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Sex Education and the Dichotomies of Identity Representation. A Case Study on Republica

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Abstract: At the foundation of this research paper lays the notion of "identity" which comes to show how postmodernism and digimodernism can, in fact, coexist in a post-postmodern world where the problem of sex education is more actual than ever. The objective of this paper is to show how in this context full of dualities, a narrow topic such as sex education can reinforce the construction and representation of an identity. In this way, this paper analyzes how the Romanian media outlet Republica tackles this topic and how, when covering it, it manages to construct the Romanian group identity. The main hypothesis of this paper is that this media outlet relies a lot on religious principles when covering this topic. Moreover, a subsidiary hypothesis is that this publication correlates sex education with politics, since the politicians are the ones who take important decisions for this country. For the methodology, this paper uses the qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Discussing about some of the main results, it can be said that the analysis highlighted how sex education is correlated massively with politics and religion, but also with the issue of gender identity. Consequently, the Romanian identity is defined by some strong dichotomies present in the society (men versus women, science versus religion, parents versus authorities), showing many of the vulnerabilities to which different social categories are exposed.

Keywords: *Media representation; sex education; group identity; construction of identity; Romanian identity.*

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Introduction

This research paper has as a central point the concept of "identity". The entire analysis is based on this notion, as it tries to understand how an identity is constructed starting from the media representation of a narrow topic. In this sense, this paper analyzes how the publication *Republica* tackles the controversial subject of sex education and how the Romanian identity is constructed, as far as this subject is concerned. In order to come to some conclusions, this analysis starts from revisiting some important theories covering multiple domains, demonstrating the trans- and multi-disciplinary approach used for this paper. The scientific context of this paper shows that not many studies were published in Romania regarding this topic and, more importantly, that the ones taken into consideration were not analyzing the group identity. This is the gap that this study tries to fill.

Even if this research paper focuses on the Romanian environment, this article is relevant for other countries as well, since it shows how this issue may be tackled if solutions are to be implemented or updated. While the level of educating pupils and, ultimately, citizens differs from one country to another, it is always valuable to try and come back to the causes before promoting a solution. As other studies show, there are multiple causes to be considered when thinking about changing the educational system, some of them being considered primary, while others are secondary. Definitely, the first ones to be analyzed are the primary causes and these are directly linked to specific research methods such as surveys or focus groups that show the immediate impact on a target group. Nevertheless, in order to go deeper into a certain matter so that solutions become more effective on the long term, the secondary causes are to be also considered, thinking about additional research methods that can be used.

When discussing the secondary causes and research methods, these sometimes go beyond the limitations of a specific domain and, thus, transform the analyses into trans- and multi-disciplinary ones. That is the case of such a study which finds its validity on an international level through the promotion of another research method that may help to understand sex education from another perspective. In this sense, this paper focuses on one of those areas that are less prominent when thinking of changes in education, talking here mainly about media representation of certain identities through the usage of the qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Understanding how identities are represented emphasizes how a nation, in this case, Romania, relates to a specific topic, since media is able to reconstruct the topic of sex education, following specific criteria.

Moreover, by going beyond these representations that are sometimes obvious, media outlets are able to reflect on the group mentalities derived from these representations. This is crucial for a topic such as sex education which implies the presence of vulnerable identities which need to be recognized. When acknowledging them as part of the group identity and, thus, mentalities, minor or major changes are to be considered for the curriculum concerning sex education.

By examining the communication field (linked to the educational one) and using the content analysis, this study shows how subtleties of the main issue may be found and, consequently, addressed accordingly. Admittedly, the relevance of this study lies in the way in which it promotes a certain *modus operandi* when tackling such a sensitive topic, no matter the country. It shows how, when focusing on urgent yet delicate matters, trans and multi-disciplinarity is key to finding the best solutions to move forward. Ultimately, the goal is to correlate indicators coming from multiple domains so that societies find solutions to current issues. The present case study may be an example of how to do that and which can be later extended depending on different loci.

For this research, the method chosen was the qualitative and quantitative content analysis that, based on a designed analysis grid, shows some constants and some inconsistencies present in the Romanian society. Talking about the hypotheses of this paper, the first one is that the Romanian publication correlates the topic of sex education with issues concerning religion. As well as that, many associations are to be made between sex education and politics, as the latter has a lot of influence on the first. The second hypothesis focuses on the frames used by *Republica*, showing that the responsibility frame is used to emphasize the importance of the political decision-making process. This is directly connected to the morality frame, in the sense in which the Romanian identity is perceived as relying a lot on these principles when taking important decisions. The last hypothesis is that the Romanian identity is seen as being archaic and vulnerable because they still rely on religion when discussing about education.

One of the scopes of this paper is to show that identities are nowadays media-dependent when talking about their representation and their validity in the public sphere. Another objective of this paper is to highlight how a research paper that analyzes media content can become useful in updating the curriculum or even in changing mentalities. However, when considering the scopes, the ultimate objective of this paper is to show that a narrow subject such as sex education can, in fact, be a starting point

for understanding how identities are constructed and how they influence societies from within.

Literature Review

Some words have been brought to the attention of the public in connection to the era in which we live, such as: "digimodernism", or "posthumanism", all of them implying the idea that technology is above the human, thus, above the *identity* of the human. Even if possible, everything needs to be taken with a grain of salt. Society has indeed detached from the postmodernist culture but, I would argue, still not reached the post humanist phase. Obviously, signs of posthumanism are present around us, but they do not constitute the norm since the *human identity* is still needed in the present society for everything to function. This is why, I would say that we live in a post-postmodern world, where traces of postmodernism are still visible and where technology finds itself in a prominent place, but still unsecured. The problem of technology as not being central in our society goes back to some social inequalities that are present in the world. It is for sure that the dominant cultures impose a certain direction (like the digimodern one), but, as long as some other minor cultures, the ones not from the very bottom, but from the middle, do not assimilate that new direction, it is impossible for it to impose anything. We are talking about a spectrum, but what is sure is that postmodernism has not been completely left behind and it is still integrated as a component of the main direction of many societies.

Coming back to our present days, this permanent change that we inherited and amplified is what makes us find it so difficult to give a reliable description of what we live. Technology is the one that makes this transition even more complicated, since old and new models seem to live together and recreate the identity of the human being. The difficulty of defining this identity in clear terms is what makes it even more problematic to represent it. According to Stuart Hall, the way in which representations work is through language, since "in language, we use signs and symbols – whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects – to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings" (Hall, 1997, p. 1). However, as Stuart Hall points out, it is not only about producing meaning, but it is also about how this meaning circulates between people and even between cultures. And this is essential since "culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings" (Hall, 1997, p. 2). In other words, as suggested by the same author, meanings are created within cultures (and, I would argue, within societies) that share the same meanings and that can, in fact, understand the

world from a particular perspective since they have the same system of references. Nevertheless, Stuart Hall draws attention to the fact that "circuits of meaning" exist in any culture and, as a consequence, contradictory viewpoints are represented that "sometimes call our very identities into question" (Hall, 1997, p. 10). This is how, even within the same culture, contradictions and segregations may appear, as these own binaries may "define what is 'normal', who belongs – and therefore, who is excluded" (Hall, 1997, p. 10). So even within the same community/culture/society, it may be argued that separations and different levels of power may appear as a result of language that produces and shares certain meanings.

The ways in which messages are produced are countless (if we take into consideration the appearance of the alternative ways of using technology) and the way they are represented are equally difficult to count. Nevertheless, there is one mean that, even if it could be considered quite old now, is still valuable to be considered when thinking about representation and sharing meaning and that is the media. Talking about the mainstream media, this would be seen as a controlled and rather conservative domain in which meanings are created, represented, and somehow even re-represented. This re-representation is what Stuart Hall defines as being a "kind of distortion of what it really means", suggesting that the specific "work on representation would be in measuring that gap between what one might think as the true meaning of an event (or an object) and how it is represented in the media" (Hall, 1997, p. 6). In other words, Stuart Hall discusses about the theory regarding the social construction of reality formulated by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966. According to the two sociologists, "among the multiple realities there is one that presents itself as the reality *par excellence*. This is the reality of everyday life" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 35). The main point of their discussion is not about *The reality*, but about the reality constructed through social interaction. According to the two sociologists, the interaction between people constructs the world, as they exchange meanings and modify them, and "since they themselves have shaped this world in the course of a shared biography which they can remember, the world thus shaped appears fully transparent to them" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 76). This last idea is paramount for this research paper, as it describes in a nutshell how the media influences the perception of the public regarding an issue. The social reality that, from one perspective, the media governs through sharing actions (and I would say, even notions) that are habitualized (using the two sociologists' concept here) (Berger & Luckmann, 1991), transform this whole world not into a *simulacrum*, in

Baudrillard's terms, but into *The reality*. And this is how the media manages to control opinions, perceptions and, thus, shape identities.

Going into the field of media studies and talking about the way in which the media represents versions of reality, it is important to consider one of the mechanisms employed by the media in this process of creating and sharing meaning. Theorized by many researchers, the framing theory shows how the media draws attention to certain aspects of reality. According to Todd Gitlin, "frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6), while according to Erving Goffman, frames are "principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them" (Goffman, 1986, p. 10). Both these researchers talk about frames as principles and together they highlight some valid points regarding their importance for the media discourse: the fact that these principles are directly related to time and space, but also to the social environment, as noted previously by Luckmann and Berger. In this context, the role that the media has become crucial, as shown before and also highlighted by another media theory (the agenda-setting theory), the media chooses what to show to the people, depending on where and when these messages are to be transmitted. That is why, media representations of identity are so different: not only because different aspects of reality become prominent, but because they are also correlated with time and space references, not to mention the social environment where those messages circulate. For the analysis that is going to be performed in this research paper, I am not only interested in the framing theory in general, as this paper needs in the analysis part a specific categorization. That is why, in this paper, the categories defined by other two researchers that were interested in the framing theory will be used. In the article *Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News*, Holli A. Semetko and Patti M. Valkenburg examine the next five types of frames:

"*Conflict frame*. This frame emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest. […]

Human interest frame. This frame brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem. […]

Economic consequences frame. This frame reports an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region, or country. […]

Morality frame. This frame puts the event, problem, or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions. […]

Responsibility frame. This frame presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, pp. 95-96).

As this is the main theory that is going to be used in this research paper from the field of media studies, it is also important to now reexamine a dichotomy established by researchers from the field of semiotics, since these two concepts will be again of ultimate importance in creating the analysis grid of this research paper. As far as signs and symbols are concerned, the media is well-known for its capacity to distort and recreate signs and symbols to give substance to certain topics that are either rather difficult to tackle or that are the subject of some tabloid media outlets. In connection to this, the media uses two governing principles of semiotics to create and share meaning: denotation and connotation. According to Roland Barthes who starts from the points expressed by the linguist Louis Hjelmslev, denotation is just the relationship (R) created between the place of expression (E) and the plane of content (C) (Barthes, 1986, p. 89), promoting, in this way, the structuralist perspective of Ferdinand de Saussure. As far as the connotation is concerned, Roland Barthes argues that, in fact, "the first system (ERG) becomes the plane of expression, or signifier, of the second system" which is wider than the first one (Barthes, 1986, p. 89).

As these theories were revisited, it is now of ultimate importance to discover if similar research papers or books were written on the topic of sex education in Romania so that this study finds its validity and also its place in the vast domain of communication studies. According to one study published in 2016, the researcher acknowledges the importance of introducing sex education in schools, since in Romania, at that time, there were no discussions regarding its introduction in the curriculum. As the researcher points out, this study was initiated to promote the introduction of sex education in schools, showing the necessity of such a delicate subject in the curriculum. Its results highlight the need for a campaign that should better inform the pupils of the unknown aspects of sex education. Even if the students seem to know some aspects regarding prevention and sexually transmitted diseases, the researcher says that these notions are to be reinforced by formal education, the discussions between parents and children, and the media coverage on this topic[1] (Constantinescu et al., 2016).

[1] All the Romanian references presented in this study are translated by the author of this work.

Undoubtedly, in the case of such a study, the sociological approach is used since the conclusions are drawn based on statistics and surveys.

According to another study published in 2015, the researchers take into consideration health education and, as a subsidiary topic, sex education. They emphasize the need of introducing health education in the curriculum, not only as an optional subject which makes it be taught in random contexts, but as a permanent subject studied in schools. In this context, health education is recognized as a necessity and a human right (Neghirlă et al., 2015). Furthermore, this research focuses on another important aspect that, even if not mentioned in the article, is still visible: the shame felt to talk about sex education in general, as the authors prefer to analyze sex education as part of health education, since this is easier to be received by the public.

As it is visible from the studies presented above, even if they reflect on the difficulties of an archaic system, none of them concentrates on identity construction or representation. More than that, all these studies use methodologies that do not focus on content analysis and, thus, they do not consider the media. This study becomes relevant from this point, as it fills the gap between the sociological perspective and the communication one. As no study tackled how society is perceived from within, this research paper becomes of ultimate importance. In this way, such a research paper is needed to first bring forward the causes of perpetuating a specific mentality so that it can then analyze proposing the best strategy to counterbalance the effects.

As presented above, meaning is created socially and, that is why, understandings of the world are so complex, depending on time, space, and different societies. In this socially constructed universe where meanings are shared, this research paper comes to show that a narrow subject is important and can help in understanding some trends happening in society. But this study should always be correlated with other sociological and psychological ones. Moreover, this paper emphasizes that changes are not only needed in the educational system, but also on the political and social scenes. Nevertheless, maybe the most important change that is needed and highlighted through this paper is the one of accommodating different beliefs to a new societal norm in order for them to work together. In this way, the rigid lines between dichotomies become more transparent and the vulnerabilities may be reduced.

Methodology

Research design and sampling

As stated before, this paper aimed to analyze how the subject of sex education was approached when connected with religion, politics and issues regarding identity construction in the Romanian environment. The analysis was based on a particular online media outlet that was chosen because it is an independent press organization, namely *Republica*. Apart from this, the media outlet was selected because its journalists only write opinion pieces. Since this paper focused on the articles published on *Republica* considering a specific timeframe, the method that was considered suitable for this research was the qualitative and quantitative content analysis.

Talking about the timeframe, this paper was interested in the articles published on the topic of sex education between 1st January 2020 and 31st July 2021. In 2020, for the first time, the politicians argued pro and against the introduction of sex education as a subject that needs to be studied by students, as part of children's rights. Across 2020, the politicians debated on this topic without actually coming to a conclusion. Moreover, at the beginning of December 2020, Romania had its Parliament elections and this could be considered a milestone in seeing if the subject of sex education was affected by this change on the political scene. As a decision was not reached and as the new Parliament was newly elected, this paper continued to analyze the articles published until 31st July 2021. The analysis stopped there because the discussions were put on hold. The politicians decided somehow to introduce sex education as a module under a discipline called "education for life", but the discussions remained in some committees of the Romanian Parliament. Only in June 2022, the actual law was sent to the President of Romania to be promulged.

As this paper focused on the articles published in Romanian, it is to be noted that some spelling/orthographic issues were encountered. That is why, the keyword chosen for selecting the articles contained all variants to make sure all articles that were relevant to this topic were taken into account: the main keyword was "educația sexuală" ("sex education"), together with its variants: "educație sexuală", "educația sexuală", "educație sexuală". This keyword was introduced in the search tool that is available on the website of *Republica*. For this study, the researcher preferred to manually and thoroughly select the articles using the keywords suggested above. Admittedly, the manual check has its drawbacks but, since this paper was interested in the direct reference that the articles might contain, this was considered to be the best option.

Research questions

Since this study promoted a trans- and multi-disciplinary approach, there were four research questions that were considered here:

1. What topics are most frequently associated with sex education?
2. What frames are used when examining this topic?
3. How is the subject of sex education correlated with identity issues (connecting it with religion and politics)?
4. What features of the Romanian group identity are reflected in the opinion pieces regarding sex education?

When thinking of the hypotheses of this research paper, it is firstly important to mention one aspect that is related to the actual notion of "hypothesis". In this sense, this paper does not use it in a quantitative manner, focusing on two variables that are to be demonstrated. In fact, the hypotheses are here just a *modus operandi* to be able to formulate certain presuppositions. Starting from there, these can be validated or not.

The first hypothesis is that sex education was correlated with issues concerning religion and politics, as Romania is a country whose citizens rely a lot on religious customs, while also being governed by politicians who serve certain interests. The second hypothesis is that *Republica* used the morality frame together with the responsibility frame to show that morality (understanding here also the religious values) is very important to the way decisions are made, but also to show that politicians should be more inclined towards taking the right decisions for their future citizens. The third hypothesis is that the Romanian identity was constructed from the point of view of *Republica* as being archaic, preserving some old traditions that do not let the society evolve, even though the politicians tend to bring forward the impressive progress the Romanian society made.

Data analysis

For each of the 39 articles that were scraped during the first phase, a specific table (see below) was completed to be able to come to some conclusions.

Table 1. Table containing the indicators that were analyzed for each of the selected articles

Date of publication	
Author	
Title	
Link for the article	

Focus of the article		
Denotative/Connotative meaning of the title		
Main actors		
Semantic associations with religion		
Semantic associations with gender		
Semantic associations with the place of residence		
Other semantic associations		
Connotative words	Yes/No	Examples
Observations (the semantic fields of the connotative words)		
Metaphors		
Irony/Sarcasm		
Observations		

Source: Author's own conception

As far as the table presented above is concerned, some mentions need to be made in order to better understand how the indicators were used in the analysis *per se*. The first and possibly the most delicate issue was the one of translating the words from Romanian to English without losing the sense given by the Romanian author(s). The way in which this difficulty was overcome was by searching not for the exact word from the dictionary that could help in the translation but to find the word that would contain the understanding given by the author(s). Connotation is directly linked to the issue of translation. That is why, for this research paper, connotation was indicated by either of the next three subindicators: absence of denotation (the sense taken from the dictionary), presence of irony when using the word, or being part of a phrase, which is understood metaphorically.

For "Irony/Sarcasm", it was mentioned if irony and/or sarcasm were present or absent from the articles selected. Voyant tool was used to double-check the accuracy of the keywords present under the "Other semantic associations" column.

Even if this research was mainly a qualitative one, since the nuances were the ones considered to be of ultimate importance, there was a small

part of this analysis that focused on the quantitative side. The words/phrases that were of interest were counted manually.

Results

Speaking of the results of this study, it would be first and foremost important to say some words regarding the number of articles published within the chosen timeframe. Thinking of the fact that the timeframe was quite wide (more than one year and a half), the number of articles published on this topic is relatively low – 39. This could suggest the fact that the topic was not considered of high importance by *Republica*. Even so, it must be argued that this media outlet only published opinion pieces which are more difficult to write, and which need more time to be elaborated. This is how the low number of articles could be explained.

Apart from this, one of the key aspects revealed by the analysis is that sex education becomes, in many situations, a starting point to examine complex issues existing in the Romanian society. Even if a number of these articles contain in the title the main keyword "sex education", in fact, the authors use this just to start a discussion regarding the Romanian mentality when talking about sex education and sex in general.

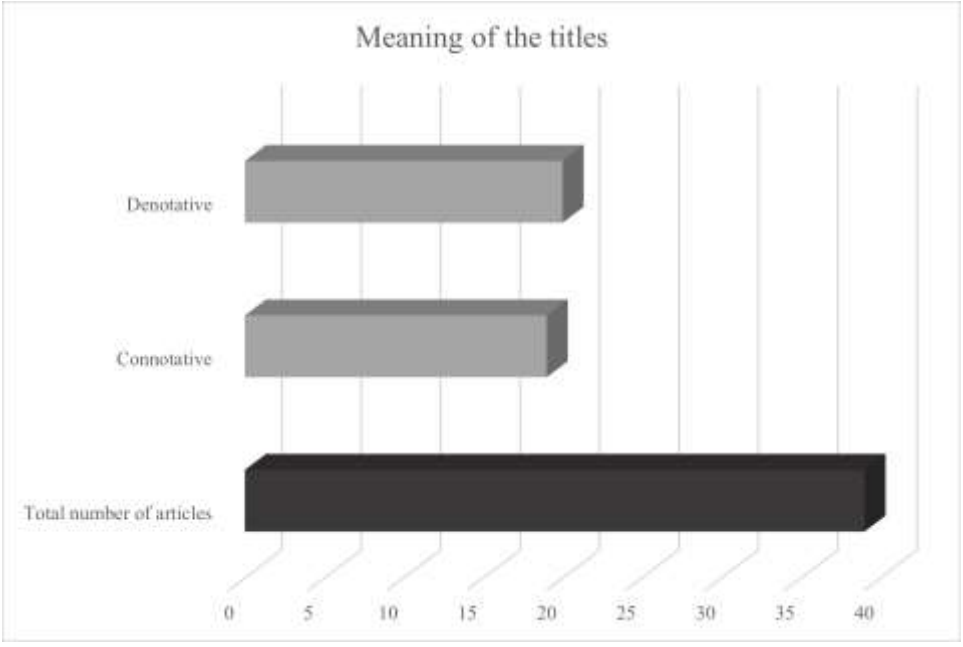


Figure 1. *Meanings of the titles in Republica*

Source: Author's own conception

When talking about the meaning of the titles, the Romanian authors use denotation and connotation in equal amounts. This suggests that they tackle from various perspectives this topic, some of them being more focused on making sure that the message is understood instantly by the readers, while others like to play with words and somehow let the readers think of the deeper issues present in the Romanian society and towards which the titles try to point.

Topics Associated with Sex Education

When talking about sex education, *Republica* associates this topic mainly with religion, gender, and politics.

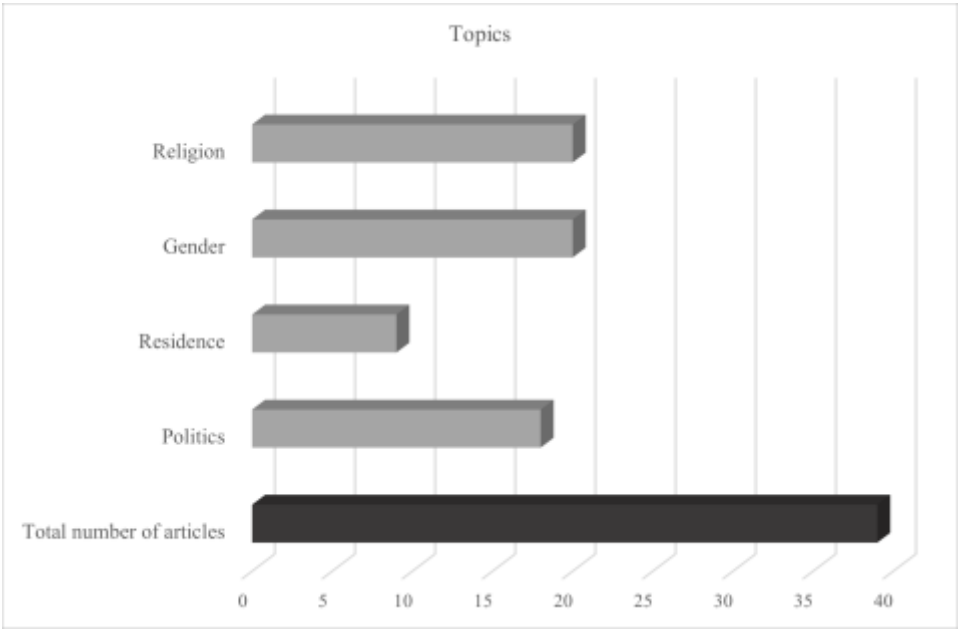


Figure 2. *Topics associated with sex education in Republica*

Source: Author's own conception

As we speak of a country that relies a lot on religious principles, the association made between these two topics is not coming as a surprise, mainly because the two of them are seen in contradiction. The main idea suggested by the articles is that religion and sex education have

nothing in common and that they cannot cooperate to help promote a relevant education. When thinking of religion, almost all the authors are

either sarcastic or pitiful, suggesting that there is no possible way in which the country can evolve if the mentality is religious. To put it in another way, even from the very start, one of the characteristics of the Romanian identity is visible: having religious principles that overpass science. Being obedient and respecting the dogmas mean for the majority that they are not sinful. Even if the central idea is that the Orthodox church is to be blamed for this long tradition of not promoting development, there are also some grey zones that become prominent. Some journalists suggest that, in fact, the help provided by the Church could have a strong impact on promoting this type of education in schools. Moreover, in one of the articles, it is suggested that there should be made a difference between the Orthodox church as an institution and the priests who live in small communities and who are helping the ones in need and, surprisingly, even agree with the introduction of this subject in the curriculum. However, the debate is still on as the Orthodox church as an institution tries to preserve "the innocence of the children" who are, as suggested by the articles, not so pure, as they have other means to learn the subtleties of such a delicate topic on their own, if and when they are not helped by specialists.

When considering the association between sex education and gender, this comes as a surprise in the way in which it appears in the articles. Only a small part of the articles speaks of the necessity to let the children discuss, discover, and accept their gender identity through the guidance offered in school. For *Republica*, the problem of gender goes back to the strong biological dichotomy between males and females. At this point, the Romanian identity gains another characteristic, the one of archaism since the society is not capable to adjust to new realities. As the articles concentrate a lot on the roles that men and women have, the traditional Romanian mentality still defines these roles, as females are seen as victims and males as aggressors. Furthermore, another debate started when the Parliament introduced a law through which in schools it is possible to speak only about men and women in the biological sense. This situation was presented by the journalists as being another red flag, suggesting the traditionalism of this country.

Gender is a problem of nuance only in some cases, the main reflection being on the status of the woman in the Romanian society, since she is considered the one who gives consent when she smiles or wears a mini skirt. As in the case of religion, here there are some grey zones that are visible, but they are an exception from the norm. This happens when in one article it is said that there is some sort of gender equality when talking about the salaries given to men and women. However, as pointed out by the

articles in which the authors try to encourage women to act, the situation is different in the urban and the rural areas of Romania.

And here the topic of sex education is associated not only with gender, but also with the place of residence. The number of articles in which this association appears is relatively low but still prominent enough to speak about a reality that is present in Romania. In this sense, in this country, it is not only difficult to be a woman, as they run the risk of being harassed or abused, but it is even worse if that woman lives in a rural area. The main aspect highlighted here is that the women from the rural areas are even less educated than the ones in the urban areas and that the families do not offer them the support they would need. The Romanian identity seems not only to maintain the inequalities between genders, but also to accentuate them through the correlations made with education and locus.

When talking about politics, it is for sure that a prominent actor appears: the politicians. This comes as no surprise in Romania where this social group is blamed every time when something does not function in society. This idea is not only perpetuated in the articles, but it is also reinforced through giving proofs of the manners in which the politicians are to be blamed for the actual state of the educational system. When thinking of politics, the keyword for the Romanian identity is distrust, since the authorities do not show the population that they respect some governing societal principles. In fact, in many instances, it is suggested that there is a link between politics and personal interests, between politics and religion, or, even worse, between politics, the good of the people, and personal values. The last category seems to be the one that dictates the way in which decisions regarding sex education are taken in the Romanian Parliament. As many politicians are conservators by nature (even if they are part of some liberal parties), they immediately make the same association between sex and education as presented by the church: losing the innocence of the children. The articles highlight the fact that the politicians bring forward their own principles (which in some cases reflect radicalistic views) and, that is why, the interests of the many are not coming first. Even if in some of the articles the names of some parties appear (PNL – The National Liberal Party, PSD – The Social-Democratic Party, AUR – The Alliance for Uniting Romanians or USR – Save Romania Union), they are not relevant as individualities, as the fundamental aspect is that there are two major sides taking part in this battle: the one which thinks that sex education should be included in the curriculum (their number is relatively low) and the one which does not agree to even mention the concept of "sex education" in schools (their number is high).

That is why, the Romanian identity, through the lenses designed by the journalists, is seen as reluctant to change because of personal convictions doubled by the politicians who put their interests first. Here the segregation present in the society is also visible. In this way, distrust, dishonesty, and lack of respect are the characteristics through which the Romanians talk about politics, including here the authors themselves who become the voice of an identity fed up with the superficial ways in which the politicians and the institutions they represent treat the citizens. Even so, in many instances, the journalists underline that the citizens themselves have a responsibility and that they should also get involved, if they want to see some changes occur.

Sex Education and Framing

The last association between sex education and politics is particularly important for defining the main frame that is used in these articles – the responsibility one. As it can be expected, such a sensitive topic urges all the parties involved to take responsibility for it. It is understandable that the ones who are considered responsible for everything are the President, the members of the Parliament, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Education who discuss a lot about this topic, but who are not able to reach a conclusion that would be in the benefit of the many. But the responsibility frame is also a means used by journalists to perform a call-to-action through which they invite each member of the Romanian society to do whatever they can to support the introduction of this topic in the curriculum. To simplify, the responsibility frame is used in this context not only to emphasize the important role that the politicians have, but also to encourage all the members of the society to participate in this initiative. In this way, the journalists suggest that this change is not entirely a problem of the authorities, as it is highly believed. The Romanian identity is, thus, seen as individualist and selfish, as the people are reluctant to start doing something all by themselves and waiting for the authorities to proceed with anything.

Nevertheless, the responsibility frame is not the only frame used in the articles. As many of the articles focus on the idea of the vulnerability of women, the frame used to construct such an identity is the human interest one. In this sense, the articles become more emotional, since they present different traumatic experiences of women (mainly). On the other side, men are seen as being the aggressors. The human interest frame promotes, in this way, specific attitudes adopted by men and women that are to be indicative of the construction of these identities separated by the biological sex:

frustration, irritation, disgust towards men and pity and compassion towards women.

This frame together with the morality frame is used to bring forward some of the religious principles through which the Romanian identity perceives the world: the women seen as sinners. Moreover, the morality frame appears as a subsidiary frame to show the need to act and, that is why, it is correlated with the responsibility one in some instances. This is how the focus of the articles is mainly on the society on the whole, reinforcing the idea that it is the responsibility of all the citizens to act by firstly understanding the benefits of promoting sex education (only 2-3 articles deliberate on the fact that sex education in schools is not the solution).

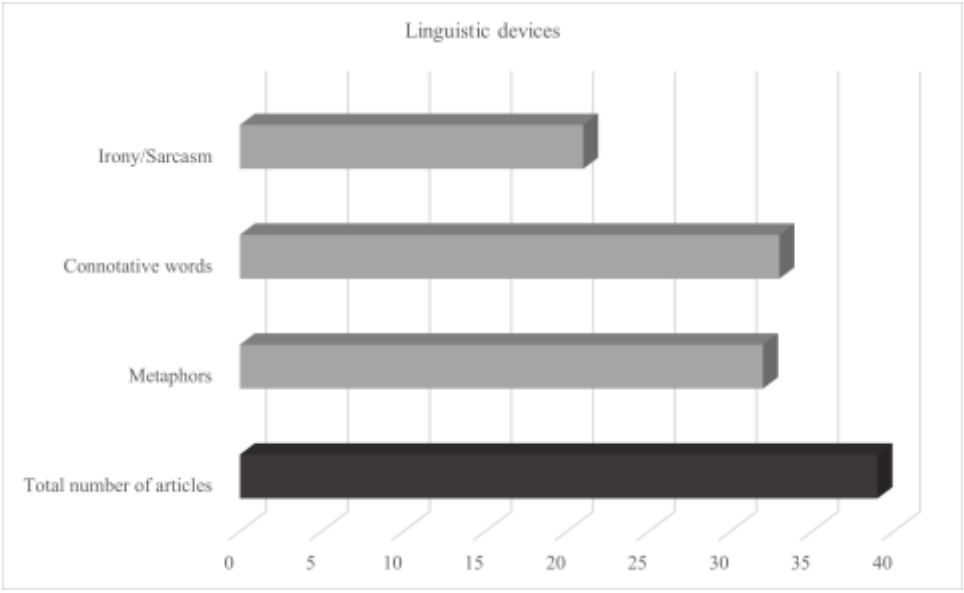


Figure 3. *Linguistic devices used in the analyzed articles from Republica*

Source: Author's own conception

Treating the situation with irony and sarcasm is seen as a possible solution to make the population understand that it is high time they did something to change the archaic mentality. Irony and sarcasm are used in the articles focusing on the responsibility or the conflict frame (religion versus evolutionism, politics versus real life), creating this substantial difference between contrastive elements. Compared to this, the articles which use the human interest frame as their main one are not relying so much on irony or sarcasm, but rather on connotative words. Undoubtedly, these words and

metaphors establish some connections between journalists and the audience, either positive or negative, depending on how their beliefs coincide or clash.

Speaking of the analyzed articles, connotative words and metaphors become a means through which the authors impose a specific gradation of how frames are used. For example, in an article where the responsibility frame is used on a large scale, connotative words and metaphors are employed in order to highlight the need for the authorities to take action. In an article where the morality frame becomes prominent (this is present in the articles which give credit to the religious principles), the connotative phrases or metaphors coming from some iconic biblical texts are used. However, there are other instances where these biblical phrases or axioms appear not to suggest morality, but to accentuate the responsibility frame, since the scientific evidence is placed above the religious archaic concepts, as many of these journalists argue.

Features of the Romanian Group Identity

In the first subpart of this analysis, it was shown that sex education is correlated with politics and religion, as well as with issues concerning the place of residence and gender. This made the researcher conclude that the Romanian group identity keeps preserving some archaic values, the group mentality being directly linked to religious principles rather than to scientific evidence that should support the decision of introducing sex education in schools or not.

As far as politics is concerned, this identity does not trust the politicians since they act and take decisions based on their own moral prerogatives and not by seeking the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Mill's principle of utility). Moreover, the fact that the Romanian society did not progress is showed by the way in which the discussions regarding gender are held. This identity is still processing how to relate to the roles that men and women have in relationships: aggressor and victim. The nuances regarding gender identity are hardly mentioned and, when they are, they are perceived as conditions that need to be treated, being seen as deviations from the (archaic and punitive) norm.

Apart from the main indicators presented above, there are other associations that are possible when thinking of sex education. In fact, the number of other associations is so high that emphasizes how sex education is just a starting point to talk about other salient issues present in the Romanian society. At this moment, it is important to state that, in this context, the low number of articles published on this topic is even more justified, since sex education becomes just an umbrella topic for so many

issues which the Romanian society faces. As some of the associations can be included in the same semantic fields, some of the issues presented in the below word cloud were grouped together.

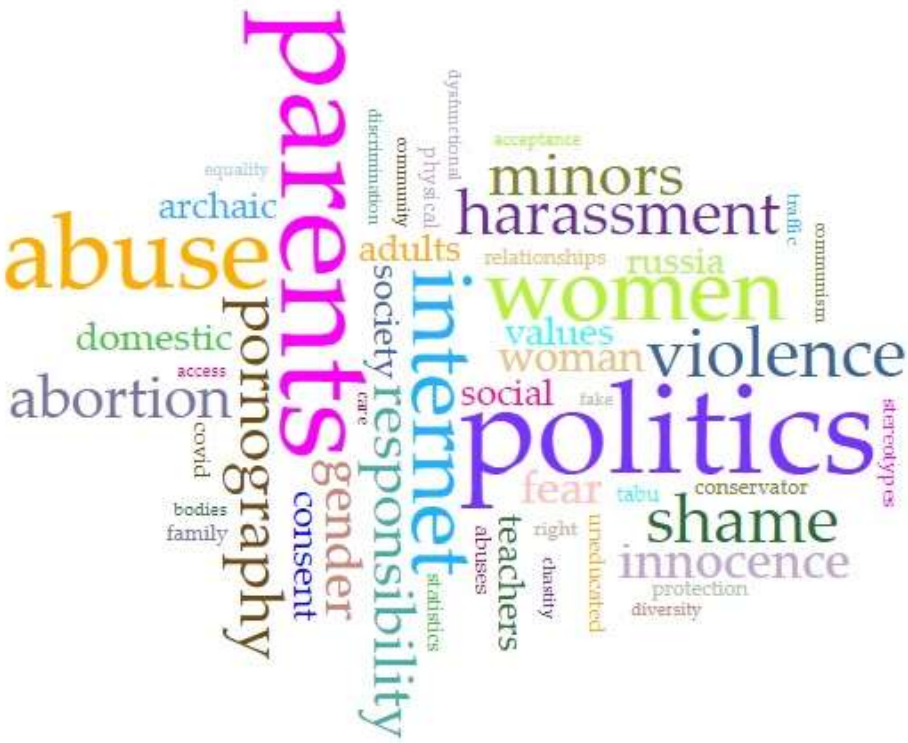


Figure 4. *World cloud of other associations made with the topic of sex education in Republica*

Source: Author's own conception

Parents

Another point of interest is the association made between sex education and parents who are considered important actors by *Republica*. The articles link these two concepts variously, highlighting that there are many grey zones when trying to blame someone for this situation. The identity of the parents is constructed in a rather contrastive way as being the victim who is responsible, vulnerable, indoctrinated, or even ashamed. These characteristics are not to be understood only in isolation, but also grouped together. That is why, the journalists draw attention in many instances to the fact that parents and adults, in general, need education too in order to know how to understand themselves and how to tackle this subject in the discussions they have with their children. For the topic of sex education,

parents are considered as performing divergent roles: supporters, instigators, victims, educators, models, abusers (mental, but also sexual).

Harassment, Abuse, Violence, Abortion

The correlation made between sex education and these major issues present in the Romanian society accentuates the vulnerable, traumatic, and dangerous place in which women find themselves. When considering the benefits of sex education, many authors argue by saying that this will limit the abuses performed toward women or minors. These two vulnerable categories are taken into consideration by the articles and, through them, it is showed that the Romanian identity is perceived as being in itself vulnerable to harassment, abuse, and violence. Directly connected with the issue of gender, the authors speak about a specific type of violence that affects women – domestic violence. This is how the roles of men and women are perpetuated: males as aggressors and females as victims. Age is another important factor that comes into play, especially in cases where the age difference seen in the relationships between males and females is big. This is why, the authors that have some law background consider different penalties that should be given to aggressors as they abuse minors, even if it is suggested that these penalties are quite low or that the aggressors easily get away with them because they are in a privileged position.

Internet, Pornography

This category seems to come in contradiction with the traditionalism of the Romanian society, since technology is totally opposed to the mentality presented in this study. However, many of the authors draw the conclusion that, in fact, children have access to the Internet, and this is how they are even more predisposed to being in contact with the wrong people or exposed to false information. Many articles talk about the problem of pornography, a way in which the abusers try to blackmail minors. Another acute problem that is raised is the one of objectifying women. Surprisingly enough, this continues the issue of gender inequality, but it digitalizes it, making it more actual. Simply stated, from this perspective, the Romanian identity is altogether contradictory in itself by putting together many aspects that respond to some archaic principles, while also including some problematic traces of modernism.

Shame, Innocence, Tabu, Family, Access

In many of the analyzed articles, the concept of "shame" is associated with sex education and, ultimately, with sex: shame to discuss with the children, shame to ask as a child, shame to discuss with the students as a teacher, children being ashamed to tell the parents what happened with them. Shame becomes a trademark for the Romanian identity. In fact, many journalists argue that the problem with introducing sex education in schools starts from the shame most citizens feel when approaching this topic. Probably the most eloquent way in which this is visible is by noticing how the Parliament did not want to use the term "sex education" while the authors used it massively to make a point about the importance of accepting this terminology as part of the daily lives of human beings. Moreover, the idea presented before regarding the innocence of the children also appears here, as it concentrates on some dogmatic ideals such as chastity or purity. The Romanian society is, from this perspective, represented as feeling ashamed to acknowledge some present realities, going back to some biblical values difficult to be adapted to what was discussed previously – the massive intervention of technology in the children's lives.

Russia, Communism, Discrimination, Stereotypes, Archaic

Even if this last category is not so prominent, it was interesting to see how some of the authors felt the need to appropriate the way in which Romanians tackled this subject to the way in which Russia uses its control over the population and promotes some laws. Nevertheless, the articles from *Republica* do not promote at a basic level such an understanding, as Russia is given just as an example, being part of some statistics that show how similar tactics were adopted by Romania and Russia, as far as some delicate social issues are concerned. Even so, the subtext may imply that, when correlated with certain connotative words, metaphors, or allusions to totalitarian regimes, Romania is closer to the Russian mentality that is perceived as being archaic and poorly educated. In this instance, notions such as "communism", "discrimination", or "stereotypes" become valid, if Russia is seen as a model in understanding how the Romanian mentality approaches the subject of sex education. In one of the articles, the author says that he tries to stay away from comparisons with Russia, using this language to show that, in fact, there are certain subtleties through which Romania could be perceived as being similar to Russia or Hungary which promoted some laws against the LGBTQ+ communities from their countries.

Talking about discrimination, in another article, the problem of bullying is mentioned, showing that Romania is right before Russia and Lithuania in some statistics. One last example that should be given here reflects on another issue that places Romania near Bulgaria, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine and that is the problem of abortions. Here an important connection is made with religion, highlighting that all these countries are Orthodox societies that promote religion classes in schools. Nevertheless, they do not promote health classes/sex education classes.

Limits and Discussions

This paper finds its validity as it tries to show how the Romanian identity is perceived in relation to a controversial subject such as sex education. When talking about designing such a research paper, it is always important to keep in mind that there are some limitations attached to it. In the case of this research, it needs to be mentioned that only one media outlet was analyzed, so there is a geographical limitation that this paper has: it only focuses on the Romanian environment during a specific timeframe. Talking about the methodological limitations, this paper focused primarily on the qualitative and quantitative content analysis and, consequently, the Romanian identity described in this study reflects only on how this media outlet perceived it. Furthermore, the research focused only on one journalistic genre, namely opinion writing, so for future research papers, news writing should be considered in order to see if the same features become prominent. The discussion regarding the limitations of a paper cannot stop here, as there is also at least one epistemological limitation attached to it: the results of this study must not be considered to be representative for the Romanian group identity in general, as only one media outlet and one journalistic genre were considered. Moreover, the timeframe chosen to analyze the articles may also influence the results and, thus, the features of the Romanian identity are representative only for this phase.

Coming back to the literature review of this paper, it should be mentioned that, in fact, the results of this study complete the findings of the other studies mentioned above. Even if different methodologies were used, all these studies suggest the importance of introducing sex education in schools. While the research papers presented before suggest through surveys the need for updating the curriculum, this study focuses on identity representation to emphasize this need. In a way, while the other studies focus on the effects of an old curriculum, this study focuses on the cause and, that is why, it becomes relevant, but also original (while in general

societies focus on the effects, the causes should be analyzed and understood).

As it could be seen, the studies regarding sex education highlight the same tension between the existence of studies focusing on the effects and the inexistence of studies focusing on the causes. Nevertheless, this paper is not only relevant for some important people involved in the decision-making process. In fact, it shows that each Romanian citizen is part of the problem, since mentalities need to be changed in order to reduce the contrasts between different social groups. This study is a moment of realization, as it shows how the media influences societies both positively and negatively: while perpetuating certain dichotomies present in a society, it also invites the citizens to act and to start addressing this issue by understanding their own vulnerabilities when thinking of sex education.

Conclusions

This research paper aimed to analyze the way in which *Republica* tackled the subject of sex education and how the Romanian identity was constructed when associating the topic of sex education with other salient issues present in Romania. As visible from the analysis, sex education is just a starting point to examine other problems related to religion and religious mentality, gender and gender equality, *locus* and its influence on education and politics and the attitude of citizens towards the *status quo*. This is how the study responded to the first research question. For the second research question, the study showed that when comparing the topics associated with sex education, some specific frames were revealed, mainly the responsibility frame and the human interest frame. For the responsibility frame, *Republica* created a call-to-action through which not only the politicians are to do something for the country, but it was shown that, in fact, every citizen has their own duty in order to help the country evolve. As the topic of sex education is a very delicate one in Romania because of the alarming statistics, the journalists used the human interest frame to humanize specific stories. In a limited number of cases, some articles used the morality frame, emphasizing the religious aspect involved in this whole problem, either by giving credit to the Orthodox conceptualization or, more prominently, by putting it in contrast with the need to action (the responsibility frame used here again). In this way, many articles pendulated on this thin line of the conflict frame so that they could show some divergent realms: religion and evolutionism, technology and medievalism, parents and authorities, parents and specialists.

As far as the third research question is concerned, it is arguable that there were many nuances describing the Romanian group identity when correlating it with the topic of sex education. The main point is that this identity is seen as being a contrastive one, bringing together elements of archaism and modernism. However, the negative aspects prevail, as the society still relies on some religious principles through which sex education is seen as having a negative impact on the pupils. Another important aspect was related to how gender was perceived in Romania, separating the two biological genders: females who are victims and need help and males who are aggressors and need to be silenced. In this way, an enormous gap is created between these identities which is made even more prominent if the urban/rural aspect is considered. In this sense, women from the rural areas were perceived as being even more vulnerable.

The last research question focused on the main features that construct the Romanian identity from the perspective of the subject of sex education. Apart from the mentions made above regarding religion, gender, and politics, other semantic associations discovered in the articles showed in a more obvious manner how technology and archaism are two attributes of this heterogeneous identity: while being an ashamed identity, thinking of chastity as the ultimate goal in the children's lives, the children watch pornography on the Internet and are exposed to online harrasments and objectification. For the Romanian identity, however controversial it may sound, words like "abuse", "discrimination", "violence", "shame", "innocence", "empowerment", and "education" might coexist.

Talking about the hypotheses, the first one was validated, as sex education was associated a lot with religion and politics. Here it needs to be added that strong correlations were also made with gender and, in some cases, with the place of residence. The second hypothesis was partially true, as the morality frame was used to show how decisions were sometimes taken in a country that promotes a religious mentality founded on the premise of chastity. Nevertheless, the responsibility frame was seen as being more prominent. However, the politicians did not take the right decisions for the country as they were relying a lot on their personal beliefs. In this sense, each citizen was invited through a call-to-action to do something to help the country progress. The third hypothesis was again partially true, as the Romanian identity was seen as being rooted in some archaic values, while also preserving some nuances of modernism, even though these nuances were not positive (using the Internet for the wrong reasons). Moreover, the politicians did not focus on the progress Romania made, as

this topic seemed to bring forward their dogmatic beliefs, rather than their role as representatives who should seek the good of all citizens.

Some final remarks need to be made at this point in order to link this present study with future research papers that explore the same area. To support the theoretical and practical advancement, it is valuable to focus on some key results demonstrated through the present study, the first one being the dichotomic understanding of the topic of sex education. Considering the analyzed articles within the given timeframe, Romanians adopt one of the two opposing viewpoints when it comes to speaking about aspects related to sex education, everything being mainly linked to the antinomy between tradition and progress. Moreover, many of the analyzed articles speak of the vulnerable position in which women find themselves, as they are abused physically and mentally, being represented as victims by the journalists. Their vulnerability increases if layers such as religion (women lead men into temptation) or place of residence (women living in rural areas) are added. One final key result that is worth mentioning, if we are to consider identity representation, is how the topic of sex education is linked to other exposed categories in which the relationship between superior and subordinate becomes relevant, thinking here of others, apart from women: men represented as the aggressors, abused children, minors with access to the Internet, or other gender identities that find themselves in a delicate position, as they are not represented by the strong biological dichotomy male-female that is the only one validated by many Romanians, according to the analyzed articles.

This study showed in many ways how starting from a narrow topic such as sex education, the Romanian identity can be understood in its complexity. This study is only a starting point in understanding the importance of correlating many domains in order to be able to help solve some issues present in today's society.

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