006), where the older person appears as an object of measures, likely dependent on the home care workers' care and help.

Figure 2. *Kaleva* 27.9.2022 (photo: Pekka Peura)



Image three (see Figure 3) features a close-up of the hands of a nurse and an older person. Holding hands communicates care, closeness, reassurance and comfort (Sandnes & Uhrenfeldt 2024). In this image, the older adult's hands with thin, wrinkled and bluish skin communicate vulnerability, fragility and weakness, whereas the nurse's restful hands can be interpreted as communicating tenderness and reassurance. Even though this image of home care portrays an intimate touch, it simultaneously repeats the typical and narrow representation of older people as vulnerable objects of care lacking agency and personality (Wangler & Jansky 2021).

The social representation of older adults' formal home care that these images construct may be encapsulated as vulnerable old people in need of help. In this social representation, older adults appear as objects of care, whereas care workers are portrayed as routinized providers of care. The relationship is depicted as asymmetrical, with the care workers portrayed

Figure 3. *Keskisuomalainen* 18.7.2023 (photo: Anni Reenpää)



as active agents and the older people as passive, sometimes even helpless objects. The plain surroundings as well as workers' uniforms and disposable gloves, for instance, create an impression of formal home care as impersonal and institutionalized.

Efficient Care Workers in a Hurry

The social representation of *Efficient care workers in a hurry* is constructed based on images where only care workers are depicted without depictions of older people. Typically, care workers are portrayed as taking care of diverse tasks in older adults' homes or moving between places by car or on foot. These images can be understood as communicating hurry and efficiency.

Several images of formal home care depict care workers alone. Typically, they represent movement, workers going from one place to another. In image four (see Figure 4) a care worker is depicted driving a car. This visual representation emphasizes the mobile nature of home care work in which the care workers visit older people in different locations, which often means driving long distances per day. The direction to the right usually communicates future orientation, activeness and determination (Jewitt & Oyama 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In addition, the woman does not lean relaxed on the headrest but slightly bends forward, which creates an air of efficiency and hurry. The focused presence of the care worker can be interpreted as an expression of determination.

Figure 4. *Karjalainen* 25.1.2023 (photo: Mikko Makkonen)



The image presented on the next page (Figure 5) depicts a medicine dispensing machine with written notes attached on it. The note on the left reads 'The machine should be handled very carefully' and the note on the right reads 'If you need more pain killers, phone the care worker'.

Figure 5. *Kainuun Sanomat* 15.8.2023 (photo: Jussi Pohjavirta)



In addition, there is a screen on the machine where two care workers can be seen. The care workers are thus visiting an older adult's home virtually. In this depiction of a virtual contact, the metallic surface of the machine as well as its bluish light and screen create a cold, sterile mood (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). Depictions of home care as virtual care, for their part, may also communicate efficiency, as it saves the resources of the home care personnel.

The social representation of formal home care constructed through these images underscores care workers' efficiency (see also Ring et al. 2024). This meaning is communicated through images of workers moving from one place to another, on the one hand, and through images of virtual home care saving resources, on the other hand. The absence of older adults in these images shifts the focus from the care recipients to home care workers themselves.

Lonely Older Adults at Home

The images forming this social representation depict older adults alone at home. Typically, they are portrayed lying in bed or sitting on a chair with postures and gestures communicating inaction and passivity as if they were 'killing time'.

Image six (see Figure 6) depicts an older person lying in bed at home. Despite the bright colours of the quilt and bed linen, the image communicates inactivity through the stiff, resting pose of the older person. In addition, the 'flat space' created by the high angle of the image constructs a gloomy, stagnant air (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The older adult lies on their back in the bed, hands crossed on the stomach. The image is cropped so that we cannot see if the person is watching TV, for instance, or just lying on the bed. Due to the cropping and high angle, the viewers' attention is focused on the bed and the lying body of the person (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006).

Figure 6. *Kainuun Sanomat* 15.8.2022 (photo: Juha Neuvonen)



The head/face of the person and surroundings cannot be seen. This creates an air of anonymity and impersonality (Allen 2015). In our interpretation, this kind of 'visual amputation' strongly refers to a lack of agency and ability to steer the course of life. Besides impersonality and lack of agency, the image may be understood as communicating loneliness. Although the atmosphere of the image is calm and it could be seen as depicting the older person simply resting, we interpret the high angle, focus on the bed, inactive pose, as well as the absence of other people and visual cues of the environment, as constructing more of an impression of boredom and loneliness.

Image seven (see Figure 7) shows the hands of an older person crossed on her chest. The face and surroundings cannot be seen, which creates an air of anonymity (Allen 2015). However, the person sits in an upright

Figure 7. *Savon Sanomat* 22.11.2022 (photo: Katja Juurikko)



position, they have dressed up (judging by the neat blouse) and the nails are painted. These elements suggest that the person may be in relatively good health and condition. The person wears a safety wristband. The red colour of the button as well as its location near the intersection of the horizontal and vertical golden sections draw the viewer's attention (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The image suggests that the security wristband enables the person to live at home because they can call for help when needed, thereby offering a sense of greater safety and security among older people living at home. Nevertheless, the crossed hands in the middle of the image may also refer to the importance of prayer, religion and trust in God as sources of safety for older people. Simultaneously, the image communicates loneliness, as no other people are visible, while the position of the hands may also suggest waiting for somebody. Finally, the central presence of the security wristband invites us to trust that this older person will be able to manage at home on their own.

This type of imagery constructs a social representation of formal home care in terms of lonely, anonymous old people. Instead of care, these images portray older adults as alone, just waiting for time to pass.

Vital and Content Older Adults

The last social representation is formed by images that portray contented looking older adults in their homes. These persons are depicted in upright positions with a smile on their face which communicates their vitality. Comfortable home interiors reflect the older persons' taste and personality.

Image eight (see Figure 8) depicts an older woman sitting by a table with a flower vase on it. The woman is situated in the right golden section looking to the right, which emphasizes her activeness and liveliness in the image (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). She sits in an upright position and looks to the right, smiling as if conversing with a person whom we cannot see in the image. She wears a bright red and white striped T-shirt, which, according to our interpretation, reinforces her positive presence (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The T-shirt as well as the tablecloth are Marimekko (a Finnish brand) products, which may refer to the personal taste of the

Figure 8. *Savon Sanomat* 24.2.2022 (photo: Henna Kokkonen)



woman. In the background, we can see a bookshelf where matriculation photos (identifiable by the white cap) of young people – perhaps her grandchildren – are placed. These aforementioned elements may be understood as referring to the personality and personal history of the woman, creating the impression that she leads a satisfied life in her own home.

The last image (Figure 9) portrays a smiling older woman with a care worker. They are sitting near to each other, and the smiling and alert facial expression of the woman shows that the meeting with the care worker is pleasant. The visual elements of the image create an understanding that the older woman and the worker meet each other on more equal terms, which is communicated, for instance, through the eye-level angle and the fact that the care worker and the woman are at about the same level vertically (Jewitt & Oyama 2012; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). In addition, the older adult is depicted frontally which increases her involvement (Jewitt & Oyama 2012). The mobile phone may suggest the older woman is abreast of the times and capable of digital communication.

Figure 9. Helsingin Sanomat 25.1.2023 (photo: Markus Torvinen)



In the image, the older woman is situated in the middle of the image horizontally, and her face is situated in the upper golden section vertically, which emphasizes her role in the image. In addition, the sharpness of the image is focused on the older woman, whereas the image of the care worker on the left is slightly blurred, thus presenting the older woman as the principal figure (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). Furthermore, the older woman is not being treated, rather the two are depicted as spending time and chatting together. In our interpretation, these visual means of expression – together with the alert presence of the older woman – make her appear as the main figure of the image and suggest that she is capable of expressing herself and steering the course of her life.

The images of content-looking and communicative older adults in home environments that reflect their personality and taste construct a social representation of formal home care in terms of contented older people spending a meaningful life in their own homes. Formal home care does

its part to support older adults' agency and capability to lead a meaningful life at home, as it is intended to do.

Discussion

In this study, we have explored the images of formal home care published in Finnish newspapers with the aim of finding out what kind of understanding these images construct of formal home care and of older adults as care recipients. Based on the results, the analysed media images constructed four social representations of formal home care: (1) vulnerable older adults as objects of care, (2) efficient care workers in a hurry, (3) lonely older adults at home, and (4) vital and content older adults. The images depict formal home care as an efficient activity carried out by active care workers or by technology, such as virtual home care or wristbands, while the older adults are portrayed as passive and lonely objects of care. These visual representations are complemented by a smaller number of images in which formal home care is based on an equal relationship, where the care recipients appear well and comfortable in their own homes.

The social representations of home care constructed through news images reflect the transition of home care to becoming more institutionalized and technology- and routine-oriented, which easily loses sight of the fundamental nature of home care as individual care in a familiar environment (see also Ring et al. 2024). One aim of formal home care has been to replace hospital care and institutional care with care in the home for societal reasons (Thomé et al. 2003), primarily to make the provision of care more affordable. Formal home care itself has been made more efficient, for example, by reducing the amount of time care workers spend with clients, which is also reflected in the newspaper images of older adults' home care. In our data, this trend in which speed and efficiency have become the norm, is communicated through the images of hurrying and effective care workers. In addition, the images construct an understanding of the private home as an institutionalized setting, where the ultimate purpose of living in a familiar place, surrounded by one's own belongings and memories, is lost (see also Wada et al. 2020). On the other hand, images of smiling older adults interacting with care workers create an understanding of home care as a means of providing adequate care

and attention, enabling them to live meaningful lives in their own home environment. Thus, the range of images constructs an understanding that older adults receiving home care are a heterogeneous group and that home care is provided in various ways. Based on prior research, this also reflects reality, as some home care clients manage their daily lives reasonably independently, while a significant number need frequent support for daily activities (Tolonen et al. 2024) and feel lonely (Kehusmaa 2022).

In contemporary societies, media images are an important resource for social representation, as they not only reflect reality but also serve as a means of (re)constructing reality. Social representation regarding older adults and home care through media images does not occur in isolation but draws from and engages in dialogue with the social, societal, and cultural resources on the topic available to the community, capable of both reproducing and challenging them. These social representations shape people's thoughts and actions towards the object of social representations (Moscovici 1984). The four social representations of formal home care and older people as care recipients mainly constructed an understanding of older adults as vulnerable objects of care deprived of their agency (representations 1 and 3) echoing the common cultural belief of ageing in Western societies (see Gullette 2015; Prieler 2020). On the other hand, care workers were depicted as efficient employees whose relation to older adults appeared as impersonal and routine (representation 2). These social representations reproducing understandings of older adults as a burden may have social impacts on political decisions related to later life, and the development of care services. Social representations of hurry and efficiency in eldercare may reinforce public debate focusing on saving money rather than on the quality and dignity of care (e.g. Wyman et al. 2018). Moreover, negatively valenced social representations of home care may also raise fears among the public audience regarding their own ageing. At the same time, fear and awareness of the challenges of eldercare may make people plan and prepare themselves better for old age.

Our findings supplement previous research, which has found images of old as dichotomous, emphasizing either its misery or vitality (Varjakoski 2023; Williams et al. 2010; Ylänné 2015). Considering the widely shared ideal of living at home, it is interesting that representations of home care in Finnish media are predominantly negative, often emphasizing old age as a period of decline and burden. However, this study

also identifies portrayals of older adults who do not fit simplistic categorisation and represent wellbeing despite daily care needs. Although these representations are less prominent, they diversify the often-seen portrayals of ageing and older adults. The representations situated between the very negative and over-positive images, appear to emphasize older home care recipients as active agents in their everyday life offering interesting theoretical perspectives for future research. Strengthening these types of representations, may also contribute to the empowerment of older adults in society.

Media images and representations are efficient means of shaping the public perception of older adults not only among media audiences but also among older adults themselves (Kessler 2009; Loos & Ivan 2018). Older adults may use culturally available social representations of formal home care as basis for constructing meta-representations and meta-meta-representations (Elchereth et al. 2011) in terms of beliefs regarding how they think other people perceive formal home care and them as recipients of home care. Stereotypical media images of older adults communicating passivity, loneliness and vulnerability can be harmful, because older people can internalize this image as their self-image (Martens et al. 2005; Wangler & Jansky 2021) thus diminishing their sense of agency.

Social representations theory and visual rhetorical analysis do not understand media images as neutral documents of reality but rather as visual arguments constructing social reality (Danesi 2017; Martikainen 2019). From a performative perspective, the choices photographers make related to the visual construction of images and the choices media outlets make on what kinds of images they publish are meaningful because they shape the media audiences' thoughts and actions. As our findings show, newspaper images reinforce to some extent the prevailing narrow cultural understanding of older people as a burden and passive object of care. Questions therefore arise as to how conscious photographers are about the choices they undertake when making photographs of formal home care and, equally, how conscious are the choices of newspapers to publish certain kinds of images of formal home care. By repeatedly publishing certain kinds of images of formal home care and older adults as its clients, newspapers may reproduce and naturalize narrow and stereotypical understandings of formal home care that may influence political decision making, planning of welfare services and, ultimately,

older adults' perceptions of themselves as recipients of home care and members of society, thus serving to maintain and reinforce older adults' inferior position. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness of visually constructed meanings and the power of media (images) to shape the realities in which we live.

This study has some limitations that are important to take into account. First, the number of images published in newspapers was relatively low and therefore the data available for use in this study was limited. However, the low number of images likely reflects the overall limited visibility of older adults in the media (Ylänné 2015) rather than the quality of the data collected. Second, we have only analysed images and thus excluded the textual content of the articles. Therefore, our interpretations only concern one aspect of the social representations of formal home care produced by the media. In future research, the analysis could also be extended beyond newspapers, for example to television advertising or television series. Third, the images were analysed by researchers. Different insights would have been obtained if older adults themselves had been involved in analysing the images.

Although the data were collected in Finland and therefore represent a specific cultural and societal context, it is likely that the findings resonate with public discourses from other countries as well. Due to demographic changes, many societies are currently aiming to find sustainable ways for care provision and are at the same time required to find ways to adapt to longevity culturally by diversifying representations of ageing and older adults' care. In future research, it would be interesting to examine the possible cross-country differences in images of home care and how they represent different ways of implementing ageing-in-place policies.

Conclusions

This study shows that the images used in newspapers reinforce to some extent the prevailing understanding of older adults as a burden (see Ishikawa 2020). The results also reflect the discourse that home care has been stealthily transformed into institutional care without any benefits to the client, such as better availability of care workers. The newspaper images construct the understanding that home care recipients are dependent on care

workers' ability and time to help and meet them. From the perspective of social representations of such a specific group of older adults, it should be noted that people in dominant social positions have the power and opportunity to repeat and reproduce stereotypical representations, making them seem natural (Gorham 1999). Therefore, it is important to emphasize older adults' own perceptions when discussing and making decisions regarding them.

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Competing Interests Declaration

The authors declare none.

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