

# *Hot topic: examining discursive representations of menopause and work in the British media*

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# Hot topic: Examining discursive representations of menopause and work in the British media

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## Abstract

This study builds on Goffman's idea of stigma to examine how mainstream print media in the UK have framed menopause over the past decade, especially concerning work. We used a computational corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADS) approach to analyze 2993 articles on menopause. The results indicate increased attention to menopause and, more recently, to menopause and work. However, the narrative consistently foregrounds negative aspects associated with dysfunction, decline, and unpredictable behavior, especially around litigation. These discursive representations reinforce the stigma around menopause by constructing women at this stage of life as the dangerous other, affected by physical and mental abnormalities. For women not to be disadvantaged at work, menopause representations must be more balanced by including more positive stories. Our study offers insights that can be of relevance to emerging workplace policies and assist the media in communicating the issues of menopause and work. We also make a methodological contribution by taking the CADS approach to explore empirically and systematically the dominant discourses around menopause in the UK mainstream media just over the last decade.

## KEYWORDS

British media, discrimination, menopausal women, menopause, newspapers, stigma, workplace

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom (UK), the topic of menopause, especially concerning work and working life of women, has been receiving increased attention from practitioners (e.g., Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development [CIPD], 2019), campaigners for women's rights (e.g., Fawcett Society, 2021), trade unions (e.g., Unison, 2019), policymakers (e.g., All-Party Parliamentary Group [APPG], 2022; Women and Equalities Committee, 2022), and scholars (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2021; Grandey et al., 2020; Jack et al., 2019; Steffan, 2021). Menopause marks the end of the reproductive stage for cis women and some of those who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming.<sup>1</sup> It happens on average at the age of 51, but it may occur later or earlier, naturally, or due to medical reasons or surgery (Rees et al., 2021). Menopause is defined as an event 12 months after the last menstrual period (Rees et al., 2021). Its transition, however, starts a few years earlier, in the perimenopause period, and can last up to several years afterward (Rees et al., 2021).

Menopause can be a positive experience for many women (Atkinson et al., 2021; Bertero, 2003; Hvas, 2001; Hvas & Gannik, 2008; Jack et al., 2019; Perz & Ussher, 2008). However, it is estimated that between 20% and 25% of them experience severe symptoms, such as hot flushes, night sweats, fatigue, irritability, and reduced concentration (Rees et al., 2021). Women in this life stage are a growing group within the workforce in the UK (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022). The general concern is that menopausal women may be disadvantaged at work and leave employment altogether (Atkinson et al., 2021; Bryson et al., 2022; Evandrou et al., 2021) due to their symptoms or gendered ageism (Jack et al., 2019). Moreover, menopause might limit career progression since it usually coincides with the time when many women seek to move into more senior positions (Grandey et al., 2020).

In the past few years, there has been a surge in guidance on how to support women at work published in academic (e.g., Hardy et al., 2018; Rees et al., 2021) and nonacademic outlets (e.g., CIPD, 2019; Unison, 2019). There has also been an increase in media attention to menopause, a topic which until now has been considered taboo (Krajewski, 2019). Menopause has been making headlines in the UK with celebrities, such as Davina McCall, discussing their experience of menopause (Morris, 2021) or politicians, such as MP Carolyn Harris and her peers, campaigning to raise awareness of issues and break the stigma around menopause (see APPG, 2022; Women and Equalities Committee, 2022).

According to Goffman (1963, p. 3), stigma is an "attribute that can be deeply discrediting" and symbolizes devalued stereotypes. Therefore, increased awareness and informed understanding of menopause are considered critical to improving the quality of life of working women (Hardy et al., 2018). These can contribute to the reduction of stigma associated with this natural transition and open pathways for women to start conversations on the topic with their managers, ensuring they are better supported during menopause and in their career (Grandey et al., 2020). Nevertheless, there is little information on how menopause has been discursively constructed in public domains, for example, the media, and especially how menopause is represented concerning work. This is an important area of research as mass media can influence how positively or negatively an issue is framed (Goffman, 1974). This informs general beliefs and an understanding of relevant societal matters and sets certain discourses in motion that can limit perspectives and stigmatize people and social groups (Krajewski, 2019; Lyons, 2000).

Our understanding of discourse is grounded in perspectives from critical and sociolinguistics (Blommaert, 2005; Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1995) which underlies much of the work in corpus-assisted discourse studies (Partington et al., 2013). Thus, we consider discourse as *language in use* which is constructive and constraining of social meanings, relations, and representations influencing people's beliefs and behaviors (Partington et al., 2013). The notion of discourse as language in use instantaneously directs attention to the actual material or building blocks from which discourses are constructed, that is, lexico-grammatical choices. Language users, including journalists, have a large pool of such resources at their disposal from which they select certain words and phrases over others to construct a phenomenon or a social group in a particular way (van Dijk, 1995). When similar constructions are frequently reiterated, especially through the vehicle of mass media, then they are likely to become powerful (Baker, 2016) setting

normative ways of seeing or thinking of a phenomenon (in our case menopause) and of a social group (in our case menopausal women).

Understanding discursive reiterations in the media and the ideas they communicate around menopause are important for two reasons. They can be enabling and empowering when, for example, representations of menopause are more positive or balanced. Thus, they might encourage more open conversation that could improve women's working lives. Alternatively, when overtly negative, they may discourage or silence talking about the topic altogether, reinforcing taboos and limiting potential social change. It is precisely through identifying such acts of negative discursive repetition *en masse* that the mechanics of stigma and stigmatization can be better understood, challenged, and resisted. Therefore, our study brings together the concept of powerful discourse or discourse-as-reiterated-language-choice and the notion of stigma as conceptualized by Goffman (1963) to examine the dominant discursive constructions of menopause. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the dominant discourses around menopause and being menopausal in the UK media and how have they changed over time from 2010 to 2021?
2. What kind of ideas, beliefs, and issues do these discourses produce and reproduce and to what extent do they perpetuate stigma around menopause?
3. What roles do work and issues related to work play in the context of media representations of menopause and what do they foreground or background?

To examine the research questions, we adopt the approach of corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADS) (Partington et al., 2013). Whereas previous research concerned with representations of menopause was based on a small number of texts and conducted using manual content analysis (e.g., Krajewski, 2019; Lyons, 2000); our research uses a large corpus of 2993 media articles on the topic of menopause collected from the major national newspapers in the UK and applies a combination of computational and linguistic tools to interrogate the corpus.<sup>2</sup>

The advantage of using a corpus-based approach is that it allows us to identify patterns of frequently repeated language choices concerning the issue in question in a large amount of textual data. We specifically adopt the tool of keywords, that is, words that are identified as salient and/or distinctive to a corpus pointing to dominant topics or thematic foci (Baker, 2006).

We also use the tool of collocation, which detects frequent meaning associations of certain words with other words, which might be difficult to discern from a manual analysis of a small sample of texts (Baker, 2006). Such recurrent word associations have been shown to reveal salient discourses around societal phenomena that have developed over time through repeated use of language (e.g., Baker, 2006; Taylor, 2021).

Exploring public discourses of menopause is a timely matter because it can help inform emerging workplace policies and legislation and assist governments and the media in communicating the issues of menopause and work in ways which are not disadvantaging or stigmatizing (e.g., APPG, 2022; Women and Equalities Committee, 2022). This article also contributes to the literature in two ways. Firstly, we make a methodological contribution by taking a novel empirical approach underpinned by insights from linguistics to explore the dominant discourses around menopause in the UK mainstream media. Secondly, we provide evidence that there has been an increased attention to menopause, especially concerning work. However, media discursive representations consistently foreground negative aspects, including themes of decline, reduced cognitive abilities, and unpredictable behaviors such as those around litigation and taking employers to court. This negative focus can potentially deepen the stigma around menopause and further contribute to alienating and disadvantaging menopausal women at work. It might spread the perception among employers and employees that menopausal women are the *dangerous other* affected by physical and mental abnormalities.

## 2 | BACKGROUND

Menopause has been shown to be heavily medicalized in Western Europe, Australia, and the USA (Ussher, 2011). Atkinson et al. (2021) argue that despite the evidence that many women experience menopause positively (see Bertero, 2003; Hvas, 2001; Hvas & Gannik, 2008; Jack et al., 2019), the prevailing biomedical discourse overemphasizes its negative aspects, such as bothersome and debilitating symptoms (Ferguson & Parry, 1998; Hvas & Gannik, 2008).

The prevalence of the biomedical discourse has also been observed in previous studies on media representations of menopause in women's magazines and advertisements outside the UK (e.g., Hvas & Gannik, 2008; Krajewski, 2019), where menopause mainly was constructed as a "disease", a hormonal deficiency syndrome (Ferguson & Parry, 1998). This is evident when the media treats menopause as an illness that requires medical treatment or prevention to avoid risk factors associated with premature death or aging decay (Hvas & Gannik, 2008; Krajewski, 2019). The biomedical frame is observed even when media messages emphasize women's agency and choice on how to approach menopause and health (Hvas & Gannik, 2008; Krajewski, 2019), as the underlying goal is to avoid age decline that may affect a person's "normal" functioning.

The biomedical discourse also includes the eternal youth idea and the need to preserve female sexuality and physical attractiveness (Hvas & Gannik, 2008). This reflects the expectation of youth that accompanies the female beauty ideal; therefore, having an aging appearance (e.g., wrinkles, gray hair, and hot flushes) transgresses this sexist view of female beauty, leading to a loss of status (Chrisler, 2011; Rowson & Gonzalez-White, 2019).

Feminist scholars argue that the pathologization of women's reproductive processes (Ussher, 2011) perpetuates "existing inequality of power between women and men in societies" (Krajewski, 2019, p. 138). In her study of advertisements for menopausal women, Krajewski (2019) identified the taboo discourse surrounding the female body, in addition to the biomedical discourse around illness and decline. Like other taboos related to female biological functions (e.g., menstruation), menopause is framed as something private that should remain hidden (Chrisler, 2011; Grandey et al., 2020).

Menopause carries a stigma because it entwines several issues associated with dysfunction and loss of control (Krajewski, 2019). When women are not able to control their bodies (e.g., hot flush and menstrual flooding) or their emotions, they can be seen as transgressing the androcentric norm (Chrisler, 2011; Krajewski, 2019; Ussher, 2011) or violating idealized feminine qualities of calm, control (Ussher, 2011), and beauty (Chrisler, 2011; Rowson & Gonzalez-White, 2019). Krajewski (2019) argues that older women's behavior is open to ridicule when associated with hormonal changes.

Advertisers encourage women to cover up the (undesirable) signs of menopause or aging (Krajewski, 2019). Research on menopause in the workplace points to similar beliefs that menopause should be concealed (Atkinson et al., 2021; Butler, 2020; Grandey et al., 2020; Steffan, 2021). Both the biomedical and the taboo discourse frame menopause negatively, as something undesirable and as a threat to the women's perceived social status and credibility.

### 2.1 | Stigma, menopause, and the workplace

Goffman (1963) conceptualized stigma as any mark or attribute that negatively sets people apart. He identified three main types of stigma: "blemishes of individual character" (e.g., addiction and mental health), "abominations of the body" (e.g., physical deformities and scars), and "tribal stigma" (e.g., negative perceptions and attitudes based on race, gender, and ethnicity) (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). Stigma develops through labeling, stereotyping, and othering based on an undesirable attribute. This process reduces the social status of those labeled (Link & Phelan, 2001), positioning them as inferior in relation to the dominant group (Chrisler, 2011).

Link and Phelan (2001) highlight the role of contextual norms and expectations in magnifying the effect of a stigma, influencing the power balance between stigmatized and non-stigmatized groups. Chrisler (2011) argues that

a stigmatized group automatically elevates the status of the non-stigmatized in societal and organizational hierarchies. When we apply these ideas to the workplace, menopausal women may be stigmatized for “violating” norms and expectations associated with the “ideal” neoliberal worker. This androcentric model is still much endorsed and promoted by organizations (Acker, 1990). Thus, being menopausal can become an additional threat to women, whose inferior power status relative to the superior group (i.e., men) may deepen at this stage.

Goffman (1963) uses the terms discredited and discreditable to differentiate when a stigma is known to others. Discredited is when the stigmatizing attribute is public knowledge. In the case of menopause, when symptoms are visible to others (e.g., hot flashes), women's menopausal status may become evident. If this biological transition is constructed as stigmatizing, these women may be viewed as “discredited”.

On the other hand, discreditable is when the stigmatizing attribute is hidden from others. Therefore, the credibility of the person is not affected unless the stigma is unveiled. This risk can be a source of anxiety for the person (Chaudoir et al., 2013; Goffman, 1963). Attempts to conceal menopausal symptoms and appearance at work observed in previous studies (Jack et al., 2019; Putnam & Bochantin, 2009; Steffan, 2021) can be argued to reflect women's efforts to distance themselves from this stigma. In this process, women are trying to retain their credible status in relation to a “predictable, controllable, and reliable” ideal worker (Grandey et al., 2020, p. 8).

As media representations shape shared understandings, attitudes, and narratives, how menopause is envisaged and discursively constructed will help us understand the extent to which it is stigmatized. If our study confirms the dominant biomedical and taboo discourses and negative representations found in previous studies (e.g., Hvas & Gannik, 2008; Krajewski, 2019), then such representations can evidence the perpetuation of a discrediting stigma that may disadvantage menopausal women at work.

### 3 | DATA AND METHODS

ProQuest, an electronic database of UK newspapers, was used to search for newspaper articles published by the most widely distributed and read UK national newspapers (see Table 1). We focused on national newspapers only because it was of interest to this research to identify what kind of messages, beliefs, and ideas around menopause are disseminated to larger audiences than readers in a particular region or town.

Subsequently, the newspapers were searched to retrieve articles on menopause published between 2010 and 2021 (inclusive). To this end, we used the search term “menopause” as the “subject”. ProQuest features a thesaurus of subject headings attached to every article, thereby helping retrieve articles on a specific topic. The subject search produced a corpus of 2993 articles on menopause.

TABLE 1 Newspapers.

Newspaper	Type and style
Daily Mail	Tabloid
The Daily Mirror	Tabloid
The Times	Broadsheet
The Sun	Tabloid
The Daily Telegraph	Broadsheet
Mail on Sunday	Tabloid
Sunday Times	Broadsheet
The Guardian	Broadsheet
Sunday Telegraph	Broadsheet
Sunday Mirror	Tabloid

TABLE 2 No. of articles and words in the entire Corpus per year.

Menopause corpus data		
Year	No. of articles	No. of words
2010	3	2595
2011	84	64,175
2012	149	108,907
2013	107	72,230
2014	135	96,029
2015	292	230,391
2016	251	184,898
2017	349	285,983
2018	336	318,152
2019	397	389,841
2020	341	331,497
2021	549	471,401
Total	2993	2,556,099

The articles were subsequently exported from the ProQuest database and processed using a custom-made Perl programming script which stripped the articles of the metadata and produced files that included only the title and the actual text of the article. This created a corpus of 2,556,099 words (see Table 2).

The corpus was subsequently divided into two sub-corpora of articles according to the year of publication, one from 2010 to 2015 and the second from 2016 to 2021. The division into the two sub-corpora was motivated by the publication of the guidelines on menopause diagnosis and treatment by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in 2015, which, we felt, might reflect a potential change in discourse. The 2010–2015 sub-corpus contained 700 articles and the 2016–2021 contained 2223 articles, indicating a considerable increase in media attention in more recent years.

Once compiled, each sub-corpus was uploaded onto the corpus linguistic software program Sketch Engine and queried using the “Keywords” tool. Keywords are identified automatically by comparing the frequencies of all words in a focus corpus (in our case one of the sub-corpora) to another large reference corpus. We used the English Web 2020 corpus as a reference corpus because it is a comprehensive and representative dataset of written English (35 billion words) and includes a vast diversity of genres and topics. Using a diverse corpus better uncovers lexical items distinctive to the texts included in the focus corpus (Geluso & Hirsch, 2019).

Sketch Engine retrieves keywords using keyness score based on a normalized frequency ratio with a simple math parameter added to account for the zero problem in divisions.<sup>3</sup> The keyness score calculated in this way indicates how many times an item X is more frequently used in corpus Y as opposed to corpus Z. Keywords retrieved in this way are good indicators of words that are distinctive to the focus corpus pointing to salient topics. For our analysis, we decided to use keywords with the keyness score of 3 or above and applied lemma as an attribute, meaning that keywords that are the same words but with different morphology (e.g., hormones and hormone) were grouped together into their canonical form as found in the dictionary (e.g., hormone). The procedure was repeated for each sub-corpus.

Once keywords were retrieved, results were downloaded into a CSV file and categorized into thematic categories. All retrieved keywords were grouped manually by the third author according to the similarity of their meaning; the process was assisted in two ways. Firstly, the meanings of words were carefully checked by examining 100 randomly sampled concordance lines,<sup>4</sup> since words acquire meanings in combinations with other words in context or can have specific meanings that would be difficult to discern from a decontextualized keyword list. For example, the



verb “depress” did not mean “pressing down” or “lowering an estimation” but was associated with “feeling depressed” as in mental health. Therefore, it was classified under the thematic category of Disease and Other Health Issues. Secondly, labeling the thematic categories was assisted by the extant literature on issues related to menopause. The categories were then cross-examined independently by the first and second authors to ensure consistency. Any ambiguities were resolved by checking the concordance lines or referring to the relevant literature. Although systematic inter-rating was not adopted, it was felt that procedures allowed for a robust and meaningful categorization of keywords allowing us to understand the main themes that the media foregrounded when reporting on menopause.

The discourses associated with the keywords were explored further using the collocations tool. We performed collocational analysis in Sketch Engine using the span of 4 words to the left, 4 words to the right, and a logdice score of 7 or above. Logdice is a statistical measure for identifying typical word combinations and is independent of a corpus size. This was further expanded by qualitatively studying concordance lines that take us to the actual texts.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Key topics and discourses around menopause in the 2010–2015 sub-corpus

Using the parameters described in Section 3, we identified 471 keywords in the 2010–2015 sub-corpus, which we subsequently classified into thematic categories; 43% of the keywords were semantically directly related to a biological, medical, or bodily domain suggesting that from 2010 to 2015, menopause was predominantly constructed as a biomedical phenomenon. The largest proportion of keywords in the 2010–2015 sub-corpus is in the BIOMEDICAL CATEGORY, including keywords pointing to internal female (mostly reproductive) organs and bodily chemicals and processes (see Table 3).

The BIOMEDICAL CATEGORY was followed by DISEASE AND OTHER HEALTH ISSUES, firmly placing menopause in the category of illness or states of being seriously out of “normal” health. Words such as “cancer”, “depression”, “osteoporosis”, “stroke”, “asthma” and “dementia” were some of the most frequently mentioned diseases linking menopause overwhelmingly with a serious and potentially terminal illness.

The dominant biomedical perspective in this sub-corpus is further reinforced through the focus on MEDICAL TREATMENTS AND PROCEDURES, of which “HRT” or “hormone therapy” were the most frequently mentioned, while ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS were a much less salient category with only 5 keywords (see Table 3). Other domains relevant to women's life, especially that of work, received minimal attention in this sub-corpus. The thematic category WORK included only one keyword, “workplace”, which occurred 60 times in this dataset.

Most of the keywords identified across biological and medical categories point to negative symptoms or effects of menopause, with words such as “pain”, “panic”, “exhaustion”, or “debilitating” constructing this stage of female life predominantly as detrimental. This comes prominently into view in the category EMOTIONS, which contains almost exclusively negative words pointing to distress (e.g., “worry”, “fear”, and “cry”) and mental imbalances (e.g., “mood swing”, “erratic”, and “rage”). Two words, “confident” and “happy”, identified in this category, present a discursive anomaly at first glance. In context, however, these keywords reveal two dominant themes; they are used in before and after narratives, in which the time before menopause is re-told as happy and positive and during or after as negative and a state of loss. The text extracts below illustrate these patterns:

1. I think the whole menopause thing turned him off. My life feels like a constant struggle to be happy and carefree and keep looking good—and not be a boring miserable person who he wouldn't want to be around.
2. I was never a raving beauty but I was always confident of my looks when I was younger, and liked to think I could turn the occasional head. Now I am invisible.
3. I was a normal, confident woman in charge of marketing for a top hotel. I was happily married and we had three children [...] But as I neared 50 I became paranoid.

TABLE 3 The 2010–2015 keywords classified into thematic categories.

Thematic category	Keywords (sorted by score descending)	No. keywords	Total freq. of keywords
BIO-MEDICAL	Hormone, estrogen, ovary, testosterone, bone, progesterone, hormonal, heart, ovarian, blood, fertility, egg, womb, period, fat, pregnancy, pregnant, tissue, vaginal, brain, muscle, chemical, thyroid, collagen, reproductive, gland, menstrual, PMS, medical, conceive, DHEA, cycle, pelvic, calcium, progesterone, follicle, prostate, joint, lining, urine, fertile, vagina, birth, gene, FSH, stomach, bladder, cell, childbirth, insulin, serotonin, climacteric, nerve, ovulation, breathing	55	13,306
DISEASES & OTHER HEALTH ISSUES (INCL. MENTAL HEALTH)	Cancer, risk, depression, osteoporosis, disease, anxiety, affect, side-effect, trigger, stroke, health, diagnose, healthy, asthma, stress, dementia, clot, decline, insomnia, panic, overweight, diabetes, alleviate, fluctuate, syndrome, prevent, diagnosis, cardiovascular, debilitating, fracture, obesity, attack, Alzheimer, infection, condition, dry, illness, imbalance, tumor, infertility, hypothyroidism, anxious, depress, fluctuation	44	10,863
DIET & LIFESTYLE	Sleep, exercise, supplement, soya, diet, alcohol, lifestyle, herbal, vitamin, wake, isoflavone, eat, soy, phytoestrogen, yoga, cohosh, clover, smoking, drink, yam, caffeine, herb, sugar, gym, meal, bean, smoke, smoker, fiber, phthalate, carbohydrate, mimic, protein, vegetable, calorie, sage, extract, agnus, snack	39	4829
PERSONALITIES & CELEBRITIES	Sarah, correspondent, Amanda, jenny, Lisa, Judy, Erika, Denise, Sally, Frostrup, Miriam, Kittson, society, Jane, charity, Hazel, Teresa, Sophie, jo, Belinda, Mariella, Carol, Heather, Manning, Jill, dame, Julie, actress, Charlene, Louise, Marilyn, Fiona, Rebecca, Barbara, Bergholdt, Borland, Rachel, Samantha, Holm	39	2450
MEDICAL TREATMENTS & PROCEDURES	HRT (hormone) therapy, prescribe, treatment, replacement, pill, gel, remedy, tablet, drug, dose, antidepressant, patch, increase, bio-identical, treat, transplant, surgery, hysterectomy, test, medication, IVF, synthetic, medicine, prescription, placebo, chemotherapy, safe, pessary, implant, conventional, anti-depressant, cure, bioidentical, freeze, injection	36	9450
PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS	Symptom, flush, sweat, hot, migraine, headache, loss, pain, dryness, drop, fatigue, tiredness, relief, severity, wrinkle, tired, painful, relieve, ache, regulate, brittle, irregular, cramp, combat, temperature, palpitation, exacerbate, bleeding, inflammation, tenderness, discomfort, snore, exhaustion, bloated	34	8886
EMOTIONS	Mood, suffer, feel, swing, cope, worry, scare, fear, irritability, emotional, struggle, misery, distressing, cry, psychological, complain, shock, feeling, erratic, rage, irritable, sufferer, confident, endure, happy, emotionally, dread	27	4998
LIFE CYCLES & TIME	Menopause, menopausal, age, night, post-menopausal, perimenopause, premature, middle-aged, life, postmenopausal, month, perimenopausal, young, week, decade, year, old, long-term, daily, mid-life, midlife, hour, puberty, yesterday	24	15,025

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Thematic category	Keywords (sorted by score descending)	No. keywords	Total freq. of keywords
INVESTIGATIONS & ADVICE	Researcher, study, suggest, finding, advice, help, advise, warn, research, evidence, explain, trial, journal, guideline, avoid, guidance, publish, recommend, tell, compare, watchdog	21	7481
MEDICAL & SCIENCE PROFESSIONALS	Dr, GP, doctor, gynecologist, expert, consultant, professor, scientist, specialist, NHS, clinic, Currie, stud, hospital, Johnston, prof, obstetrician, Woyak, gynecology, surgeon	20	5423
VISIBLE BODY PARTS & SIZE	Breast, skin, weight, body, hair, thin, gain, density, hip, waist, facial, neck	12	3930
RELATIONSHIPS	Husband, mum, baby, mother, daughter, patient, grandmother, motherhood, marry, friend, child	11	2514
GENDER	Woman, she, women, her, female, male, Mrs, man, herself	9	14,056
MENTAL ACTION & PROCESSES	Realize, memory, cognitive, think, recognize, believe, behavioral, concentrate, mental	9	2216
COSMETIC TREATMENTS & PROCEDURES	Cream, skincare, moisturizer, serum, make-up, cosmetic	6	493
SEXUALITY	Sex, libido, sexual, contraception, contraceptive, lubrication	6	1126
ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES & TREATMENTS	Alternative, CBT, hypnosis, acupuncture, hypnotherapy	5	1162
STIGMA	Blame, taboo	2	128
WORK	Workplace	1	60
OTHER	Text, title, caption, illustration, credit, cent, per, full, pounds, Euro, pound, say, Scott, Glenville, longer, ten, UK, find, five, could, region, less, London, link, half, euro, halve, go, through, too, put, twice, who, British, tend, but, because, can, Gluck, such, although, ago, after, than, why, Britain, more, six, become, so, when, have, Panay, many, few, may, still, around, it, eight, seven, four, before, extra, however, last, might, three, despite	70	
Total		471	

Such representations construct menopause as a dramatic cut-off or turning point in the life of women and a stage of loss (e.g., a loss of confidence, libido, and looks); there is an overwhelming focus on the body and the sexual functions that are frequently portrayed as in decline. There is very little positive discourse and only on very rare occasions are women reported as being happier and more confident, but this is mostly after menopause:

4. With no more monthly cycles, I now feel far more stable than I felt before the menopause: I'm more content and at peace.
5. After the menopause your oestrogen levels drop to almost zero and you lose 100% of your progesterone—so what you are left with is testosterone, she says. Suddenly women become testosterone-dominant and that's why they feel better—stronger and more confident.

Given the high female participation in the labor market, the topic of work was conspicuously absent from the media constructions of menopause in the 2010–2015 sub-corpus. In the list of the most distinctive keywords, we identified only one related to WORK: “workplace” (see Table 4).

Studying the collocations of this keyword revealed that the discourse around the workplace and menopause was dominated by adverse events. As shown in Table 4, the discourse centered predominantly on symptoms, such as

TABLE 4 The top 12 collocates of the keyword “workplace” in the 2010–2015 sub-corpus.

Collocate	Freq	Logdice
Ventilation	11	12.2
Temperature	13	11.2
Disturbed	4	10.8
Skill	4	10.7
Improvement	7	10.7
Embarrassing	4	10.6
Discriminate	3	10.6
Employer	5	10.5
Ignore	3	9.9
Poor	5	9.8
Issue	7	9.8
Support	5	9.5

disturbed or lack of sleep, which can affect women's productivity. The need for better ventilation and cooler temperatures was emphasized. There was also a focus on feeling embarrassed when overcoming sudden hot flushes and sweat, hence the emphasis on cooler environments. There was also a sense that while employers are more attentive to employees' needs regarding health, menopause has been neglected as a health issue, and there is no support, forcing women out of employment. The extracts below illustrate this kind of discourse:

6. Women are being forced out of the workplace because employers are ignoring the effects of the menopause, an official report for the government will warn.
7. Menopausal women can experience hot flushes, headaches, tiredness and sweating. High workplace temperatures, poor ventilation, poor or non-existent rest or toilet facilities, or a lack of access to cold drinking water at work can make all of these symptoms worse.
8. Flushes and sweats can be really embarrassing in the workplace, and disturbed sleep can have a huge effect on functioning.

Thus, the media reporting on menopause from 2010 to 2015 constructed this stage of a woman's life as a predominantly biomedical and sudden phenomenon that hits women around 50. Menopause was primarily represented as a story of loss and decline associated with a wide range of debilitating symptoms linked with a severe or terminal illness. Emotionally, menopause was almost exclusively associated with instability, erratic moods, and anger—all constructing menopausal women as unbalanced and unpredictable. The focus on work was minimal, with the negative effects of symptoms of menopause dominating this rare discourse.

## 4.2 | Key topics and discourses around menopause in the 2016–2021 sub-corpus

Our retrieval procedures delivered 405 keywords. The subsequent classification into thematic categories revealed that the dominant discourse around menopause continued to center on the biomedical dimension, physical symptoms, physical and mental illness, and biomedical treatments (see Table 5). Negative emotions, too, were foregrounded, with “mood swings”, “stress”, “struggle”, and “worry” topping the list. Two categories that slightly changed in prominence were SEXUALITY and WORK, suggesting that more attention has been given to both aspects from 2016 to 2021. We explore the discourse around menopause and work in detail below.

TABLE 5 The 2016–2021 keywords classified into thematic categories.

Thematic Category	Keywords (sorted by score descending)	No. keywords	Total Freq.
BIO-MEDICAL	Hormone, estrogen, testosterone, ovary, progesterone, hormonal, brain, bone, fertility, blood, vaginal, ovarian, heart, egg, tissue, period, muscle, pregnancy, pregnant, womb, pelvic, medical, reproductive, fat, cycle, vagina, menstrual, cardiovascular, collagen, joint, thyroid, calcium, gland, cholesterol, PMS, conceive, ovulation, erectile, artery, birth, lining, tooth, bladder, prostate, liver, gene, fertile, metabolism, childbirth, cell, breathe	51	34,877
DISEASES & OTHER HEALTH ISSUES (INCL. MENTAL HEALTH)	Cancer, risk, anxiety, depression, affect, osteoporosis, disease, health, healthy, dementia, trigger, diabetes, debilitating, decline, covid, stroke, side-effect, anxious, Alzheimer, panic, dry, fluctuate, endometriosis, clot, deficiency, condition, incontinence, silence, infection, overweight, bleeding, fracture, dysfunction, alleviate, infertility, bleed, miscarriage, depress, arthritis, syndrome, chronic, depressed, obesity, attack	44	26,987
PERSONALITIES & CELEBRITIES	Davina, Carol, presenter, Louise, McCall, Lorraine, correspondent, Meg, jo, celebrity, Mariella, Amanda, Andrea, Zoe, Kate, Penny, Tamzin, Frostrup, Claire, Vorderman, charity, Emma, MP, ITV, Sarah, Lisa, Ruth, Michelle, Ulrika, Jane, Liz	31	6536
DIET & LIFESTYLE	Sleep, diet, exercise, vitamin, supplement, eat, lifestyle, alcohol, wake, drink, magnesium, soya, intake, vegetable, sugar, caffeine, yoga, dairy, protein, herbal, oily, milk, CBD, calorie, relax, hangover, food, sleeping	28	12,784
EMOTIONS	Mood, feel, suffer, stress, swing, cope, struggle, worry, fear, feeling, confidence, mental, emotional, shock, ashamed, shame, happy, rage, scare, sufferer, embarrass, irritability, relief, confident, psychological, uncomfortable	26	17,858
MEDICAL TREATMENTS & PROCEDURES	HRT, prescribe, treatment, replacement, pill, patch, gel, medication, IVF, prescription, diagnose, antidepressant, hysterectomy, tablet, surgery, diagnosis, dose, drug, freeze, test, bio-identical, medicine, appointment, scan, bio-identical	25	19,674
LIFE CYCLES & TIME	Menopause, menopausal, age, perimenopause, midlife, life, night, post-menopausal, middle-aged, month, perimenopausal, daily, decade, young, premature, week, old, postmenopausal, year, puberty, mid-life, now, teenager	23	50,214
PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS	Symptom, flush, hot, sweat, fog, dryness, pain, loss, insomnia, fatigue, painful, migraine, headache, tired, ache, tiredness, palpitation, relieve, physical, exhaust, irregular, acne, discomfort	23	20,384
INVESTIGATIONS & ADVICE	Study, researcher, help, suggest, advice, finding, myth, warn, find, explain, advise, conversation, journal, recommend, survey, documentary, speak, research, ask	19	22,147
MEDICAL & SCIENCE PROFESSIONALS	GP, Dr, doctor, NHS, gynecologist, Newson, clinic, expert, consultant, specialist, scientist, professor, prof, Fishel, Currie, pharmacy, obstetrician, gynecological, surgeon	19	13,663
SEXUALITY	Sex, libido, sexual, orgasm, intimacy, sexually, sexy, intimate, contraceptive, contraception, desire, lubricant, intercourse	13	8579
RELATIONSHIPS	Husband, mum, baby, partner, relationship, mother, marriage, divorce, daughter, patient, couple, friend	12	9458

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

Thematic Category	Keywords (sorted by score descending)	No. keywords	Total Freq.
GENDER	Woman, she, her, female, male, man, women, herself, their	9	56,823
VISIBLE BODY PARTS & SIZE	Breast, skin, body, hair, weight, thin, gain	7	10,251
MENTAL ACTION & PROCESSES	Realize, admit, wellbeing, memory, think, recognize, cognitive	7	6105
COSMETIC TREATMENTS & PROCEDURES	cream, make-up, skincare, moisturizer, beauty	5	1164
WORKPLACE	Workplace, colleague, employer, boss, career	5	2051
STIGMA	Taboo, stigma, blame	3	842
ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES & TREATMENTS	Therapy, acupuncture	2	1585
OTHER	Caption, text, title, credit, full, my, say, cent, per, Scot, Eire, UK, region, less, often, too, because, ten, might, who, about, through, British, could, six, why, London, it, get, but, can, when, ago, half, really, five, than, have, around, never, so, still, yet, every, more, after, many, twice, not, just, such, tend, ulster	53	
Total		405	

TABLE 6 The top 12 collocates of the keyword “workplace” in the 2016–2021 sub-corpus.

Collocate	Freq	Logdice
Policy	61	11.3
Ensure	24	10.0
Support	37	9.5
Pledge	10	9.3
Leave	39	9.2
Discrimination	9	9.0
Anyone	12	8.8
Menopause-friendly	6	8.6
Fail	7	8.4
Stigma	6	8.2
Lucy	5	8.2
MP	6	8.1

Because of the slightly increased prominence of WORK as a thematic category (now with five keywords as opposed to only one in the 2010–2015 sub-corpus), we explored in detail discourses of the keyword “workplace” as well as related keywords identified in the thematic category of WORK. These include: “colleague”, “employer”, “boss”, and “career” to shed light on some of the issues and associations that are foregrounded in reporting on menopause and work. For reasons of space, we focus our analysis on the top 12 collocates.

As shown in Table 6, the discourse of menopause in the workplace context has changed. While in the 2010–2015 sub-corpus, the focus was on bodily symptoms and the need to ensure better temperature and ventilation; in the 2016–2021 sub-corpus, the discussion increased, concentrating on more concrete steps such as the need for an appropriate workplace policy, as evidenced by the prominence of “policy” as a collocate of “workplace”. Most instances of this collocation pair either emphasize that a very small proportion of workplaces have a menopause

policy or pledge to introduce one. Somewhat worrying is the fact that one of the strongest collocates of the workplace is the verb “leave”. Studying concordance lines of the collocation pair “workplace” + “leave” suggests that the verb is mostly used in reporting women leaving jobs and professions because of menopausal symptoms. This is constructed as a warning and a risk; leaving a profession around the age of 50 might reduce the chances of a potential return to the labor market with adverse effects on retirement income:

9. Women aged over 50 are the fastest-growing segment of the workforce, yet one in five women end up leaving the workplace as a result of some of the symptoms of menopause.
10. To leave the workplace in your 50s, when we know that you're far less likely than someone younger to return to work, has a huge impact on your retirement income.

In three instances, there was an emphasis on the taboo around menopause, which makes it difficult to estimate how many women leave the workplace because of menopause, as this is a reason that often remains hidden:

11. “It's really difficult to collect data on how many women may be leaving the workplace due to the menopause,” says Dr. Vanessa Beck, an expert in work and organization at the University of Bristol, “because it's not something people tend to talk about in exit interviews”.

Another emerging discourse concerning the workplace and menopause is discrimination. There are nine instances of the word “discrimination” as a collocate of the workplace. The use of the word either refers to women suffering from discrimination or bullying because of experiencing menopausal symptoms or a legal clause which already protects women in the UK against discrimination based on sex and age. The discourse then emphasizes that there is a legal base which allows menopausal women to launch a discrimination case if there is lack of proper support or bullying at the workplace, pointing to the growing number of court cases:

12. This month, it was revealed [*that*] a growing number of women are claiming unfair dismissal or sex discrimination in [*the*] workplace linked to menopause.

Another strong collocation of workplace is “stigma”, which occurs six times near the word. Although “stigma” is not as frequent as the other collocates, it is in the top collocates of “workplace”, suggesting a relationship between menopause, stigma, and workplace. Exploring the texts reveals two patterns. On the one hand, the articles emphasize that menopausal women experience stigma at work; on the other hand, the stigma is denied. This happens on two occasions in articles published in the *Daily Mail*. The extracts below exemplify the patterns:

13. Surveys of attitudes in five countries find women still experiencing stigma in the workplace. A third of women who have suffered symptoms of menopause say they hid them at work and many think there remains a stigma around talking about the subject.
14. Apparently, this [*a policy of introducing menopause leave and flexible working hours*] will make it easier for us to talk about the issue and reduce workplace stigma around it [*menopause*]. I've never heard such patronizing nonsense. First, most women my age have no problem whatsoever talking about menopause.

Four other words among our topical keywords belong to the thematic category of WORK; these are “colleague”, “employer”, “boss”, and “career” (see Table 5 above). Table 7 shows the top 12 collocates of these keywords.

As can be seen, there is a gender dimension in the representation in that a clear distinction is being made between male and female colleagues. Interestingly, the discourse on male colleagues is quite positive in that the focus is on men and their desire to understand more about menopause. A different discourse emerged around the

TABLE 7 The top 12 collocates of the keywords: “colleague”, “employer”, “boss”, and “career” in the 2016–2021 sub-corpus.

Collocates of colleague	Freq	Log dice	Collocates of employer	Freq	Log dice	Collocates of boss	Freq	Log dice	Collocates of career	Freq	Log dice
Male	47	10.5	Introduce	16	10.0	Humiliate	10	10.1	Peak	37	10.7
Female	34	9.7	Policy	18	9.7	Ill-informed	7	9.7	Successful	15	9.5
Front	10	9.1	Urge	15	9.7	Male	19	9.3	Quit	11	9.0
Manager	7	8.7	Supportive	9	9.3	Female	21	9.1	Their	130	9.0
Friend	17	8.7	Support	29	9.2	Claim	10	8.9	Juggle	9	8.9
Inferior	4	8.5	Court	8	9.2	Outdated	4	8.9	Track	11	8.8
Solidarity	4	8.5	Adopt	8	9.1	Former	9	8.8	Motherhood	8	8.7
Inadvertently	4	8.5	Claim	14	9.1	Sack	4	8.8	Family	18	8.7
Understanding	6	8.4	Must	15	9.1	Chain	4	8.8	Build	10	8.6
Paranoid	4	8.4	Challenge	11	9.1	Tribunal	5	8.7	Path	7	8.5
Stigmatize	4	8.4	Terrify	6	8.9	Speech	4	8.7	Unfair	7	8.5
Customer	4	8.4	Warn	5	8.8	Tell	32	8.6	Ladder	6	8.4

keyword “boss”. Here too, a distinction is made between “male” and “female” and the dominant theme is a lack of understanding. Bosses are generally represented as ill-informed or having outdated views. There is also a focus on legal aspects, including that of taking bosses to court or tribunal, something that bosses are warned about:

15. She took her bosses to a tribunal where she claimed she had been unfairly dismissed and a victim of discrimination. The judge agreed, saying her menopausal condition, along with other health problems, “amounted to a disability”.
16. Rise of the menopause employment tribunal: Experts warn bosses: Support women or face court.

This kind of threatening discourse is more pronounced regarding the keyword “employer”, which, in this context, is strongly associated with legal items such as “court”, “claim”, and “challenge”. This discourse portrays menopausal women as agents who feel empowered to take their employers to court. The dysfunctional and ailing “body” is then suddenly turned into a *dangerous other* who presents a threat of litigation, court cases, and compensations:

17. Growing numbers of women are taking their employers to court citing menopause as proof of unfair dismissal and direct sex discrimination, researchers have said.
18. Support staff with menopause or face claims, employers told.
19. Growing numbers are taking their employers to court claiming that they've lost their jobs as a result of the menopause.

Verbs such as “terrify” and “warn”, which are strong collocations of “employer” (see Table 7), discursively emphasize that employers need to be afraid of midlife women.

20. The report warned employers that women were already protected against workplace discrimination “on the basis of either their sex or their age”.
21. Employers must be terrified that they may put a foot wrong and end up with an expensive court case.

In doing so, this discourse portrays menopause and menopausal women as a threat to the world of work, reinforcing gendered ageist bias. “Career” is also generally constructed as being impacted by the period of menopause.



Women are often described as being unable to perform well at work due to the debilitating symptoms, being forced to take time off or simply quit:

22. Unsurprisingly, this had taken its toll on them, both physically and mentally, with some women at the peak of their careers finding themselves so exhausted they had to reduce their hours or even give up work altogether.
23. In a survey of 1100 menopausal women, 94% said symptoms made working life tougher and half were forced to take time off, dramatically limiting career opportunities.

As seen in Table 7, “peak” is the top collocate of “career” occurring 37 times in the vicinity of the term with a strong logdice score of 10.71. In almost all instances, it is used to refer to menopause as the prime factor constricting or even stopping women's professional development and success. Metaphorically, menopause is constructed as pushing them off the top of the career ladder:

24. One million UK women, many in their late 40s and early 50s and at the peak of their careers, have left their jobs because of menopause.
25. Just as they reach the peak of their career, a lot of women hit the menopause—and struggle to cope.

Overall, the discourse around menopause and the workplace is infused with negativity. Women and their professional development are being described as disadvantaged by their menopausal bodies and discriminated by a lack of understanding among bosses and no appropriate policies in place. Cases of women taking their employers to court and potentially being a threat are given increasing prominence in these media representations.

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study is the first to examine representations of menopause in the British media using a large corpus of newspaper articles spanning a decade. It uses a corpus-based analysis to deliver empirically robust results showing the dominant discursive patterns of representations of menopause in public discourse in the UK. Our analysis shows a perpetuation of a negative and stigmatizing discourse firmly embedded within the biomedical perspective that exacerbates the taboo and the decline and dysfunction narratives around menopause. Positive stories of menopause, and the fact that many menopausal women are productive and successful, are simply not foregrounded. Increased instances of negative discursive representations position menopause simultaneously within the three Goffmanian types of stigma (1963), framing women at this stage as the *dangerous other*.

The predominant focus on physical, potentially visible, symptoms (e.g., sweat and hot flushes), as shown through keyword analysis, emphasizes the idea of “abominations of the body”. The focus on cognitive and psychological decline and related unpredictability (e.g., depression, anxiety, irritability, and rage) may be perceived as women's fault or a reflection of their inability to manage themselves, hence reinforcing the “blemish of personal character stigma”; and by being inherently a women's issue, menopause also links to tribal stigma. This triple stigmatization of menopausal women not only violates idealized notions of femininity (Chrisler, 2011; Rowson & Gonzalez-White, 2019; Ussher, 2011) but it also contravenes the hegemonic norm of a reliable and predictable idealized worker (Atkinson et al., 2021; Steffan, 2021). Thus, this may reinforce a perception that menopausal women are not fit for work.

The recent and slightly increased focus on the workplace, which we have observed in the 2016–2021 corpus, seems like a positive development. Recognition of the issues menopausal women may experience at work might prompt governments and employers to take action to protect them with appropriate policies and legislation. Nonetheless, our results indicate that menopause is positioned predominantly as an adverse event that is likely to suddenly change women's working lives for the worse. The undesirability of menopause is further confirmed by an emphasis on its negative consequences such as discrimination, marginalization, and loss.

Studies on menopause at work suggest that women act as the discreditable trying to avoid being discredited (Chaudoir et al., 2013) by trying to hide any evidence of this stigma (see Jack et al., 2019; Steffan, 2021). When

vulnerable to social devaluation for being menopausal (Chaudoir et al., 2013), women may engage in impression management (Goffman, 1959) to fit in with an idealized worker (or femininity). This process is likely to perpetuate the taboo around menopause at work (Steffan, 2021) “congealing” menopausal women’s position as the *other*.

Not only are menopausal women constructed as the *other*, but the menopausal other is also a *dangerous other*. The salient discourses we identified construct menopause as a period of instability and irrationality, with women depicted as losing control not only of their bodies but also of their minds. Ussher (2011) argues that this pathologization of the female body and its natural biological processes constructs women as unreliable and unpredictable, hence *dangerous*, especially for the employers. The *dangerous other* discourse perpetuates the idea that menopause is a health dysfunction that makes women erratic and unstable. Women, constructed as *dangerous others*, are bound to behave in extreme or unpredictable ways, for example, initiating litigation and taking their employers to court or quitting their jobs. Media discourses frequently “warn” bosses and employers about these threats. We are not arguing that such scenarios should not be featured in the media, but the absence of sufficient positive representations to balance negative ones is concerning (Hvas, 2001; Krajewski, 2019).

The paucity of positive menopause stories confirms the discredited status of menopausal women in society. It also contributes to maintaining gendered ageist attitudes toward midlife women at work that prevent them from being offered opportunities for career progression (Ussher, 2011). Furthermore, the *dangerous other* frame acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy that will continue to affect women by threatening their social status (Krajewski, 2019) and driving them to suffer in silence (Steffan, 2021). At an extreme, menopausal women may internalize the triple stigma associated with the *dangerous other* discourse (Chaudoir et al., 2013) and feel discouraged from pursuing career advancement or staying in work altogether (Jack et al., 2019; Steffan, 2021).

Our research aimed to highlight dominant discourses in the recent constructions of menopause in the British media, particularly in relation to the workplace. Potential subtleties that could have emerged in a fine-grained year-by-year investigation may have been missed. Likewise, our analysis is primarily quantitative and concerned with single words. Exploring more collocations and text extracts qualitatively could show more nuanced patterns of media representations of menopause. Future research could explore this in more depth through a more detailed analysis of our 2016–2022 corpus. This could also explore how women use discourse (i.e., language) to respond to such negative positioning. Another important context to critically examine is discourses perpetuated in legislation and policy documents to assess the extent to which they facilitate or hinder a fair and balanced approach to menopause at work. This is particularly timely as organizations and policymakers are still developing ways to support working women going through the menopause transition.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For reasons of space in this paper we use the terms “woman”, “women”, “female”, “she”, “her” and so on as placeholders when referring to individuals going through menopause.

<sup>2</sup> A corpus is simply a collection of texts which are stored electronically and available for quantitative and qualitative analyses using a corpus linguistic software.

<sup>3</sup> More information available from: <https://www.sketchengine.eu/documentation/simple-maths/>

<sup>4</sup> Concordance or concordance line refers to the display of occurrences of a search term (a word or phrase) as used in a corpus (produced by Sketch Engine).

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