

# Communication of Attitudes Towards Childless Women in Politics: A Content Analysis of Lithuanian News Site Comments

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Based on social representations theory, the paper focuses on the communication of attitudes towards childless women in politics in one of the Internet news sites. One article case was selected, and a qualitative content analysis of comments (365) was conducted. The article and the content of comments were on childless women in politics. The predominant hegemonic social representation is most commonly reflected via an argument that childless women lack practical experience; therefore, they could not represent the interests of families with children. The chosen method allows expressing more radical and aggressive attitudes towards childless women roles. The polemic social representation opposes hegemonic attitudes through the arguments breaking the interlink between female procreation role and their role in the public sphere, also through the critique of double standards. Finally, emancipatory social representation undertakes the neutral position, emphasizing the freedom of choice. Thematic anchoring is the most common communicative mechanism in all three types of social representations.

**Keywords:** communication, media, attitudes towards childlessness, childless women in politics, stereotypes, social representations theory, content analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

The prevalence and social acceptance of childlessness have increased in recent decades almost everywhere (Tanturri et al. 2015). At the same time, women's role in most societies remains tightly coupled with childbearing function. Since media is a favourable space to reinforce and communicate such ideologies, there is a growing body of literature in social sciences analysing the representations of childlessness. The researchers tend to find stereotypical and negative representations of childless women in media and popular culture (Graham, Rich 2014; Giles et al. 2009; Hintz, Haywood 2020).

A few studies have been conducted on childlessness in Lithuanian media after regaining independence. A survey of childlessness representation in women magazines in 1991–1996 found that motherhood was still idealised (Šumskaitė, Rapolienė 2019). Having no children was presented as a deviation from a woman's mission. Analysis of internet portals and women magazines of a later (2011–2016) period indicated a relative rise of the topic of voluntary childlessness (Rapolienė, Šumskaitė 2019). Childlessness is presented as a modern rational 'Self' project, whereas motherhood as a woman's mission and the traditional family image is questioned.

Considering that the phenomenon of childlessness is represented rather negatively, and most of the research was conducted with the print media (except Archetti 2019), I question how childlessness is represented in more anonymous media channels, such as a comment section? Based on the social representation theory and qualitative content analysis of comments in a news portal, this paper focuses on the attitudes towards childless women's role in politics and the mechanisms by which negative, positive or neutral attitudes are expressed. Methodologically such an approach allows looking at a broader spectrum of meanings adhered to childless women's roles and allows evading the interviewer's effect. The comment section might seem like a vehicle to discharge emotions. However, it also allows the communication and creation of alternative interpretations of reality (Lyzenko 2014). The face-to-face research methods might prevent expressing politically incorrect opinions. Meanwhile, the comment section allows understanding what lies behind the discriminatory attitudes.

## **THEORY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS**

First formulated by S. Moscovici (1988), the theory of social representations is an interdisciplinary communication theory that links society and individual, media and public. Moscovici makes a distinction between three types of social representations. Hegemonic representations are defined as uniform and prevailing, and they are shared by most of the members of a nation or other structured macro unit (Moscovici 1988: 221). Emancipated representations represent subgroups that create their meaning versions, but these meanings are not somewhat different from prevailing in society. Such sub-groups form a certain degree of autonomy. On the contrary, polemic representations appear to result from social conflicts, struggles and controversies (Höijer 2011). Of course, the division of social representations into these three categories is relative not only because social thinking is described as complex and often heterogeneous but also because social representations are multifaceted and can be fundamentally contradictory (Höijer 2011).

The social representation theory helps to identify representations and differentiation of the specific communicative mechanisms that explain how ideas are transformed in the common sense, showing the media's ability to naturalise social thinking. Anchoring and objectification are two socio-cognitive communicative mechanisms that the theory suggests. Anchoring mechanisms refer to the process when the unknown is made understandable by associating it with something familiar (Jaspal et al. 2012; Höijer 2011). In other words, the unknown is being brought into a well-known sphere of earlier social representations so that the meanings can be compared and interpreted. Höijer explains this process as a kind of cultural assimilation that incorporates new social representations into the well-known ones. The theory suggests five specific anchoring mechanisms (Höijer 2011: 7):

1. Naming is the most common way to get acquainted with a previously unknown or foreign phenomenon. This process frees the phenomenon from the veil of secrecy and incomprehensibility and localizes the phenomenon in the matrix of our cultural identities.

2. Emotional anchoring is a communicative process during which a new phenomenon is associated with well-known emotions. So unknown becomes recognizable, for example, a threat, danger or something nice and pleasurable.

3. Thematic anchoring is defined as using underlying categories of meaning at more basic thematic levels. The concept of themes illustrates the in-depth structural levels of social representations. Some forms of thematic anchoring are antinomies or metaphors.

4. Anchoring in antinomies is related to humans' capacity to make distinctions, to think in oppositions, polarities, or antinomies. Some antinomies are universal in all societies, such as life/death, human being/nature, we/them, fear/hope and freedom/oppression.

5. Anchoring by metaphors. Metaphors make things and phenomena perceptible, portraying them as something else, such as 'life is a journey' or 'time is money'.

The second mechanism, objectification, 'makes the unknown known by transforming it into something concrete we may perceive and experience with our senses' (Höijer 2011). The theory delineates two types of objectification. Emotional objectification refers to a solid emotional component involved in the representation. Objectification through personification is a process when an idea or phenomenon is linked to a specific person. In a more profound sense, the theory can be considered both an approach to looking at social phenomena and a system to explain them (Höijer 2011).

## METHODS

The study is based on the selected case from one of Lithuania's most popular online news portals, *lyrtas.lt*. The portal takes the second position in Lithuania by the average number of daily Internet users (660 thousand; Gemius Global 2021). The chosen article 'She was Shocked After A. Baukutė's Words "I Made my TV Louder to Make Sure I have Heard it Right"' (02.23.2021) is a critical response towards Lithuanian actress' words, 'I do not like female politicians without children'. She expressed such an opinion during a commercial TV LNK talk show 'Kisses. Ruta'. The critical response of the anonymous person in the portal *lyrtas.lt* provoked 409 comments which were either on childless female politician's role or childless women's role in society in general. Forty-five insulting comments were omitted from the analysis because it was impossible to indicate the author's stand of point.

A qualitative content analysis of the remaining 365 was conducted using the Maxqda programme. The comments were coded both in inductive and deductive ways. The deductive coding allowed indicating which type of social representation of childlessness prevailed. The inductive coding revealed underlying topics of discriminatory, non-discriminatory or neutral opinions. In the study, I used quantitative data about the number of comments about each type of representation. The most extended comments consisted of 80 words on average, the shortest ones up to 10 words. Thus, the possibilities to look at the quantitative occurrence and co-occurrence of words between comments were low. Word counting was performed to analyse thematic anchoring, counting the words used to define childless women in politics (numbers of words and comments are provided in brackets in the empirical part).

The analysed comments are a reaction to a clear negative opinion towards childlessness, which may have reinforced stronger critical reactions. Thus, the limitations, as well as advantages of comments analysis, should be acknowledged. Even if this way of communication

opens up a space to express attitudes that would remain hidden in the face to face contact, at the same time, the expressed opinions are laconic, not nuanced and allow one to see only the general opinion.

## ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF CHILDLESS WOMEN IN POLITICS: TYPES OF REPRESENTATIONS AND COMMUNICATIVE MECHANISMS

The majority of comments (43.1%) signify the prevalence of hegemonic social representation of childlessness. This group of commenters took a discriminatory position tending to agree to actress's opinion on childless women's role in politics. They provided various discriminatory arguments about childlessness as a general phenomenon and a more specific topic about childless female politicians. In opposition to the hegemonic social representation, more than one third (36.3%) of comments fall into the group of polemic one. These commenters took a critical position towards the actress's words and argued against hegemonic attitudes, expressing a tolerant position towards childless women's role in society. Finally, the emancipatory social representation of childlessness (20.6%) may be tracked via neutral attitudes, emphasising freedom of speech and freedom to choose our lifestyle. However, these comments have not clearly advocated childless women and have not provided solid arguments against the hegemonic position.

### Hegemonic Social Representation

**Thematic anchoring** is the most common communicative mechanism to express hegemonic attitudes. Underlying categories of the meaning about what it means to be childless female in politics including competencies and knowledge of childless female politicians are only theoretical arguments of traditional women's roles and traditional femininity, and pronatalist arguments.

Analogies between childless female politicians and other professions oriented towards practice were prominent (43 comments). This idea is used to prove the argument on lacking practical knowledge:

*So why do we need driving tests on the streets? After all, the rules are memorised, you know the difference between the wheel and pedals :) The car would be repaired by a technician based on a YouTube video; in cafes or restaurants, the food would be prepared by someone who had previously worked as a dishwasher next to the chef. Or maybe you are pleased when you have a surgery or dental prosthetics by a student who has just graduated? No problem, he knows everything from books or a friend has told him. 😊*

*It is exciting how much competence a person could have known things only theoretically.*

In this way, an interlink between the public and private spheres is drawn. Such arguments are based on the premise that without practical knowledge gained while raising children, women without such experience will not understand the needs and problems of families with children. A further elaboration of this argument is a stereotype that childless women are not concerned for the future of the nation (8 comments):

*Childless politicians do not care about the country's future; they do not care what kind of world they will leave for children and grandchildren. After all, these are not their children. On the contrary, childless people even tend to make things worse.*

Other categories of thematic anchoring are meanings of traditional women's roles and traditional femininity (7 comments). As stated by Grainger (2020), the female politician with no children is a deviation from the traditional role as a wife and mother, and therefore,

someone to be feared. The rhetoric of such arguments includes traditional categories of femininity, such as empathy and understanding. Baukutė's social initiative of introducing the so-called 'window of life' (6) would go along with traditional femininity because the mainline in such arguments is that men would never come up with such an idea. The representation of the childless female politician is an extension of the career woman stereotype. Female politicians are being represented as others:

*You may not have children, but in this case – don't go to politics.*

*It's painful, but Baukutė is right. It is not discrimination; it is a fact. The interests and the way childless women understand things are different.*

Pronatalism (5 comments) that encourages procreation is expressed via biologised arguments. Such stereotypical attitudes locate women's role in society in a narrow frame of procreation:

*The human breed would have become extinct if there had been a tolerance for such deviations.*

*I want to remind each self-important woman that on this cosmic dust, called the Earth, your duty is the only one – to give birth to offspring. Everything else is the manifestation of your egocentrism that is interesting only to yourself.*

Along with pronatalist ideas emphasising the so-called duty to procreate, arguments on intergenerational solidarity (5 comments) are presented: *And who will cover your old age pension, paid via the principle of solidarity? Not the children you gave birth to and raised.* A few commenters chose wordings from the cultural heritage, using old sayings and expressions ('no children, no brain', 'it's better a girl with a child than a spinster'). One religious argument interlinking procreation with Catholic values was presented.

**Anchoring through naming.** According to the theory of social representations, classifying and naming are strongly connected to processes of stereotyping. The phenomenon of childlessness is being named as a pervasion and deviation, and childless women as 'empty-bellies' (1), vain (1), egoists (1), incomplete (4), worthless (1), weird (1), different (3), spinsters (2), grumble (1) and cold (1). Of course, these are not neutral classifications; such namings are loaded with preferences, the process of stereotyping brings questions of inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and domination (Pickering 2001). If most commenters choose moderate rhetoric, some undertake more radical and aggressive expressions: 'No – for Vain women.'

**Anchoring by metaphors.** Metaphors make things and phenomena comprehensible by imagining them as something else. Some metaphors are universal ('*Theory without practice is empty, theoretical knowledge is zero*'), while others reflect culturally specific expressions:

*Female politicians who are childless pass laws and regulate how it will be 'better' for a mother or family... So it's like an egg would be teaching a hen.*

*Anyway, a family is like a small country, so first, you have to learn how to deal with it.*

**Objectification through personification.** In objectification through personification, a phenomenon of childless female politicians is linked to specific persons. Well-known names of politicians and other famous women who have careers in journalism are documented as examples of 'Other' women in society:

*Grybauskaitė, Pumprickaitė, Šimonytė, Miliūtė, Ulbinaitė – can't you feel how 'cold' are those women? This artist is right; spinsters have their own elusive and irreplaceable peculiarities, and the presence of such politicians in the government does not promise anything good.*

Names of politicians from other countries, such as A. Merkel and M. Thatcher, are also used to find the links with otherhood.

## Polemic Social Representation

Polemic representations, being determined by antagonistic relations, reflect more liberal and tolerant attitudes communicated via the thematic anchoring mechanism. Most comments are critical responses towards hegemonic representations. That is why a large number of comments are oriented towards breaking the interlink between experience in politics and practical knowledge in childcare (17 comments), between the public and private:

*Managing the state is not the same as changing diapers for a child.*

*[Childless women] will not be able to understand the needs of a family? And what there could be so not understandable? After all, you don't become a particular person after changing piles of pampers, cooking a huge pot of soup, or buying mountains of clothes and shoes.*

Another category of thematic anchoring is the critique of discriminatory attitudes and double standards (18 comments). Some commenters criticised the communicative mechanism of anchoring in antinomies, noting that the discriminatory position creates oppositions:

*Baukutė is making a circus. It's time she forgets about politics because various differentiations begin: believer – nor believer, with multiple children – childless, vaxxer – anti-vaxxer, etc. Please stop it, finally.*

In polemic ways, the stereotyping arguments are criticised: the fact of judging other people by reproduction (4), naming the actress's position as an act of bullying or as a despising position (4), documenting discrimination (2). Double standards in finding interlinks between obstacles to undertaking political positions only for childless women but not for men (2) are noticed. Along with a critique of double standards, some commenters emphasise the quality of raising children: it is more important how to raise children instead of the fact you do or do not have a child(-ren) (8 comments). The acknowledgement of childless women's roles and contribution to society (6 comments) also finds a place in the discussion. Some commentators acknowledge that childless women pay taxes distributed to children's education and health care protection, childcare benefits, etc. (3). One commenter argues that childless women are involved in the care job of the elderly and children with disabilities (1). A few commenters use objectification through personification to share personal experiences with childless women that they know. They highlight the positive role of childless women in society, such as personality qualities, help and care of other people. Other categories communicated through thematic anchoring include defenders of involuntary childlessness (6); critique of pronatalism (2); demographic arguments on overpopulation (2); asexuality (1); sharing personal experiences of being a mother of a childless daughter or other positive personal experiences with childless women (4).

## EMANCIPATORY SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

If polemic social representations are constructed as opposition towards hegemonic attitudes, less numerous emancipatory social representations are communicated in a rather neutral tone, in most cases emphasizing the freedom of speech and, more seldom – freedom to choose our lifestyle (75 comments). This type of social representation is communicated via three mechanisms: objectification through personification (the first quotation), anchoring by metaphors (the second quotation) and thematical anchoring (the last quotation):

*Every woman is best suited for something: Baukutė for raising children, Šimonytė with Grybauskaitė for leading the state.*

*Medieval Lithuania, ladies and gentlemen, what right do you have to slander childless women and give yourself advantages?! Every person is a blacksmith of her/his life, and there are different nuances in every person's life.*

*In my opinion, a person has the right to say what she/he thinks. To agree or disagree is everyone's opinion.*

The emancipated representation relates to subgroups that create their versions of reality with a certain degree of autonomy concerning the interacting segments of society (Höijer 2011). We can find this position in our case analysis through the attitudes that being childless might be a disadvantage in politics for both genders (*There is no difference between who passes laws, whether childless women or men who have left their families, children? It's the same sh...*). It could seem that such a position tries to break the double standard, but simultaneously is a reproduction of stereotypes interlining the private and public responsibilities. Some commenters emphasise them not against childless women in general but childless women in politics. In this way, such representations oppose hegemonic attitudes only partially while choosing an 'in-between' position. Such arguments attempt to promote tolerance to recognise childlessness as an equivalent form of existence.

Interestingly enough, neither the polemic nor emancipatory social representations have any signs of childlessness as a modern 'self' project, found by the previous studies on childlessness representation in Lithuanian media (Rapolienė, Šumskaitė 2019). Similar to A. Maslauskaitė (2002), who revealed an imitative tendency in mass media concerning family-related topics, Rapolienė and Šumskaitė (2019: 31) conclude that the experts' approaches, information and research from other countries on the form of voluntary childlessness give the impression that this topic is somewhat invasive to our everyday living world. In the analysed comments, there is also a distinction of different forms of childlessness, using an argument of involuntary childlessness because of infertility problems. However, involuntary childlessness is not being discussed as an alternative way of lifestyle. Contrarily, justifying arguments of childlessness as a phenomenon in comments signifies that this topic is more about bringing it from the shadows than considering it as an alternative lifestyle. Of course, that might be related to the specific topic – childless women in politics, which does not open up broader discussions on various forms of childlessness. The signs of a more individualistic approach – childlessness as a modern self-project – do not appear in the discussion because of the prevailing attitudes towards the phenomenon in Lithuania.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the social representation theory, the article explores the communicative mechanisms of the attitudes towards childlessness and the content of comments on childless women's role in politics. As far as I know, no research has examined the representation of childlessness in politics in the comments section. This approach thematically allows indicating more concrete argumentations and methodologically – gathering more straightforward attitudes.

The paper results go in line with the previous results so that rather negative representations of childlessness are found. The hegemonic social representations that favour the disadvantaged position of childless women in politics predominate in the comments section. The most common communicative mechanism to prove discriminatory arguments is thematic anchoring, using the idea that female politicians lack practical experience. Therefore, they

could not represent the interests of families with children. This argument, drawing a parallel between women's skills gained in the private sphere and professional competencies, was not found by previous studies on childless women's representations in Lithuanian media and reaches the classical distinction in feminism debates between public and private. The attempts to break the public/private dichotomy can be found in the polemic group of representations. Such arguments attempt to promote tolerance, to break the interlink between childlessness and otherness. Besides the critique of double standards and discriminatory attitudes, childless women's role in society is acknowledged, sharing positive experiences. Such results go in line with the previous research on childless women's roles in society providing help and care in extended family networks (Pollet et al. 2006). This research direction focuses not on what childless women *lack* but what childless women *give* to society. Finally, the least numerous emancipatory representation reflects a neutral position towards childless women's role in society. However, individualistic attitudes on the freedom of choice of our lifestyles are expressed, not opposing hegemonic attitudes or opposing only partially. Such arguments attempt to recognize childlessness as an equivalent form of existence.

In sum, the communicative mechanism – thematic anchoring – prevails in all three groups of social representations of childless women's role in society, although all other mechanisms indicated by social representation theory are found. Anchoring through naming is a mechanism that allows seeing rather aggressive or radical attitudes, naming childless women with a range of de-humanizing epithets. The rhetoric behind such epithets moves closer to hate speech that would probably not be grasped via face-to-face methods. The underlying principle behind anchoring through naming and thematic anchoring is the otherness of childless women – a result that has also been found in other studies (Graham et al. 2013). However, in the analysed case, it is expressed in straightforward and aggressive ways. Likewise, biological arguments emphasizing women's procreative roles are communicated in open ways.

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## Nuostatų į bevaikių moterų dalyvavimą politikoje komunikacija: Lietuvos naujienų portalų komentarų turinio analizė

### *Santrauka*

Remiantis socialinės reprezentacijos teorija, straipsnyje analizuojama požiūrio į bevaikių moterų vaidmenį politikoje komunikacija interneto komentaruose. Atlikta atrinkto straipsnio bevaikių moterų dalyvavimo politikoje tema komentarų (365) kokybinė turinio analizė. Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad dominuoja hegemoninė socialinė reprezentacija, kuri dažniausiai grindžiama stereotipu, kad vaikų nesulaukusios moterys neturi praktinės patirties, todėl negali atstovauti šeimų su vaikais interesams. Pasirinktas metodas leido atskleisti radikalesnes ir agresyvias nuostatas dėl bevaikių moterų vaidmenų. Poleminė socialinė reprezentacija oponuoja hegemoninei, laužant sąsajas tarp moterų prokreacijos ir dalyvavimo visuomenėje vaidmenų. Emancipacinė reprezentacija išreikšta neutralia pozicija, akcentuojant pasirinkimo teisę, tačiau neoponuojant hegemoninei pozicijai. Dažniausiai naudojamas komunikacinis mechanizmas – tematinis įtvirtinimas, pasireiškiantis visuose reprezentacijos tipuose.

**Raktažodžiai:** komunikacija, medijos, požiūriai į bevaikystę, bevaikės moterys politikoje, stereotipai, socialinės reprezentacijos teorija, turinio analizė