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Author(s): Ishikawa, Motoko

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Media portrayals of transitions from work to retirement in two ageing societies: the case of ageing baby boomers in Japan and Finland

Motoko Ishikawa ^{a,b,*}

^a Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

^b Research Institute of Human Development, Kyoto International Social Welfare Exchange Centre, Japan

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ABSTRACT

This article explores media portrayals of the transition from work to retirement under the circumstances of demographic change through a focus on newspaper discussions about ageing baby boomers in Japan and Finland. Due to their shared characteristics as a distinct population group that advances the rapid ageing of the population, media representations of Japanese and Finnish baby boomers during the transitional period to retirement give insight into the social perceptions of retirement and their implications on later life. Manifest content analysis and subsequent thematic analysis identify that the topic of “work, retirement and pension” dominates media discussions in both countries. Analysis also conveys that this topic involves specific themes on three levels: macro level, attitudinal level and behavioural level regarding working, subjective and social perceptions of retirement. Social and cultural differences between Japan and Finland are well accounted for in shaping each theme, which is characterised by even contrasting expressions regarding the extension of working life and attitudes toward work and retirement. However, deeper analysis suggests that the idea that values an active, productive and engaged lifestyle beyond retirement underlies both Japanese and Finnish media discourses. Media discussions in both countries risk creating a discriminatory dichotomy among older people: the Finnish media marginalises those who are out of work and without work-like activities, while the Japanese media tend to exclude those without socially desirable competence.

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed the greying of the population in many developed countries. The main source of population ageing in the majority of these countries is that the baby boomers – large birth cohorts born after the end of the Second World War – have been growing old (Gale, 2012). However, unlike some countries that had a long period of increasing birth rates (the United States, Canada and Australia) or two separate peak periods (the United Kingdom) from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s (Falkingham, 1997; Leach, Phillipson, Biggs, & Money, 2013; Phillipson, Leach, Money, & Biggs, 2008; Van Bavel & Reher, 2013), the role of the baby boomers in demographic change is even more pivotal for Japan and Finland. These two countries experienced a pronounced increase in birth rates during a brief period in the latter half of the 1940s following demobilisation (Karisto, 2005, 2007; Sakaiya, 2005/1976; Sakaiya, 2008/2005). The relative size of the baby boom cohorts in Japan and Finland has been noticeably higher compared to the age groups that preceded and succeeded them, which is a major contributing

factor to the rapid ageing of the population. While Japan has been the world’s most aged society since 2005 (Cabinet Office, 2018), Finland has been one of Europe’s fastest ageing countries over the past decade (Eurostat, 2022). With the ageing of the Japanese and Finnish baby boomers, both the old-age dependency ratio and social expenditures for old age have increased and are expected to continue increasing (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Project Team for Financial Statistics of Social Security, 2018; Terveiden ja hyvinvoivien laitos (THL), 2019). This poses a major challenge for maintaining the old age pension system, arrangements for care services and kinship structures.

Due to the particularly large population of baby boom cohorts in Japan and Finland compared to other industrial countries, baby boomers have moved into retirement during a relatively short period of time. This offers an excellent opportunity to study how retirement is understood in contemporary societies, especially under the circumstances of an ageing population. The analysis of mass media is important for exploring social perceptions of retirement since the media has a

* Corresponding author at: Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Keskussairaalan tie 2, PO Box 35, 40014 Jyväskylä, Finland.
E-mail address: motoko.m.ishikawa@jyu.fi.

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notable influence on public opinion with respect to ageing and retirement. However, cross-cultural analyses on media representations of ageing are rare. This study examines how transitions from work to retirement are portrayed in Japanese and Finnish media in the context of an ageing population. Japan and Finland create an interesting opportunity for cross-cultural comparison because the baby boomers constitute significant cohorts in the rapid ageing of the population, but at the same time, these two countries are substantially different in geographical, historical, societal and cultural terms. Thus, comparing these two countries makes it possible to explore what socio-cultural influences shape conceptions of ageing and retirement.

Shift in the meaning of old age

Rapid ageing of the population in many industrialised countries has prompted discussions about the possible negative impacts of demographic change on healthcare systems, social security programmes and intergenerational solidarity. As the term alarmist/apocalyptic demography indicates, these discussions have tended to depict population ageing as a social crisis with catastrophic ramifications (Gee, 2002; Katz, 1992; Robertson, 1997). To counter the crisis discourse on demographic ageing coupled with the anxiety of sustainability in a welfare state, the concept of active ageing has been proffered as a policy response to the challenges of population ageing (Foster & Walker, 2015).

Although active ageing originally meant the participation of older people in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs (World Health Organization (WHO), 2002), policy operationalisation of the concept has been dominated by a neoliberal perspective that prioritises the extension of working life (Foster & Walker, 2015; Walker & Maltby, 2012) and restricts the social contribution of older adults to work and work-like activities (Moulaert & Biggs, 2013). Currently, due to the prevailing constructions of active ageing, the idea of retirement is undergoing a transformation from well-earned leisure rewarded as a result of individuals' productive years to an increasing pressure on older workers to stay productively engaged and to contribute to society (Foster & Walker, 2021; Taylor & Earl, 2016; van Dyk, 2014).

It can be argued that the emergence of the narrative of working longer, which is stimulated by the utilitarian approach to active ageing (Taylor & Earl, 2016), causes a major shift in the meaning of old age. The shift in what it means to be ageing and of an old age equates active ageing with working longer and extending the midlife, thus prioritising productivity, effectiveness and independence into later life (Foster & Walker, 2021; Gilleard & Higgs, 2011; Higgs & Gilleard, 2014; van Dyk, 2016). It is this rearrangement of the meaning of old age that critical gerontology points to when problematising the active ageing paradigm. The critique of active ageing revolves around two streams of reasoning. First, presenting older adults as a social and economic resource risks evading responsibility for public provision and leads to the approval of restructuring neoliberal welfare state (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; van Dyk, 2014). Second, continuing work into later life is said to be anti-ageist as it allows older adults to retain more social status and power, but simultaneously, it can contribute to the stigmatisation and disempowerment of those who do not meet the criteria for ageing actively (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Moulaert & Biggs, 2013). Both streams of critique caution that active ageing policies embrace exclusive, implicit normative standards of a "good later life" that transfer responsibility from nations to individuals/families (Holstein & Minkler, 2007; Lassen & Moreira, 2014).

Nevertheless, the shift in the meaning of old age is not induced by the mere existence of the concept of active ageing but instead, through the social construction of ageing itself. While active ageing has dominated policy discourse, advocacy for social policy that underscores the productivity shapes various narratives of older workers and retirees. These narratives are then widely spread across society, particularly via the mass media, which plays an important role in socially constructing older

workers and reflecting or reinforcing stereotypical images of ageing (Taylor & Earl, 2016). A fundamental question arises: do social constructions of ageing and retirement via the mass media contribute to exclusive and normative standards of later life as critical gerontologists have cautioned? To address this question, the next section looks into studies on media representations of ageing and old age.

Media representations of ageing and old age

While mass media reflects the cultural beliefs regarding ageing that have widely spread across society (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007), it simultaneously shapes perceptions of and knowledge about ageing and later life (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000; Koskinen, Salminen, & Leino-Kilpi, 2014). In a climate consisting of a rapidly ageing population, alarmist/apocalyptic demography and counterarguments highlighting active ageing are supposed to exercise a significant influence on society since popular media represents, in various ways, an increasing number of older adults. The word "representation" refers to articulating certain ideas, which reveal what is not apparent from another perspective, as well as making certain selections, using certain words and relating certain contexts to descriptions (Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2011a). Because of this process of representation, the described phenomenon is no longer neutral. Thus, media representations are cultural products advancing particular beliefs by repeating certain perspectives, cultural values, social norms and role expectations, thereby influencing self-identity, how other persons in society are viewed or approached and societal attitudes in general (Koskinen et al., 2014; Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2011a, 2011b).

Of the various forms of mass media, newspapers offer a window into public opinion, culture, politics and social life (Fairclough, 1995). The important role of newspapers in shaping public opinion and influencing political decision making is visible when they discuss topics such as population ageing and older people, which can have profound implications for social policy. Earlier studies on newspaper representations of ageing, older people, and their identities share general trends. Older people in print media are under-represented relative to their actual numbers, and the images of ageing are depicted in a stereotypical way with negative emphasis on older people's frailty and dependency (Fealy, McNamara, Treacy, & Lyons, 2012; Koskinen et al., 2014; Rozanova, 2006). Population ageing, meanwhile, is commonly perceived as a serious threat to and burden on society (Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2011a, 2011b). Those features encompass both an underlying sense of ageism and apocalyptic demography (Gee, 2002; Katz, 1992; Rauhut, 2010; Robertson, 1997). Unlike the stereotype of vulnerability in old age, a study focusing on the discourse of successful ageing in newspapers reveals that those older persons past the official retirement age who participate in productive activities are portrayed as remaining youthful (Rozanova, 2010).

The persistent news-press representations of older people as passive and in need of care take on somewhat different depictions when covering advancing age among the baby boomers. Some studies point out that baby boomers can deviate from general images of old age by drawing on their size, good health, affluence and power (Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2011a), which then projects onto their future images as demanding and self-aware care users (Jönson & Jönsson, 2015). However, the majority of scholarship discussing constructions of the baby boomers in the media, albeit being biased toward the American and British contexts, reveal that the baby boomers tend to face criticism, even in a hostile manner. The criticism arises from the media's way of combining anxieties about demographic and economic landscapes regarding pensions and the healthcare systems with the alleged characteristics of the baby boomers, such as hedonistic behaviours, self-absorption, selfishness and a strong sense of entitlement (Bristow, 2016; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012; Phillipson et al., 2008). Though frailty and dependency are hardly mentioned, the criticism toward ageing baby boomers can be regarded as another manifestation of demographic alarmism.

Table 1
Retirement process of the baby boomers in Japan and Finland.

	Japan ^a	Finland ^b
Phase I	before early retirement: 2004–2006	before early retirement: 2000
Phase II	during early retirement: 2007–2009	during early retirement: 2001–2007
Phase III	before normal retirement: 2010–2011	during normal retirement: 2008–2015
Phase IV	during normal retirement: 2012–2014	

^a Japanese baby boomers are those born in 1947–1949. They were eligible to receive part of an old age pension at the age of 60 if they were covered under the Employee's Pension Insurance System. This was defined as early retirement. The entitlement to a full old age pension started when they turned 65 years old, which was defined as normal retirement.

^b Finnish baby boomers are those born in 1945–1950. Normal retirement occurred between 2008 and 2018 due to a flexible retirement between the age of 63 and 68 introduced by the pension reform of 2005. However, the old system and the reform maintained several paths to retiring before the normal retirement age in 2001–2007, which was defined as early retirement. 2015 signifies the year when the youngest baby boomers turned 65.

As a review of the literature shows, media representations of the ageing baby boomers have tended to focus on their anticipated future images as old persons with care needs but have largely bypassed portrayals of the actual retirement process. For this reason, discourse on active ageing emphasising productive lifestyles has not been present. Media discussions that focus on anticipated imagery of the boomers' future pose a challenge to understanding the interactions between the changing nature of retirement and the constructions of the social meaning of old age. The idea of retirement in the process of transformation particularly highlights transitions from work to retirement in public policy (Phillipson, 2019), which may shape changing public opinion, including the media (Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003; Wilińska & Cedersund, 2010). Hence, exploring how the media portrays ageing baby boomers in relation to retirement reveals the social perceptions of retirement and their implications on later life, along with knowledge on approaching old age in the context of ageing societies. Japanese and Finnish baby boomers, with their visibly unified population groups who have undergone mass retirement in a rather shorter time span within different socio-cultural contexts, have a unique vantage point on this issue.

The aim of this article is to investigate how ageing and retirement are socially constructed when Japanese and Finnish mass media represent baby boomers' transitions from work to retirement and to examine the extent to which different socio-cultural contexts affect these social constructions. The study further explores whether media representations of retiring/retired baby boomers engender a shift in the meaning of old age, which embraces implicit and distinct ideas about later life. The research questions of the present study are as follows: (1) What topics are discussed when Japanese and Finnish national newspapers represent the baby boomers during retirement and the beginning of old age? (2) Does the dominant discourse of active ageing with a productivist vision infuse the media portrayals of retirement for baby boomers in Japan and Finland? (3) And if media portrayals of active ageing are dominated by the productivist vision, does the media adjust the discourse of active ageing in their respective countries similarly or differently?

Data and methods

Data collection

The data were collected in an earlier study in which the results were published in a monograph (Ishikawa, 2020). The data consisted of 1236 articles from two Japanese newspapers published between 2004 and 2014 and one Finnish newspaper published between 2000 and 2015. Since the research focused on transitions from work to retirement, data collection was constructed around the retirement process of the baby boomers by distinguishing before and during phases of "early" and "normal" retirement (Table 1).

Newspapers are considered to be a valid choice for the present study, even though traditional print media have started to lose their dominance with the increasing popularity of digital and social media. Given that the

study explores media portrayals of ageing baby boomers over the course of more than a decade, including the period prior to the emergence of social media, and especially given that the investigated topics likely have long-term influence on decision making in social and political matters, the choice of newspapers is justified.

The Japanese data were collected from the two leading national newspapers: *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Asahi Shimbun*. Although both newspapers have a large readership among the general public, the editorial pages of *Yomiuri Shimbun* are said to be centre-right and conservative, whereas *Asahi Shimbun* is known for its progressive and liberal statements. Using the following sampling strategy, articles were collected from full-text online databases. Since the Japanese word for "baby boomer" elicits multiple meanings, a combination of key words were used for data retrieval in order to make the search results correspond to the idea of the baby boom generation. The key words translated into English were "baby boomer AND (life OR living OR way of living OR lifestyle OR retirement OR retiring age)". Search terms generated a combined 2803 articles (1056 in *Yomiuri Shimbun* and 1747 in *Asahi Shimbun*) published between 2004 and 2014. These initially retrieved articles were then read to determine whether they fell within the scope of the study objectives. The inclusion criteria for selecting an article were as follows: the article should report on the baby boomers themselves, describe issues related to them or portray some specific phenomenon influenced by or having an influence on the generation of baby boomers. The selected article needed to meet one of these three criteria, and duplicates were removed. Finally, 1109 articles (474 in *Yomiuri Shimbun* and 635 in *Asahi Shimbun*) that fulfilled the inclusion criteria were selected for analysis (Appendix figure).

The Finnish data were comprised of any anonymous editorials and comment articles in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* that made reference to the baby boomers. Anonymous editorials and comment articles written by editors-in-chief or other journalists of the *Helsingin Sanomat* represent the line of the press. *Helsingin Sanomat* is a daily newspaper of national circulation that has the largest readership in Finland. It is not inclined toward a particular political ideology but rather reflects diverse thoughts and standpoints. The provided data were part of approximately 1500 collected articles that had been retrieved in another study (Kiuru, 2022) from the electric archive using search terms related to ageing and retirement. The data used in this study were 149 articles covering the period between 2000 and 2015, and each of them included the Finnish equivalent of "boomers" or another term referring to them such as "Finns who are approaching retirement age", "generation born after the war" and "wet generation".¹ The 149 articles were read through to determine the relevance for the present study by applying the same inclusion criteria used in selecting Japanese materials. However, more

¹ "Wet generation" implies the high alcohol consumption among the baby boomers. This term was used in the article that discussed negative health consequences of excess alcohol intake in older people including the baby boomers.

moderate and careful assessment was implemented due to the smaller amount of data and the specific features of editorials that reflect the official stance of the newspaper in diverse as well as subtle ways. This process led to selecting 127 articles for analysis (Appendix figure).

The Finnish data consisting of editorials and comment articles is less extensive than the Japanese data, however, the special characteristics of editorials in *Helsingin Sanomat* contributed to the feasibility of the study. A cross-cultural study on the argumentative style of newspaper editorials revealed the uniqueness of Finnish editorials; a comparison of editorials in *Helsingin Sanomat* with those in prominent English and German newspapers uncovered that, while arguing over opinion was the common approach in English and German newspapers, Finnish editorials tended to inform readers with background material on which they could base their own opinion (Tirkkonen-Condit & Liefländer-Koistinen, 1989). The informative nature of editorials in *Helsingin Sanomat* compensates for the smaller amount of data by encapsulating abundant information within the data. Furthermore, the editorials can be regarded as influential given the monopolistic position of *Helsingin Sanomat* in Finland. Meanwhile, the editorials in the Japanese newspapers can be regarded as argumentative rather than informative, given that *Yomiuri Shimbun* adopts a conservative perspective, whereas *Asahi Shimbun* is inclined toward more liberal thinking. It is then reasonable to include other articles in the Japanese data set to better capture diverse media discussions, which enables cross-case inference through qualitative comparative analysis (Thomann & Maggetti, 2020). Thus, even though there is an imbalance in the total number of articles across the countries, the two different corpora are comparable for doing these analyses.

Data analysis

I read, coded and analysed the research material in the original languages (Japanese and Finnish) without the help of professional translators or translation applications. The study on newspaper representations of baby boomers during the transitional period to retirement first looked into the manifest content of the data sets. The identified manifest patterns were then closely examined to uncover their latent and underlying meanings. Thus, the analyses were implemented with two steps: first, the manifest content analysis method organised the data sets, and second, the data were qualitatively explored using a thematic analysis approach. This staged process of investigation allowed for addressing a large amount of research material in a systematic fashion.

The manifest content analysis aimed to systematise the data sets, to provide an overview of the content and to quantify any patterns. The unit of analysis in the manifest content analysis was individual newspaper articles. As manifest content refers to the surface, each article was read to determine the nature of the discussed topic by looking closely at the texts with a low abstraction level and a low interpretative degree (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017; Patterson, Semple, Wood, Duffy, & Hilton, 2015). After developing a coding scheme for the article topic, the coded data were organised into broader categories while considering how the different topics were related and linked. Sorting the codes into meaningful clusters revealed several broad subjects. All the articles were then recoded for both the main subject and any minor subjects in accordance with the defined broad clusters. After coding the material, cross tables of the subjects covered by the articles and the phases of newspaper discussions were devised.

Thematic analysis was used to qualitatively investigate the content of the categorised manifest subjects. In the present study, thematic analysis was implemented for the subject of “work, retirement and pension” that had been identified both in Japanese and Finnish data. The unit of analysis was at the level of individual sentences, phrases or paragraphs in the articles that had been classified as having this particular subject. In a methodological sense, a theme refers to a specific pattern of interest or represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Themes were found

bearing latent content or underlying meanings in mind, and interpretation of such latent content was conducted by keeping both a closeness to and distance from the text (Graneheim et al., 2017). The process of analysis consisted of several steps as follows (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) generating initial codes that capture interesting features and distinct patterns in the data, (2) searching for themes, (3) reviewing themes, (4) defining and naming themes, and (5) producing the report.

Findings

This section first presents the overview of the results of the manifest content analysis, which is followed by an exploration of the topic of “work, retirement and pension” in order to investigate how the print media portrayed transitions from work to retirement in context of the mass retirement of the baby boomers. Specific themes found in the thematic analysis of this topic are delineated on three levels to highlight a comparative view of media discourse in Japan and Finland.

Dominance of the topic of “work, retirement and pension”

The results of the manifest content analysis are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The tables provide an initial overview of the content of Japanese and Finnish newspaper reports and the share of different topics during each analytical phase as well as the whole study period. Evidently, more frequent discussions about the baby boomers were held in Japan in relation to their early retirement, whereas the Finnish debates tended to pay constant attention to the baby boomers throughout the study period. The analysis also shows that while newspaper discussions in the two countries focused on several shared topics, other specific topics characterised the media representations in the respective countries. The common topics included “work, retirement and pension”, “ageing, health and care”, and “baby boomers as a generation”. “Consumption and marketing” and “activities, associations and relationships”, which constituted central topics in the Japanese data describing various narratives of individual baby boomers, did not appear in the Finnish data. Absence of these topics seems to result from the fact that the majority of Finnish articles discussed the baby boomers as a generation or cohort rather than as individuals. This tendency might be ascribed to the data confined to editorials and comment articles.

In both Japan and Finland, the topic of “work, retirement and pension” dominated the media discussions, particularly in the early phases. However, the actual retirement and advancing age of the baby boomers caused the emergence of other topics. The delayed development of the topic of “ageing, health and care” was especially evident in Japanese debates, which implies an increasing general concern about health and care issues along with the ageing of baby boomers. Likewise, post-retirement lifestyles that were gradually established among baby boomers appeared to affect the emergence of the topic of “baby boomers as a generation” toward the period during normal retirement. Though the development of media discussions over time is interesting, the present study focuses on analysing the topic of “work, retirement and pension”, as it is the most relevant for investigating social perceptions of retirement and exploring how they reflect the meaning of later life in the context of demographic change.

Exploring specific patterns in the two data sets, including the topic of “work, retirement and pension” (515 Japanese articles and 77 Finnish articles), revealed several themes. Four themes were identified in Japanese data: (J1) macro influences and responses triggered by the impending retirement of the baby boomers, (J2) experiences and reality of retirement, (J3) continuing work into the post-retirement period and (J4) seeing the baby boomers as a resource for society. Correspondingly, three themes were refined through investigating Finnish data: (F1) impact of baby boomer retirement on the labour market, (F2) attitudes toward work among older workers and (F3) image, expectation and reality of new retirees. The analysis of the two data sets discovered such a similarity that the themes were formulated on three levels: macro level

Table 2
Proportion of articles by topic and phase in Japanese newspapers.

	Phase I before early retirement (2004–06)	Phase II during early retirement (2007–09)	Phase III before normal retirement (2010–11)	Phase IV during normal retirement (2012–14)	Total period
Topic (%)					
Work, retirement and pension	53.4	47.5	45.2	9.8	46.4
Ageing, health and care	8.3	8.6	27.4	43.8	13.1
Baby boomers as a generation	9.2	12.2	12.9	17.0	11.3
Consumption and marketing	19.0	18.8	8.1	13.4	17.8
Activities, associations and relationships	23.7	28.4	40.3	26.8	26.6
Total number of articles (N)	541	394	62	112	1109

Note: One article can be categorised under multiple topics. The topic was discussed in the articles either as a main subject or as a minor subject.

Table 3
Proportion of articles by topic and phase in Finnish newspaper.

	Phase I before early retirement (2000)	Phase II during early retirement (2001–07)	Phase III during normal retirement (2008–15)	Total period
Topic (%)				
Work, retirement and pension	70.0	67.2	52.5	60.6
Ageing, health and care	50.0	27.6	30.5	30.7
Baby boomers as a generation	0.0	8.6	22.0	14.2
Current events in economic and political affairs	0.0	17.2	20.3	17.3
Other	0.0	1.7	5.1	3.1
Total number of articles (N)	10	58	59	127

Note: One article can be categorised under multiple topics. The topic was discussed in the articles either as a main subject or as a minor subject.

(J1, F1), attitudinal and behavioural level (J3, F2) and subjective or social perceptions about retirement (J2, J4, F3). However, prospective retirement among the baby boomers and the looming labour shortage as well as individuals' actions and thoughts were often discussed in different ways. The following subsections discuss the results of the analysis using a comparative perspective while highlighting different and contrasting aspects between Japan and Finland.

Constructions of baby boomer retirement from a broader standpoint

It is apparent that both the Japanese and Finnish newspapers shared a serious concern over the prospective labour force shortage due to the mass retirement of the baby boomers. This concern was reflected in formulating the specific themes: “macro influences and responses triggered by the impending retirement of the baby boomers” for Japan and “impact of baby boomer retirement on the labour market” for Finland. In addressing the threat of labour shortage, the media discussions in both countries paid keen attention to the baby boomers' behaviours in terms of work and retirement. Hence, extending their working life was a heatedly debated issue for both countries but with considerably different emphases. The Japanese debates centred around the postponement of retirement beyond the age of eligibility for an old-age pension or continuation of full or part-time work after retirement. The baby boomers were depicted as having played a vital role in the economic and social development of Japan, with a special emphasis on their high skills and expertise in manufacturing that have been greatly appreciated over the decades. The media discussions repeatedly highlighted the idea that losing boomer engineers (most of whom are male) would mean a crisis not only for companies, but also for the whole Japanese economy. Consequently, a notable point in the articles was elaborating how to utilise the rich experience and skills of the baby boomers by means of transfer of expertise to younger generations in order to maintain Japanese economic vitality. The next excerpt is an example of efforts to hand down skills, knowledge and experience:

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, Ltd. has been organising technical courses in all of its factories since 2004. In the air-conditioner manufacturing factory located in a suburb of Nagoya City, eight selected young employees are engaging exclusively in courses for a half year while being out of the production line. (...) The aim is for them to get a complete picture of operations. Their teachers are employees from the baby boom generation. (...) Useful skills along with rich experiences cannot be easily replaced by a machine or instruction manual. (Asahi 6.1.2006).

As the excerpt epitomises, the media discussions in Japan demonstrated social appreciation of the baby boomers who have been equipped with expertise and experience through long working careers. This is in stark contrast to socio-cultural constructions of the baby boomers as a problem or seeing them as contenders backed by their seemingly selfish characteristics and strong senses of entitlement as identified in British and American studies (Bristow, 2016; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012; Philipson et al., 2008).

Meanwhile, the point of focus in the Finnish media discussions was delaying the effective retirement age so that it comes closer to the legislative age for collecting a normal old-age pension and helps slow the rapid decrease in workforce. Thus, the Finnish debates surrounding the retirement of the baby boomers and its potential impact on the labour market focused more generally on various ways to hinder popular practices of early retirement. This argument was in line with the major goal of the implemented pension reform to delay the effective retirement age by 2–3 years by curtailing the range of pension options available and streamlining pension systems (Kannisto, 2019). Improving the working environment and pension reform were the main measures that newspaper articles detailed as a response to questions of how the working life of Finnish citizens could be extended. In this context, the baby boomers were frequently described with figurative expressions to indicate the importance of staying in the workplace and coping with the workload, as represented in the following excerpt:

We can survive the retirement of the baby boomers and expected workforce shortage only when to work at least two or three years

longer than at present day. Working life should be developed to enhance the productivity of work as well as the wellbeing of personnel, which indeed are dependent on each other. (Helsingin Sanomat 24.3.2002).

Even though it is not as obvious as in the Japanese data, the Finnish articles also mentioned abundant experience and knowledge of the baby boomers, “which should be transferred as capital for working places and young employees” (Helsingin Sanomat 17.2.2003), and presented expectations toward their potential contributions to society by means of extending working life. However, there were not any concrete debates about how and in which occupations the baby boomers have been superior as a workforce. This appears to be relevant to the propensity of Finnish media to regard baby boomers as a new and large cohort of older adults but not draw much attention to their individual characteristics. Accordingly, media representations suggest that Finnish society was more concerned with the quantity of labour force rather than the quality of work exercised by the members of the baby boom generation.

Attitudes and behaviours toward work

The discrepancy in treating the same issue – extension of working life – can be explained by the different degrees of labour force participation among older adults in Japan and in Finland. Statistics show that, while people in Finland generally retire earlier than the normal retirement age, withdrawal from working life in Japan is usually experienced later than the normal retirement age (OECD, 2019). The different figures regarding the average effective age of retirement and the different emphases in media discussions about extending work reveal why Japanese and Finnish newspapers illustrated peoples’ motivation for work quite differently. The contrasting styles of articulating the relationship between work and retirement from the viewpoint of those approaching retirement led to shaping distinct themes in media discussions: “continuing work into the post-retirement period” for Japan and “(negative) attitudes toward work among older workers” for Finland.

Japanese newspapers repeatedly reported on the baby boomers who were willing to work and continue to have a “role” in society. A quest for meaningful post-retirement life was raised implicitly or explicitly as a new role given to the baby boomers, and it frequently appeared in the discussions in relation to continuing work beyond retirement age. The work engaged in during the post-retirement period was usually related somewhat to the previous career, utilising accumulated knowledge, experiences and networks. Yet, the media also focused on some people who have moved into very different fields, such as embarking on agriculture, fishery work or establishing a restaurant. Paying keen attention to people who have continued working reveals a central idea that underlies the actions of the Japanese people. It denotes that working has been an integral part of their social identity and continuing to work helps them maintain a high sense of value and purpose. The following quote from a man who works part-time at a new workplace after a career of 40 years epitomises this idea:

This is a kind of “lifetime employment”. It is about learning to continue working until the end of one’s life, and it will become a purpose in life. (Yomiuri 11.6.2006).

Highlighting ethical values of work held by individual older adults is not fully consonant with a critique of active ageing that claims that any form of activity without monetary value falls into low-esteem (Biggs, McGann, Bowman, & Kimberley, 2017; Foster & Walker, 2021). Older people featured in the Japanese media did engage in productive activities, but as the aforementioned excerpt indicates, more importance was put on personal development rather than economic profit.

What characterised Finnish newspaper discussions was, conversely, how people were reluctant to work longer years at a full workload but instead, favoured early retirement. The preference for early retirement and reluctance to work longer years was typically discernible when the

newspaper articles highlighted the growing popularity of receiving a part-time pension among older employees. Irrespective of its original aim to let people stay longer in working life, the part-time pension system appeared to intensify peoples’ desire to withdraw from full-time work at an earlier stage because the “final pension and the money paid out do not decrease so much, but the workload can be reduced by half” (Helsingin Sanomat 20.5.2000). Exploring diverse texts, including the theme of “attitudes toward work among older workers,” revealed two reasons to favour early retirement and unwillingness to work longer years. The first rationale for the behaviours and attitudes of people facing retirement is that they tend to regard the workload as too strenuous or perceive their health as not being good enough to continue working. Second, dissatisfaction with work can be another reason for dreaming about days of being retired. In view of this general trend, the media discussions set the retirement behaviours of the baby boomers as an issue of major concern:

The baby boomers are on their way to an early retirement age, and nothing suggests that this generation would agree to stay longer in working life than previous age groups did unless channels to retirement are blocked and working life is made more attractive. Why does a worker a little over fifty years old stress her/himself with working when s/he has a chance to retire early, and income do not crucially decrease? (Helsingin Sanomat 7.7.2002).

The above excerpt indicates that the behavioural patterns of the baby boomers would hardly deviate from those of previous birth cohorts, who had favoured early retirement. This pessimistic view contradicts the expressed expectation for postponing retirement and retaining a workforce of baby boomers when discussing extending working life. The contrast between the two reporting styles represents ambivalent features about how the baby boomers were portrayed in public discussions in Finland.

Subjective and social perceptions of retirement

Both Japanese and Finnish newspaper articles cast a spotlight on the baby boomers as retired persons, which formulated distinct themes in respective media discussions: “experiences and reality of retirement” and “seeing the baby boomers as a resource for society” for Japan and “image, expectation and reality of new retirees” for Finland. While previous sub-sections discussed themes that either examine the retirement of the baby boomers from a macro perspective or emphasise attitudes toward work among those approaching retirement, these themes have mixed viewpoints. One point of view has to do with people’s subjective experiences concerning the ideals, visions and reality of post-retirement life and another with public images and social perceptions as well as expectations for new retirees.

Regarding subjective perceptions of retirement, Japanese newspapers in the early phases of the study period frequently discussed how the baby boomers themselves envisioned approaching retirement. Views on retirement were typically characterised by positive expressions, such as “looking forward to my retirement years”, “living healthy and joyfully”, “pursuing hobbies with good health and financial affluence is ideal in retirement life”, and “words associated with retirement are a new departure, life re-experienced, freedom and a leisurely lifestyle”. Narratives of retired baby boomers were a vivid illustration of those who have enjoyed doing what they love to do or who have found things for which they feel passion, not simply prospects for upcoming retirement. Furthermore, the opinions of intellectuals were inclined to encourage the baby boomers to become involved in what they really like to do or what they have never tried before. Irrespective of individual experiences or the expectations of a third party, what formed the backdrop of the media debates was the notion that Japanese baby boomers are different from previous senior citizens because “they are ‘a mass’ who have generated new social phenomena over their life course and they will have influence on society even when they retire” (Yomiuri 1.1.2007).

Various textual articulations assumed that it was not until the time of retirement that the baby boomers finally achieved self-fulfilment. This is very much akin to idea of the Third Age, which highlights greater capacity and potential agency of a growing number of healthy retirees (Laslett, 1989).

It is, however, noteworthy that quite a few articles differentiated meanings of retirement between men and women. Since Japanese baby boomer men and women have established different life courses in terms of both family and work roles, retirement has different implications for the respective genders. Clearly gendered spheres, originating from a family model consisting of a male breadwinner and a female homemaker (Okamura, 2001; Yamasaki, 2001), were reflected in the newspaper discussions, which reported men being anxious about losing a work place to which they felt strong attachment and sense of identity from and women's stress about spending more time with their husbands.

While optimism mainly characterised subjective awareness of retiring/retired baby boomers in Japanese media, Finnish newspaper articles tended to pay attention to a gap between the ideal versus the reality of retirement. This may be caused by the distribution of Finnish data. The majority of relevant articles including the theme "image, expectation and reality of new retirees" were published in the period of normal retirement of the baby boomers. Formulation of the theme in the later phase of the study period suggests that ongoing retirement generated new topical discussions in the Finnish media. Discussing the ideal retirement versus the reality of retirement involved a gap between the amount of earned pension and that required to lead a decent life. Women's disadvantage compared to men in terms of pension amounts was also mentioned, however, it was the only instance in which gender difference was highlighted in the Finnish data covering the topic of "work, retirement and pension". Regardless of acknowledging the distance between the dream and reality of retirement, the newspaper further reminded the readers of the observation that retirement does not dramatically change one's lifestyle but rather that life continues much as before.

When it comes to social perceptions of retirement, a discrete theme took shape in the discussions of Japanese media: "seeing the baby boomers as a resource for society". This is a bridging theme that is closely related to the previously discussed two themes: "macro influences and responses triggered by the impending retirement of the baby boomers" and "continuing work into the post-retirement period". The analysis of the theme "seeing the baby boomers as a resource for society" revealed that the notion of the baby boomers as a social resource had manifold implications. First, the baby boomers would become an inexpensive but quality labour force and would remain as active taxpayers upon continuing to work after retirement. Extension of working life in this context would benefit society in economic, industrial and national fiscal terms. Second, the newspapers drew attention to baby boomers' expertise and experiences that could be harnessed in various fields, from industries to activities on the community level. Third, the media discussions emphasised not only the professional competence of the baby boomers but also their wealth, good health and vigour that would help maintain the social and economic vitality of local regions, as well as that of the whole nation. The various implications of viewing the baby boomers as a social resource again have a gendered significance. In the debates surrounding extension of work predominantly in the early phases of the study period, the idea of utilising skills and experiences accumulated over a long career applied mainly to men. In contrast, in the later articles, women had a substantial presence in the stories on community activities, care and service work. These stories highlighted women's latent competencies as being potentially useful for addressing the challenges in contemporary society. By discovering capabilities typically held by women in domestic and community settings, the newspapers presented social expectations for baby boomers to undertake a new role in society.

Whether or not the media discussions in Japan shed light on men or women, the theme "seeing the baby boomers as a resource for society"

embraces the concept of active ageing, or more specifically, productive ageing (Bass & Caro, 2001; Butler & Schechter, 1995; Gale, 2012; Hinterlong, Morrow-Howell, & Sherraden, 2001). The newspapers viewed working baby boomers as smart and productive assets, while recognising their economic usefulness (Gale, 2012) and highlighting their important contributions to society through engaging in meaningful actions (Hinterlong et al., 2001).

Meanwhile, in the Finnish media, public images and social perceptions of new retirees were most visible when the newspaper articles expressed expectations for the baby boomers to engage in volunteer activities. The following excerpt from one article suggests a great expectation regarding possible retirement behaviours of the baby boomers.

Men and women born in the post-war era, who are healthier than previous generations, can still offer a lot of joy and benefits as pensioners, too. Healthy people who just left working life have to be considered as reserve manpower, who have a lot to give to others and simultaneously have an opportunity to feel important. They are likely to become a significant new resource for voluntary work, of which demand is growing faster than supply. (Helsingin Sanomat 28.2.2002).

The texts frame the baby boomers as a potential power or as a hidden social resource, and they suggest that utilising this latent force will likely benefit other people, as well as boost the self-esteem of baby boomers themselves. Although not as obvious in Japanese newspaper portrayals that accentuated the utilitarian view, Finnish media discussions of newly retired persons represented by the baby boom generation also evoked productive ageing. Productive ageing in this context, however, refers to the broader conceptualisation, which includes the capacity to engage in voluntary activities and assist with the family (Butler & Schechter, 1995) and the ability to focus on inner-directed and personally meaningful behaviours (Kaye, Butler, & Webster, 2003).

Discussion

For newspaper articles including the topic of "work, retirement and pension", the socially perceived problems and challenges were quite similar for Japan and Finland. Due to the demographic significance of the baby boom and smaller size of subsequent birth cohorts, media depictions in both countries suggested that the retirement of the baby boomers would bring about a serious shortage in labour force and an increase in social security expenses. The possible economic threat facilitated arguments unique to each country. The baby boomers were expected to delay their effective retirement age in Finland, whereas in Japan they were encouraged to postpone retirement beyond the age of entitlement to pension or to continue working part-time in the post-retirement period. Even though different points were emphasised when discussing extension of working life in Japan and Finland, the objectives of these measures were the same: to alleviate the negative impact of massive retirement from population ageing. Thus, media discussions on extension of working life in both countries were relevant to the political economy of ageing, postulating a close connection between the phenomenon of ageing and societal forces (Holstein & Minkler, 2007). Various statements encouraging working longer did not necessarily mirror the obvious neoliberal idea of welfare retrenchment in either of the two countries. However, both Japanese and Finnish media framed late career productivity as enhancing fiscal stability and sustainability of the welfare state.

A more pronounced contrast between the two societies could be discerned in depictions of the attitudes and behaviours of the baby boomers toward extending working life. Recursive articulations in the Japanese media focused on stories of those who had eagerly continued engaging in work that they found meaningful. Given the significant role of mass media in shaping perceptions and knowledge about various issues, these narratives of ageing baby boomers might have lasting effects

in terms of the retirement behaviours of contemporaries as well as younger people approaching retirement. Thus, it can be inferred that the stories reinforce social and cultural circumstances that favour extension of working life or even take it for granted. Social and cultural advocacy for prolonged work careers was evident in the way in which the newspapers positioned the baby boomers as a resource for society.

Conversely, Finnish newspaper reports predominantly focused on persons reluctant to work longer years and who instead preferred early retirement due to reasons such as health problems, dissatisfaction with work, and age discrimination experienced in the workplace. The unfavourable attitudes toward continuing work, as depicted in the media, applied to a range of older workers both then and now, from previous birth cohorts to the baby boomers and presumably successive cohorts as well. It can be argued that such media articulations reflect the persistence of a culture that regards growing older as negative, obstructive and disadvantageous, particularly in the context of the transitional period to retirement.

When emphasising the importance of late career productivity, Finnish media generally highlighted the numbers and volume of the baby boomers but scarcely mentioned their qualitative characteristics and uniqueness. Through such a lens, the baby boomers were presented as a homogeneous group of newcomers called older people. Due to this simplistic view, traditional Western constructions of elders as a special population and a social problem (Katz, 1992) were reinforced and negative overtones ascribed to those unwilling to work longer. This explanation may explain the inconsistencies within newspapers: debates on the societal level expressed positive expectations regarding prolongation of working life among the baby boomers, whereas those on the individual behavioural level were pessimistic.

What distinguished Japanese media representations was the emphasis on unique features of baby boomers, such as rich work experiences and expertise. According to Teshima (2015a, 2015b), views on present-day Japanese elders conflict. The traditional Confucian philosophy of respect for elders because of their knowledge, experiences and wisdom is met with a post-war economic growth period that sees older people as socially vulnerable and not economically productive. Given this proposition, it can be argued that the social appreciation of baby boomers' competence shown in the media was built not only on an emerging utilitarian notion of active ageing but also on the traditional Japanese custom of respecting elders, which together seemed to mitigate the modern vision of vulnerable older people. Therefore, Japanese media tended to highlight both commodified and ethical values as prospective benefits of extending working life. This interpretation interrogates the criticism that the productivist view on active ageing results in seeing longer and healthier lives purely in economic terms (Biggs et al., 2017) by design. Different socio-cultural contexts are worth bearing in mind.

The contrasting ways of depicting people's attitudes toward work and retirement create completely different portraits of older workers in Japan and Finland. What especially characterised Japanese baby boomers on the threshold of later life was their industriousness. Emphasising the transition from work to retirement as being supported by an active and engaged lifestyle implies that an ethics of busyness is desirable and appreciated in later life (Ekerdt, 1986; Katz, 2000). Post-retirement life is (most) valuable if it is earnest, active and "the busy ethic" forms a moral continuity between work and retirement (Ekerdt, 1986). The busy ethic arguably underlies the Japanese media's way of specifying attitudinal and behavioural features of the baby boomers. Yet, the busy ethic operates in Finnish media discussions too in a paradoxical manner. Repeatedly mentioning those in favour of early

retirement and seeing them as an obstacle to policies that strive to extend working life positions life as a pensioner as justified only if older persons stay engaged with a busy and active lifestyle beyond retirement.

Notwithstanding substantial literal differences in portrayals of retiring/retired baby boomers, both Japanese and Finnish media discourses implicitly or explicitly committed themselves to a productivist version of ageing (Biggs, 2004; Martinson & Minkler, 2006). The emphasis on the importance of working longer years by negatively mentioning general preference for an early labour market exit in Finnish media suggests considerable risk for later life that does not conform with productive activity. This embodies what critical gerontology has problematised as the active ageing paradigm (Biggs et al., 2017; Foster & Walker, 2021; Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Moulaert & Biggs, 2013). Furthermore, highlighting the advantage of working longer years without identifying quality of work and characteristics of the baby boomers as older workers seemingly builds on the notion that any form of labour force participation is an individual and societal good (Taylor & Earl, 2016) and that the social good trumps individual desires or abilities. In contrast to the suggestion that working longer is necessarily beneficial, the recurring articulation of the baby boomers with expert knowledge and experiences in the Japanese media is noteworthy. However, it is highly gendered since media discussions postulate that men's long working careers and skills can be utilised far beyond official retirement, whereas women's competence in domestic and community spheres has a potential to address challenges in the society. Failure to acknowledge the gender-segregated nature of the boomer life course could lead to homogenising a new breed of older adults, if not degrading those who do not have socially expected capabilities or roles.

Despite the monopolistic position of Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* and informative nature of its editorials and comment articles, the Japanese data set was disproportionately larger. While such differences between the Japanese and Finnish data sets were a limitation in this study, future studies that standardise the amount and quality of data will allow us to discern whether these conclusions can be replicated or persist. To conclude, Japanese and Finnish media represented baby boomers' transition from work to retirement as a crucial period in terms of continued engagement in productive activity. Media discussions in both countries risk homogenising all older adults and creating a discriminatory dichotomy among older people: the Finnish media marginalises those who are outside of work and work-like conduct, while the Japanese media exclude those without socially valued competencies. The finding that social constructions of ageing and retirement within mass media are imbued with a neoliberal framing and productivist approach to ageing supports critical gerontology's claims that active ageing policies constitute exclusive and implicit normative standards of what constitutes a good later life.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

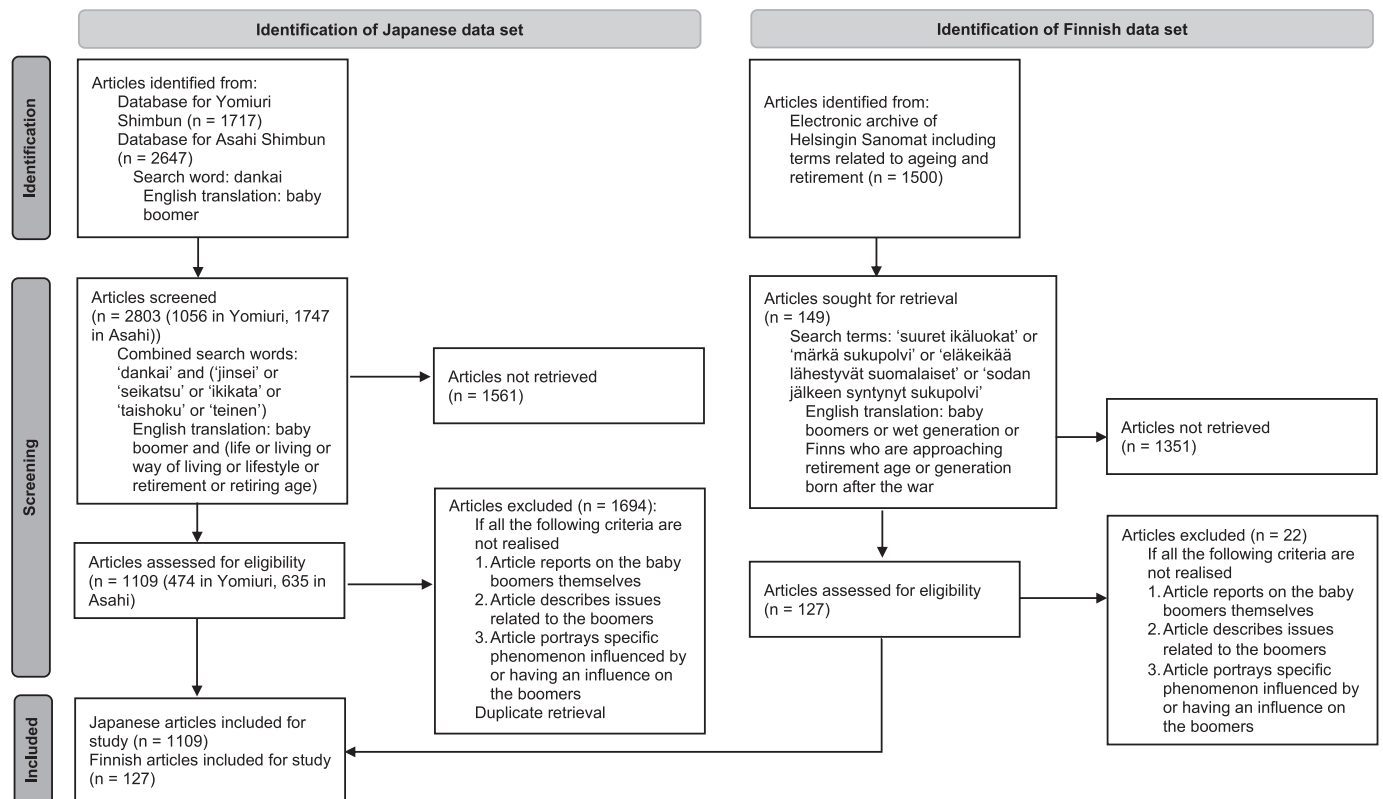
Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Appendix figure



Flow diagram for data collection.

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