Parallel representations: Career development in media and academic literature

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the portrayal of careers in print media, a subject minimally addressed in career development studies. It employs media content analysis to compare and map the language used in British print media when discussing careers with that in academic discourse. Using vOSViewer for text mapping and data visualisation, this study mirrors Lee et al. (2014)'s approach to systematically analyse 1,287 newspaper articles, identifying and exploring prevalent terms and concepts within career-themed articles. It highlights the intersection of media and career development studies, revealing how media narratives can influence the perception and discussion of career development.

Keywords: Media studies; career development; content analysis; interdisciplinarity

Introduction

Career development is an inherently multidisciplinary field, drawing upon the theoretical and empirical contributions of sociology, psychology, and education, among others, to provide an understanding of how individuals navigate their professional journeys. However,

the contribution of media studies to this dialogue has often been underexplored, despite its potential to offer profound insights into the societal norms and narratives that shape our understanding of careers.

This paper aims to highlight the significance of media studies within the wider framework of interdisciplinary investigation into careers and career development. It specifically focuses on the unique perspectives that analysis of media can provide on the dynamic interplay between public narratives of career and individual experience of career development. The focus of media studies on the production, dissemination, and reception of media content provides a distinctive lens for examining career narratives, revealing how they are both influenced by and contribute to cultural and societal understanding of career development and construction of career identities and aspirations.

In a broader context, media plays a key role in informing the public and shaping their attitudes towards social concepts, especially when the audience lacks direct knowledge or experience (Happer & Philo, 2013). This includes the area of career development, where media discourse significantly influences how individuals perceive and navigate their career paths. By presenting various career narratives in particular ways, the media contributes to shaping understanding and attitudes towards different professions and career progressions. Simultaneously, the way journalists present and frame career development in public discourse plays a crucial role in forming and influencing public opinion on this subject (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

In careers education, the role of media is very significant, serving as an essential tool for disseminating information and shaping perceptions about a wide array of career paths. Through various platforms ranging from digital content (Sampson et al., 2018) to traditional broadcasts (Gehrau, 2016), media offers a rich repository of insights, trends, and role models, significantly influencing career choices and aspirations (Apostol & Näsi, 2013).

By mapping print media discourse against academic literature on career development, this study seeks to identify areas of intersection, divergence, and mutual influence between media and academic discourses. It seeks to determine whether the trends in print media reflect or differ from the theories developed by academic researchers about career development, as well as to understand the everyday career experiences of individuals.

In the field of career development, media, as a social institution working towards the 'production of knowledge and culture' (McQuail, 1985, p. 97), holds significant power in setting agendas and steering public attention towards specific career-related issues and trends in society (Gans, 1979). The development of meaning and the construction of career narratives occur through the ways in which the media portrays particular interests, social actors, descriptions, explanations, experiences, and ideas from a particular ideological perspective (Orgad, 2016).

As a result, studying media messages is essential for a nuanced understanding of how career choices and pathways are shaped and understood by recipients through the communication methods of journalists and media owners. News stories, reports, images, and texts in the media particularly act as key resources, enabling individuals to construct meaning and form perceptions about various careers and professional opportunities in their minds and identify themselves as a member of a common culture with similar

understandings and perceptions (Van Dijk, 1998). Although the emergence of social media and digital news platforms is implicated in the decreasing popularity of print journalism, newspapers remain a frequent point of reference for rival news media, and a standard source for understanding how social phenomena or political issues are commonly interpreted. In other words, the importance of newspapers in the media's agenda-setting is far from being diminished, and print media continues to play an important role in raising debate about the stories they select and editorially frame (Cushion et al., 2016).

There are some examples of research that explore the influence of public discourse on formation of narratives around subjects relevant to career development. Bergmo-Prvulovic (2015) examines social understandings of careers, uncovering four distinct social representations of career as individual project of self-realisation, social/hierarchical climbing, game of exchange and uncertain outcome through free association. Lewig and Dollard (2001) offer a critical view on the media representation of work stress in Australian news, highlighting the focus of media narratives on economic cost of work stress. Kirchler (1992) explores unequal gender role representation in management by analysing print media. Vandenberghe (2018) investigates how newspapers portray working women, with a focus on work-family balance. Patton and Johns (2012) conduct a comparative analysis of absenteeism in both academic literature and popular press, revealing trends in media representation and Cohen and Duberley (2013) analyse narratives from the Desert Island Discs radio programme to explore career development within social and cultural contexts. By adopting various insights and methodologies, these studies highlight the media's potentially significant role in shaping and reflecting the social construction of career narratives and enrich our understanding of how careers are perceived, discussed, and influenced within society.

Methodology

In their 2014 study, Lee et al. pioneered a methodical approach to categorise the academic journal articles in the field of career studies. They used vOSViewer, a software for text mapping, to systematically review articles on career topics across various social science disciplines. This innovative technique marked a significant enhancement over conventional narrative reviews, providing a comprehensive analytical perspective on the predominant terms and themes related to careers. Their extensive research included 16,146 articles, enabling them to graphically demonstrate the frequency, connections, and groupings of key terms in scholarly discussions on careers. This paper adopts a similar approach, using VOSviewer for text mining and data visualisation. It focuses on examining 1,287 newspaper articles, aiming to identify and analyse the most recurrent terms and concepts within these articles, mirroring the methodology of Lee et al. in their comprehensive review of career-themed academic articles.

The method of 'relevance sampling' (Deacon, 2007; Krippendorff, 2004) guided the data collection process of this study, targeting newspaper articles from *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Daily Mail*. Covering the years 1985 to 2015, a range of career-related key terms were used to systematically identify relevant articles. The choice of these three newspapers was informed by their diverse readerships and differing political orientations. The 30-year period, from 1985 to 2015, was chosen due to its significance in both the academic evolution of career development literature and its manifestation in written media

discourse. The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first were marked by numerous changes in labour markets, business technologies, and economic conditions alongside important developments in the academic field of career studies. Notably, the introduction of concepts such as the boundaryless and protean careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996) during this time provides a foundational basis for examining career narratives' evolution in response to societal changes and the interplay between scholarly and popular media perspectives.

The units of analysis were individual newspaper articles or specific paragraphs from longer feature articles. Segments were selected for their sufficient length to convey a clear message while being concise enough for effective coding during the analysis.

Results

Journalists and academics, while both aiming to inform their audiences, employ different methods of communication due to varying contexts, time constraints, and sensitivity levels (Patton & Johns, 2012). Academics engage in detailed, specialised discourse aimed at a similarly informed audience, often in contrast to the more general, simplified narratives found in news media which cater to a broader, diverse audience (Philo, 2004; Krippendorff, 2004). This divergence is rooted in a dualistic discourse that contrasts theoretical, research-based knowledge with practical, real-life experiences (Björck & Johansson, 2018; Allen & Wright, 2014). The constraints faced by each group shape their output: journalists work under tight deadlines and editorial limits influenced by media corporations' agendas, often leading to simplified or ideologically-tinted narratives (Fowler, 1991). In contrast, academics have more autonomy but must adhere to theoretical and research frameworks (Fealy, 1997; Carr, 2006). The evolving landscape of British higher education and the media's increasing reliance on academic insights for credibility further underline the importance of understanding these differences in the context of public discourse and career development studies (Mullen et al., 2005).

Table 1 illustrates four overlapping clusters that emerge from a comparison between Lee et al.'s (2014) academic research and the narratives prevalent in British print media. The first cluster discusses the interplay between individual career paths, organisational management, and the overarching organisational structures, a topic of interest both in scholarly discourse and in media reporting. Educational impact on career development forms the second shared cluster, with academic literature examining the relationship between educational attainment and career progression, while the media emphasises the significant role of education in advancing career trajectories. The third overlapping cluster concerns high-profile careers, with academic literature discussing careers in prominent or conspicuous professions and the print media frequently mentioning these careers in discussions about career development. Lastly, the intersection of social policy research in academic literature with the social context cluster in media illustrates a collective focus on the societal implications of career development, including economic challenges and social equity concerns as discussed by both academics and the press. These clusters collectively highlight a multifaceted dialogue on the factors influencing career development, bridging academic insights with public commentary.

Table 1: Key Clusters in Academic and Media Discourses

Academic Literature Clusters (Lee et al. 2014)		British Press Clusters	
1- Education	The relationship between education and career development.	1- Education	Emphasising the key role of education and training in career advancement.
2- High Profile Careers	Careers in professions that are prominent or conspicuous	2- High Profile Careers	The occupational sectors most commonly mentioned in discussions about careers.
3- Organisational Career Development	Interplay between organisational practices and career management.	3- Organisational Career Development	Interplay between organisational practices and career management.
4- Social Policy	The implications of career development for social policy	4- Social Context	The societal aspects of careers, such as the gender pay gap, pensions, recession, and redundancy.
5- Individual Attributes	The individual-level determinants that influence career progression	5- Organisational roles	The dominant terms which are used in relation to job sectors and organisational structure.
6- Doctorate Careers	Academic progression and careers of highly educated individuals		

The discursive map, depicted in Figure 1, highlights the five key clusters identified in newspapers sample. The size of the circles on the map indicates the frequency of each term, while the spatial distance between any two terms reflects their degree of relatedness. Terms that are positioned closely are more likely to appear together in the same articles. Additionally, clusters located at the centre of the map are associated with a broader range of other terms, in contrast to those on the periphery, which have more limited associations. This visual representation aids in understanding the interconnections and relative significance of different terms within the dataset.

Education

The analysis of newspaper articles reveals that the most frequently occurring terms belong to a cluster centred around education and training. This cluster prominently features terms related to higher education, such as 'business school', 'postgraduate degree', 'graduate scheme', and 'academia'. There is a notable parallel between this cluster and the education cluster in academic literature, especially in terms of trends and core concepts. As highlighted by Lee et al. (2014), academic literature portrays educational factors as crucial mediators in the connection between individuals and their career success. Similarly, newspaper articles predominantly focus on training and personal development, aligning with the academic narrative. This representation of discourse as a social practice illuminates the relationship between textual interpretations of careers and broader social processes.

The public discourse around training and education aligns with a trend identified by Kanter in the late 1980s. During this period, there was a move towards standardising occupational skills to improve training and development across various sectors. As noted by Bergmo-Prvulovic (2012, p. 161), this shift in skill development and training meant that in public discourse, individuals were expected to navigate numerous transitions throughout their lives from primary school education to vocational training in college, higher education in universities, apprenticeships, employment with ongoing workplace training, and eventually, retirement.
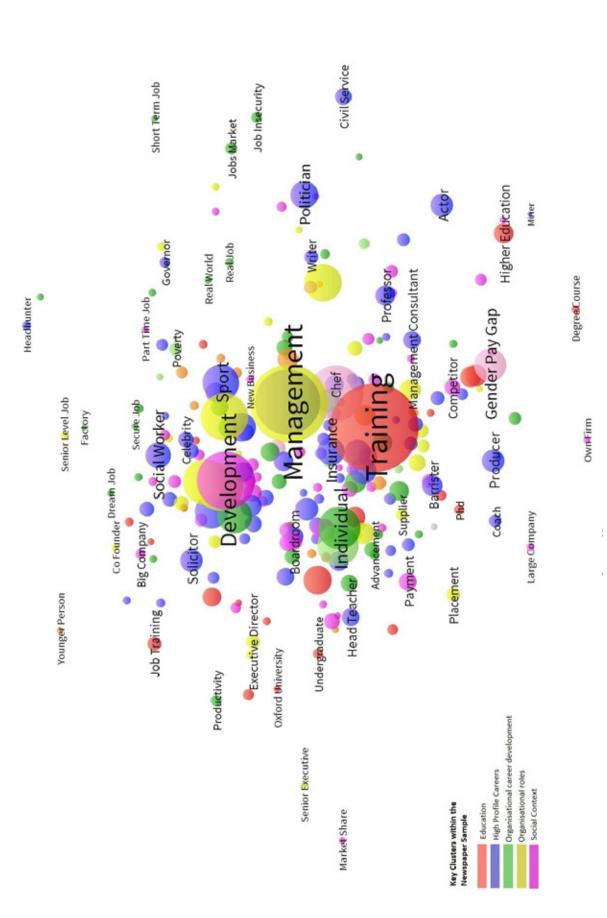
Figure 1: Key Clusters within the Newspapers Sample

A comparative analysis of this cluster in relation to the education cluster in academic literature can be interpreted as a form of 'discourse institutionalisation', which Carvalho (2008, p. 165) defines as the 'transformation of institutional structures and/or practices in a way that embodies a certain discourse' which shows the interconnection between public career conceptualisations and specific organisational arrangements or institutional practices.

In newspaper articles, there is a notable focus on higher education and the importance of a university degree, with business schools often being central to the majority of career-related narratives. Business schools are particularly recognised as institutions that play a significant role in assisting ambitious students to navigate their career paths in a self-directed and values-driven way to achieve their career goals. Moreover, an MBA degree is frequently portrayed in feature articles as a gateway to new opportunities, more freedom in career choice, and, in some cases, a higher level of career satisfaction and progress. In the academic literature, career development is a primary subject explored in relation to MBA graduates. Undertaking further studies, such as completing an MBA, is a common path for employees seeking organisational career advancement (Clarke, 2013). This interconnection suggests that the way career development is conceptualised in public discourse, with a strong focus on formal education as a pathway to career success, is not just a reflection of societal values but also influences and is reinforced by educational institutions and their practices and the alignment of public perceptions with the structures and offerings of these institutions indicates a mutual reinforcement, where educational practices shape career narratives, and these narratives, in turn, validate and promote the importance of these educational pathways.

High-profile careers

In categorising academic literature on careers, Lee et al. (2014) identified a cluster focused on high-profile careers. This category examines professions that are more prominent or visible than others, with a primary focus on career success. The occupations typically highlighted in this cluster include elite executives, politicians, judges, artists, and entrepreneurs.

A comparable grouping emerged in newspaper articles, showcasing occupational categories that appeared with high frequency in discussion of career development. The significant aspect of this cluster is how journalists define 'career' by associating it with specific occupations. The most frequent terms in this cluster are 'doctor', 'engineer', 'lawyer', 'civil servant', 'sport player' and 'police officer'. Arthur (2014) notes a prevalent tendency to equate careers with status, often distinguishing 'jobs' from 'careers' or associating careers with what is generally regarded as 'professional' work (p. 629). This viewpoint becomes particularly clear in the way certain occupations are discussed more often than others in the media. In the newspaper articles sampled for this study, there is a noticeable focus on professions traditionally considered prestigious or high-status which reflects a societal tendency to regard these roles not merely as jobs, but as examples of successful careers. Such a distinction implies that careers are often perceived as paths that not only provide financial stability but also confer a certain level of societal respect and recognition. This highlights how public discourse and media representations can shape and reinforce societal views on what constitutes a 'valuable' career, potentially influencing individual career choices and aspirations. Furthermore, the prominence of certain occupational categories

like civil servants, councillors, barristers, managers, consultants, diplomats, and finance directors in British print media supports Gowler and Legge's (1989) idea that the use of 'career' as a rhetorical device is especially prevalent in bureaucratic organisations.

Organisational career development

This cluster consists of the dominant terms which are used in newspapers in relation to organisational contexts and structural nuances. Analysing the social actors present in this cluster is insightful, as it facilitates a critical assessment of the criteria and variables empowering communities and individuals in society to engage in media debates and convey their perspectives to the public. In the study of media messages, it is generally accepted that media attention is generally biased toward 'social actors and resource-rich business organisations, who get preferential access to the media in all countries' (Tresch, 2009, p.68). This issue is more pronounced in career development studies, where careers are usually seen as relevant to those in higher social ranks, as opposed to working-class individuals who are often thought to simply have jobs.

'Manager', 'employer', 'CEO', 'chairman' and 'executive officer' are the most prevalent words in this cluster which can be interpreted as a bias towards covering news stories about people who are in the higher level of organisational hierarchies. According to Elejalde et al. (2018), if a newspaper's staff or audience perceives that actors involved in an event are politically or culturally significant, then those events are more likely to be reported. This significance may arise due to a social actor's status, notoriety, or celebrity. In the same way, the media may completely fail to cover events regarding certain topics or groups because they view them as insignificant, distasteful, or not of interest to their readership (Harrison, 2001). Based on the results of this cluster and after making a comparison with the academic literature, it can be understood that the predominant discussion around career is aligned with the observable power dynamic between different classes of society and with a tendency to erase the presence of blue-collar workers from the public discourse. This elimination can be analysed in the context of social justice and how the modern notion of career and changing nature of labour market have served to disempower and erase whole groups of people in society. Rice (2018) argues that a comprehensive understanding and integration of distribution, representation, and recognition, is vital for inclusion and equality in career development narratives. This approach may facilitate equitable participation, especially in media, where representation becomes key to amplifying the voices of diverse social actors and involving them in public discourse.

The analysis of the data specifically indicates a distinct trend in how newspapers discuss careers, primarily focusing on particular subjects and attributes. The recurrent use of phrases like 'development', 'business management', 'boardroom', 'head office', 'Silicon Valley', and 'full-time job' in a sample of 1,287 articles suggests a narrow framing of career development, predominantly in high-status, corporate environments. This pattern paints a specific picture of professional life, heavily skewed towards certain prestigious or technologically advanced sectors. Furthermore, the frequent appearance of terms such as 'private sector', 'e-commerce', 'start-up', and 'multimillionaire' in the media narrative also signifies an association of career development with entrepreneurial success and wealth creation. This representation not only highlights a particular career path as the norm but also subtly propagates a notion that careers are primarily about financial success and innovation in specific, often elite, sectors.

This cluster shows a significant bias in media representations of careers, primarily leaning towards a corporate, technology-oriented, and entrepreneurial perspective. This skewed portrayal may inadvertently narrow the public's perception of viable and respectable career options, potentially marginalising other meaningful but less glorified professional paths. This trend raises important questions about the diversity and inclusivity of career narratives in mainstream media and its impact on societal attitudes towards various professions.

Social context

The last overlapping cluster in the comparative analysis of academic literature and print media explores the broader social context of career development. It extends beyond the individual's career journey to consider the social attributes that shape career paths, such as the gender pay gap, pensions, recession, and redundancy. These terms signify a focus on how careers intersect with wider socio-economic issues.

Although the taxonomy of academic literature lacks a direct counterpart to this cluster, the social policy cluster seems to be the one that addresses social aspects within a relatively narrow scope, focusing primarily on policy-related issues. The three main areas of academic research in this cluster are work-family policies, inequality and deviant behaviours. In contrast, newspapers, as evidenced by the data, tend to engage more comprehensively with a range of issues that career development encounters within the broader social and economic context of the labour market. 'Pension', 'recession' and 'redundancy' are the most frequent keywords in this cluster, suggesting a more comprehensive engagement with the challenges and realities affecting career development.

It is important to note that, since 2014, there has been a significant increase in academic research exploring the broader social dimensions of careers which is gradually bridging the gap between public discussions and academic analysis of social and economic aspects of career development. Additionally, it is conceivable that topics related to those in this cluster might be explored in academic literature, potentially under different keywords or frameworks. This evolving landscape suggests that new taxonomies can be developed in academic literature, offering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of career development studies in academic discourse.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of prevalent clusters from academic literature and British print media uncovers several similarities in the narrative around career development. Both domains recognise the fundamental role of organisational career development, highlighting the critical interplay between organisational practices and individual career management.

Education emerges as a central theme in both contexts but from slightly different perspectives. Academic literature explores the relationship between education and career development, suggesting a foundational link, and newspaper coverage tends to emphasise the role of education and training as a lever for career advancement. In newspaper articles that discuss education in relation to career development, the emphasis is often on individual's experiences with learning and work throughout their life (Forstenlechner & Baruch, 2012). These articles typically highlight the importance of vocational training,

skill development, and the validation of knowledge through credentials in achieving career success. This focus differs somewhat from broader societal factors such as access to education, systemic discrimination, and social class divisions, which also play a significant role in career development (McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021) but are less emphasised in media narratives. Despite these nuanced differences, the underlying similarity lies in the acknowledged importance of education as a key contributor to career progression.

The discussion of high-profile careers also presents a point of convergence, with both academic and press narratives focusing on careers that receive significant public or professional attention. Academic texts may discuss the characteristics and implications of such careers, while the press often highlights the sectors frequently mentioned in career discussions. This shared focus illustrates a mutual interest in the dynamics of high-visibility, high-status careers and their influence on the normative career development narrative. It becomes clear that the predominant discussion around career development, as depicted in both academic literature and British press clusters, is aligned with the observable power dynamics between different classes in society, revealing a tendency to marginalise the narrative of working-class people from the public discourse. Such an omission can be critically analysed within the framework of social justice, examining how contemporary conceptions of career and the evolving nature of the labour market have served to disempower and effectively obscure a significant segment of the workforce.

Similarly, the representation of organisational career development cluster in print media is indicative of a broader societal tendency to echo existing power structures and systemic biases in career-related narratives. The parallel between academic and press discussions reflects a shared conceptualisation of career development that favours structured organisational progression, a paradigm traditionally associated with white-collar professions. The emphasis on careers within organisations also contrasts sharply with the narrative that has dominated the academic discourse since 1980s, suggesting that organisational careers are old-fashioned and the idea of pursuing a career within a single organisation is outdated.

This media representation not only elevates a particular career path as desirable but also contributes to the shaping of public perceptions about the value of different types of work. The emphasis on white-collar, corporate, and entrepreneurial careers may inadvertently perpetuate the marginalisation of other forms of labour and career development that are vital to the socio-economic fabric.

Finally, the social context cluster in both academic literature and print media shows that career development narratives cannot be seen as isolated stories of individual progression but are closely related to the subjects of social justice, economic cycles, and the collective consciousness, emphasising the importance of understanding career trajectories within the broader societal and economic contexts they unfold within.

Conclusion

The main contribution of this paper is to initiate a dialogue on an interdisciplinary approach in studying career development, placing a special emphasis on the role of media studies. It examined how media narratives intertwined with academic discourse to shape public

perceptions of career development and the empirical findings provided an understanding of how British newspapers contribute to shaping societal perceptions of careers in parallel with academic theories.

Addressing the gap in discursive research on career development and through the lens of media studies, this paper provides an analysis of how media framing reinforces existing societal power structures. It explores the constraints imposed by editorial policies on career-related content in print media. This prompts a discussion about the potential of the press to limit readers' understanding of career development, potentially directing them towards certain career paths while neglecting others – an aspect worth keeping in mind by careers practitioners. This points to a potentially significant gap in understanding of the value of a diverse range of careers. By identifying and critiquing the discrepancies between actual labour market dynamics and prevailing media stories, the paper also encourages career consultants and practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of alternative narratives, thereby broadening their perspective on the subjective aspects of career exploration.

For practitioners, it is essential to be aware of the media's portrayal of career paths and to critically challenge this narrative. The media often emphasises linear career trajectories within organisational contexts, potentially overlooking the richness and diversity of career paths that exist outside these traditional structures. Practitioners should recognise that careers can be multifaceted, evolving in various settings that may not always align with conventional expectations.

Furthermore, the emphasis on formal education and predetermined career ladders can obscure the significant value of practical experience. While academic qualifications are important, the practical skills acquired through direct experience are equally crucial in navigating the complexities of the professional world. Practitioners should question the predominance of this singular narrative and advocate for a more nuanced understanding of career development. By challenging the media's portrayal, practitioners can promote a more inclusive perspective on career success, one that values the amalgamation of different experiences, skills, and learning paths.

Finally, this study's scope necessitates an acknowledgment of certain limitations. While the focus was on the portrayal of career development narratives in British newspapers, this paper has not explored the wide range of other media platforms that also shape career perceptions. Future studies could benefit from exploring social media platforms such as LinkedIn to uncover distinct insights into the discursive approaches that individuals use to portray their professional identities and construct their career narratives. Another limitation due to the comparative approach of this study is that the findings are discussed only in relation to the framework established by Lee et al. (2014), leading to the emergence of several themes that, while relevant, fall outside the scope of this analysis. These additional themes could be explored in future research.

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