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### **Article Title:**

'Wealthy gay couples buying babies produced in India by poor womb-women': Audience interpretations of transnational surrogacy in TV news

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## **‘Wealthy gay couples buying babies produced in India by poor womb-women’: Audience interpretations of transnational surrogacy in TV news**

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### **Abstract**

Surrogacy is beginning to generate public debate and the way the media approach it may have negative effects on social attitudes towards gay parenting. The news media play a key role in informing society, especially about topics such as surrogacy, of which most audiences have no direct experience. The aim of our research is to explore opinion formation of surrogacy and gay parenting by analysing the audience interpretation of a TV news story in Spain. To do this we conducted four focus groups that were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis based on the discourse produced by the participants. The results show that the framing strategies used in the news story contribute to advocating an attitude of repudiation towards surrogacy, with an adverse sentiment also extending to homosexual couples who wish to become parents. This leads us to discuss the role of media in shaping public opinion and the resulting potential consequences in the case of surrogacy and gay parenting.

**Keywords:** Surrogacy, Gay parenting, Women’s commodification, Outsourcing pregnancy, Media audience, Framing effects, Attitudes formation

**Running header:** Audience interpretations of surrogacy in TV news

## **Introduction**

Attitudes towards homosexuality reveal a growing acceptance worldwide (Pew Research Center, 2013, 2017; Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; Twenge et al., 2016), mainly due to the progressive endorsement of LGBTQ rights and the legal recognition of same-sex marriage (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013). However, the same cannot be said when other components of gay men's lives enter the discussion, one of which is parenting. According to contemporary studies, the majority of Western societies are in favour of same-sex marriages but remain resistant to same-sex parenting (Webb et al., 2017; Gato & Fontaine, 2016; EOS Gallup Europe, 2003). Results show that gay male parenting provokes more negative attitudes than lesbian parenting, and it is also linked with negative opinions on reproductive techniques (Ioverno et al., 2017). Gay parenting and the means to achieve it are triggering public debate. In order to become parents, many gay couples (also heterosexual couples and singles) resort to surrogacy, an assisted reproduction technique, on which there is as yet no clear social position (Constantinidis & Cook, 2012; Wennberg et al., 2016; Norton et al., 2013). This is largely due to the general population's unfamiliarity with the technique, added to a lack of interpersonal contact with same-sex parented families (Costa et al., 2015).

The media play an important role in shaping audience perception and judgement of social concerns, particularly in issues of which the general public has insufficient knowledge or no direct experience (Happer & Philo, 2013; Dowler, 2003). In our study we focus on the social attitudes formed by television news programmes in Spain regarding the use of surrogacy, specifically by homosexual couples. While TV news programmes may aim to produce objective and informative content, they also construct discourses about reality that might lead to the promoting of certain normative practices. The framing effects are important in our study, as the way in which a certain piece of information is framed influences the perception

of the audience about the meanings attributed to the narrated elements, and, therefore, in their behaviour or attitudes towards them.

***The debate around surrogates: human vessels or solidarity women?***

We understand surrogacy as the process by which a woman gestates a baby on behalf of prospective parent(s) who cannot carry a pregnancy to term without help, whether these are single individuals or couples, heterosexual or homosexual. In the process, the egg is fertilized through in vitro fertilization (IVF) and then placed in the surrogate's womb. There are two types of surrogacy: *traditional* (or genetic) *surrogacy* and *gestational surrogacy*. In traditional surrogacy, the surrogate's own egg is fertilized by the intended father's sperm, making her the genetic mother. In gestational surrogacy, the egg is provided by the intended mother or a donor, whereby the surrogate has no genetic connection to the child. In both cases the intention is that the baby born through this technique becomes the son or daughter of the prospective parent(s) and the surrogate will not be the mother of the baby to which she gives birth. This is established by a prior agreement between the parties involved, that is, the woman who will be carrying and giving birth to the baby (surrogate), and the person or people who will be the parent(s) of the baby. The agreement is usually handled through an agency acting as an intermediary. There are, therefore, two types of surrogacy agreements depending on the nature of its retribution: in *altruistic surrogacy* a woman volunteers to carry a pregnancy for intended parent(s) while gaining no monetary profit in return beyond reimbursement of expenses associated with pregnancy and birth. *Commercial surrogacy*, in contrast, has a profit-making purpose, and the surrogate, in addition to pregnancy-related expenses, receives a monetary compensation for her services.

There is significant open debate around the use of surrogacy, with opinions strongly in favour or against, regarding regulating or prohibiting it. In Spain there are various platforms that

support its legalization (mainly formed by people who have achieved their family through surrogacy or who wish to do so), and associations linked to the LGBT movement that also back it. However, the most vociferously against are certain feminist groups and pro-family organizations closely tied to the Catholic Church. This is one of the few debates in which feminism and the Catholic Church coincide. Nevertheless, the feminist position centres on an ethical position, strongly criticizing exploitation of a woman's body. They maintain that a woman's body cannot be hired out, either partially or totally, and believe that surrogacy is not an assisted reproduction technique but an example of "extreme obstetric violence" (Larrañeta, 2016). Meanwhile, the pro-family collective takes a moral stance in favour of the traditional social construct of the family, i.e. they reject any technique that entails the dissociation of husband and wife, and claim the right that the child must "be conceived, carried in the womb, brought into the world and brought up within [heterosexual] marriage" (Ratzinger, 1987).

The major opposing viewpoints can be divided into arguments on welfare, exploitation and commodification (Humbyrd, 2009). However, the complexity of surrogacy is also surrounded by issues such as neo-colonialism, transnationality, women oppression, neoliberalism and heteronormative routines of reproduction (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 2014).

One of the major concerns regarding surrogacy is welfare. Those who oppose it believe that it may damage the child or the surrogate —the "harm argument" (Agnafors, 2014). This argument puts forward the prejudicial consequences of surrogacy and the potential effects that the entire process, and in particular the handing over of the baby, may have on the surrogates, their family members, as well as on the babies themselves (Tieu, 2009). Apart from the significant health cost involved for pregnant women, academic research indicates that the only major complications of surrogacy are ethical or legal (Brinsden, 2003). More specifically, most of these studies on long-term effects of surrogacy, including longitudinal studies and conducted in different cultural contexts, show that:

1) In general, the experience of surrogacy was important and very positive for most surrogates, who were well-motivated and rarely had difficulty separating from the child. They did not express regrets about their involvement in surrogacy, nor did they appear to experience any major psychological problems as a result of the surrogacy arrangement (Söderström-Anttila et al., 2016; Ruiz-Robledillo & Moya-Albiol, 2016; Lamm, 2012; Jadvá et al., 2014; Jadvá et al., 2003; van den Akker, 2003; MacCallum et al., 2003).

2) The own children of surrogates do not experience any negative consequences as a result of their mother's decision to be a surrogate (Jadvá & Imrie, 2014).

3) Children born by gestational surrogacy do not differ in their levels of psychological adjustment compared to naturally conceived children (or through egg donation); further, the absence of a genetic and/or gestational link between parents and their child does not have a negative impact on parent–child relationships or the psychological wellbeing of mothers, fathers or children (Ruiz-Robledillo & Moya-Albiol, 2016; Golombok et al., 2011; Bos & Van Balen, 2010; Shelton et al., 2009; Golombok et al., 2006).

4) The impact of disclosure is generally positive. The majority of surrogacy parents tell their child how they were born. Surrogacy families maintained good relationships with the surrogate over time and children felt positive about their surrogate mother and their surrogacy birth (Blake et al., 2016; Jadvá et al., 2012; Readings et al., 2011).

The exploitation argument is the claim that commercial surrogacy is morally objectionable as it is exploitative for women (Panitch, 2013; Wilkinson, 2003). Feminist scholars state that “we cannot ignore the fact that commercial surrogacy of maternity is fed by a feminization of poverty and counter-geographies of globalization” (De Miguel & Nuño, 2016). This argument clearly alludes to specific cases of commercial surrogacy in developing countries. However, some scholars consider it a weak argument for the banning of commercial surrogacy, since a) employment alternatives for potential surrogates in these countries may be

even more exploitative and damaging than paid surrogacy (Humbyrd, 2009; Wilkinson, 2003), and b) it does not apply to every case in developed countries. These scholars argue that even if we accept that transnational commercial surrogacy is often exploitative, the exploitation itself is not a direct consequence of the particular practice of commercial surrogacy, but rather of neo-colonialist processes (Kirby, 2014), that is, the socio-political, economic and cultural contexts between East and West that perpetuate a disparate distribution of power and wealth.

Lastly, the commodification argument is among the most prevalent from a feminist perspective to question the practice of surrogacy (Twine, 2015; Pande, 2014; Kroløkke & Pant, 2012; Scott, 2009, Goslinga-Roy, 2000). Commodification is the action or process of treating something as a mere product that may be bought and sold. Women's rights activists argue that surrogacy is a paradigm of oppression of women, as their bodies are reduced to mere baby-producing machines (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 2014). In fact, this argument holds that commercial surrogacy commodifies both the reproductive capacity of the surrogate and the rights of the newborn child, declaring it unethical to treat human beings as resources to satisfy another person's own interests or ends (Orlov & Orlov, 2007). For them, wombs for hire pose a real risk of people trafficking, similar to sexual exploitation or organ trafficking (Pande, 2010a; Wilkinson, 2003). From this perspective, they also warn that this practice is laced with the eugenic notions of genetic belonging and the genetic selection of the perfect offspring (Pande, 2016; Qadeer, 2009). In this regard, it might be understood that the commodification argument is rooted in the debate about the reasons behind surrogacy. The commodification argument centres on whether the surrogacy is governed by a single motivation: that of the intended parent(s) who want a baby. Furthermore, greater emphasis is placed on the fact that it is a desire, not a right. Under this dialectic, the surrogacy process becomes an end for satisfying the desires and motivations of the intended parent(s)



(empowered subjects), which turns the surrogate into a vehicle at the service of others (non-empowered, reified subject), her womb into a baby factory (commodified body), and the baby into a transaction product (commodity).

However, some authors believe the commodification argument against surrogacy is deontological in principle (Orlov & Orlov, 2007), that is, understanding surrogacy as a phenomenon within the labour arena and analysing it from the hypothesis that its nature is grounded in duty and obligation. Thus, this scenario places surrogates as passive victims of the surrogacy process (DasGupta & Dasgupta, 2014; Pande, 2010b; Scott, 2009). Those that argue against, however, consider the possibility of recognizing the surrogate as an empowered subject. Many women who have been surrogates reject the feminist arguments, which detract agency from them as women, and instead argue in favour of their capacity to make personal choices, to have their own valid and legitimate motivations and, in particular, of asserting their right to make decisions regarding their own bodies (Bromfield, 2016; AGSE, 2015). On this last point, the commodification argument questions whether women are being given control over their bodies, or whether they are being exploited for their individual body parts (Banerjee, 2010). Furthermore, feminist scholars wonder whether surrogates feel freely motivated or obligated due to their feminized poverty conditions and social status (De Miguel & Nuño, 2016; DasGupta & Dasgupta, 2014; Deonandan et al., 2012); and, if freely motivated, whether this is selfless love or money (Pande, 2011; Anleu, 1992). This argument refers directly to cases of transnational commercial surrogacy in poor countries such as India, where there is no consensus about whether a financial incentive may be a legitimate motive or not. Nevertheless, research carried out in western contexts has shown that the main reasons that lead women to become surrogates are altruistic: the wish to help a childless couple, selflessness, personal satisfaction, and enjoyment of pregnancy (Jadva et al., 2014; Imrie & Jadva, 2014; Markens, 2012; van den Akker, 2003; Kleinpeter &

Hohman, 2000). However, financial reasons were also noted (Söderström-Anttila et al., 2016), especially in commercial surrogacy.

### ***Outsourcing pregnancy: The case of India***

As surrogacy is not permitted in the majority of countries (Pande, 2010a), many intended parents resort to transnational surrogacy. Transnational surrogacy is defined as the process of gestational surrogacy in which the surrogate lives in a different country to the intended parent(s), whereby the prospective parent(s) must travel to her country to undertake the surrogacy process (Ruiz-Robledillo & Moya-Albiol, 2016). In most cases, this lack of ties between the parties encourages transnational surrogates to agree to surrogacy as a commercial act, money-making motivated. In transnational commercial surrogacy, Indian surrogates became increasingly popular among intended parents in the last decade, especially in Western nations. Permissive laws, an English speaking environment, well-equipped private clinics, qualified doctors and cheaper services attracted intended parents to India (Pande, 2015; Twine, 2015; Kumar et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the main reason contributing to this phenomenon was the relatively low cost of the process, particularly when compared to other places where transnational commercial surrogacy is also legal and recurrent, such as California (United States). The entire cost of the surrogacy process in the United States is roughly between €70,000 and €130,000, while in India the process costs a third of that (Pande, 2014; 2011; Vora, 2013; Bailey, 2011). This made India the main destination for reproductive tourism (Panitch, 2013). In fact, it became the largest provider of surrogates in the last decade (Agnafors, 2014). According to estimates, more than 25,000 babies were born through surrogacy arrangements in India every year, at least half of them as the offspring of Westerners (Desai, 2012; Shetty, 2012).

Feminist scholars denounced that the growing demand of surrogates in India encouraged the development of a commercial surrogacy industry: a growing business of reproductive tourism with negative consequences for Indian women (Rudrappa & Collins, 2015; Pande, 2015; Deomampo, 2013). They suggest this is the result of an acceptance of a neoliberal system, pushed to the extreme, which is manifested in the industrialization of reproduction and the outsourcing of pregnancies (Twine, 2015; Shetty, 2012; Rudrappa, 2010; Smerdon, 2008). International outsourcing of services is a process deployed in the neoliberal economic model in which the fulfilment of some services, such as technical support or customer service, is moved to poorer countries (Global South) in order to cut costs (Kedia & Lahiri, 2007). This complex situation heightens the controversy surrounding inequalities between the Global North and the Global South within the arguments used against surrogacy: infant trafficking, commodification, women oppression and exploitation, wealthy westerners' consumption supplied by poor countries, etc. Of special note are the deplorable conditions for women in surrogacy clinics in India, described as "baby factories" or "baby farms" where they live in overcrowded conditions with the sole function of eating and producing babies (Kumar et al., 2013; Kroløkke & Pant, 2012; Riggs & Due, 2010).

However, a prohibitionist movement is now originating from Asia. Countries such as India, Thailand and Nepal, which have allowed this technique for years, are starting to limit access to surrogacy in order to protect women from exploitation. In India, for instance, the Government has recently approved a bill that bans and penalizes commercial surrogacy services. "Surrogacy Bill" bans gay people, foreigners, single parents and unmarried couples from having children through surrogacy. Some have criticized the law, saying it takes away the rights of women, discriminates against gay people and could lead to an illegal industry (BBC, 2016; The Indian Express, 2016). Meanwhile, it should be noted that commercial surrogacy is still legal in other places, such as Ukraine or California.

### ***The role of the media***

Homosexuality is represented in Spanish media through an approach that shows its progressive normalization, and is generally integrated as another element of Spain's collective identity (Carratalá, 2011; Guasch, 2011). However, there are new subtle ways of maintaining a certain opposition discourse, which is no longer situated in the etiology of homosexuality, but resituated around the practices of homosexual people. Riggs (2012), in his analysis on how LGBT people are represented in the media, detected certain 'paradoxes of visibility'. In direct relation to a greater appearance of LGBT people in the news, consistent renegotiations are emerging about the legitimate nature or the social acceptability of many of their practices. This is also reinforced by the limited tropes available in the media and the homonormative media representations of LGBT individuals (Ng, 2013). Riggs discusses the negative effects of homonormative representation whereby the type of homosexual represented as legitimately valid is one that most resembles the heterosexual. In this regard, Domínguez & Montalbán (2014) observe that the media prefer to assimilate the experience of gay parenting in heterosexual relationships, minimizing the presence of differential elements. Here, surrogacy is presented as a differentiating component, located outside the norm, by highlighting the biological limitations of homosexual male couples and their need to seek alternatives beyond their relationship in order to become parents (Riggs & Due, 2013). Furthermore, Attribution Theory puts forward the hypothesis that heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality are more negative when they are attributed to controllable causes (Frias-Navarro et al., 2015). This gives rise to a perception that surrogacy is a controllable desire of homosexual couples, opening the debate between rights and desires.

Research carried out to date indicates that surrogacy is generally constructed in the media as a social problem (Markens, 2012), framing it as a "buying babies" process, and affordable

only to well-off people (van den Akker et al., 2016). Despite the fact that the largest group currently using gestational surrogacy services are heterosexual couples (Norton et al., 2015; Crawshaw et al., 2012), the media mainly use gay couple cases to construct their news stories around surrogacy (van den Akker et al., 2016).

As we see, the situation is complex and involves many actors, contexts and factors. Nevertheless, news media, overall, fail to reflect complexities due to their news routines (Becker & Vlad, 2009) and limit the information through which audiences might understand these issues. Having to synthesize information to fit TV airtime or newspaper space may lead to journalistic bias (Hamilton, 2004). The Agenda Setting Theory suggests that the media do not reflect reality as it is, but instead filter and shape it to suit a political agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Meanwhile, the Gatekeeping Theory also plays a role in the selective processes of agenda building, since the journalists select specific aspects and display only certain images that confirm their own criteria in judging a specific news story, while disregarding others counter to this viewpoint (Griffin, 2011, Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). This might convey a partial vision to the audience that distorts the global reality of the issues. There has been extensive discussion as to the extent to which the media may influence the dynamics of attitude formation by serving up only a partial picture of a complex reality (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Three reasonings stand out in close connection to the case study:

First, the media play a key role in informing society, especially in topics of which audiences have no direct knowledge or personal experience (Happer & Philo, 2013). Scholars have found that news media have more potential to influence public opinion with media coverage of unobtrusive issues (Bryant & Oliver, 2009), that is, issues with which people do not have direct personal experience: “because of the lack of direct experience, individuals must rely on mass media for information and interpretation of these issues” (Hester & Gibson, 2007: 301).

Second, based on Framing Theory, Entman (1993) explained that to frame is to select certain aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a media text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. That is, frames are outlines created by journalists that steer the way events are understood and narrated. Furthermore, the initial frames of a key event tend to determine how matters referring to the same subject will be presented in the future (Sádaba, 2006). Shanto Iyengar (1994) explored the effects of episodic and thematic framing. He explained that the episodic news frames are embodied as an event-oriented report and illustrate public issues in terms of concrete instances, removed from their context, while thematic framing presents collective or general evidence. He found that there is a preponderance of episodic frames in television news coverage. This may have two effects on the audience: a) reducing synecdochically the entire subject matter to the case represented, and b) promoting and guiding attributions of responsibility (Iyengar, 1990).

Third, and last, the second level of agenda-setting considers how the agenda of attributes affects public opinion (McCombs & Evatt, 1995). The terminology used to describe a particular event would be an example of intentionally assigning attributes. For example, it is not the same to use the concept “wombs for hire” than “surrogacy”. Likewise, the media may also promote a public discourse of non-acceptance on a particular issue by introducing it as a social problem (Best, 2010): guiding the selection and presentation of news reports by using a frame emphasizing the negative elements –the “problem frame” (Altheide, 1997), drawing a picture of victims and perpetrators, and removing alternative solutions from public debate (Happer & Philo, 2013).

### **Research purpose and questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore attitude formation about surrogacy and gay parenting by analysing audience interpretation of a TV news story in Spain. According to the barometer of the Sociological Research Centre, 86.8% of the Spanish population says it finds out about the news from the television, compared to the press (45%) or the radio (35%) as complementary media (CIS, 2016). Television news shows are among the largest audience programmes and contain descriptions of the issues that most concern Spanish society, with a global media audience of public service broadcasters of over 8.5 million viewers, according to Kantar Media (2016).

However, there are no significant studies about the reception/interpretation of television news stories, especially on issues related to surrogacy and gay parenting that would enable us to understand the significant contribution of TV news in the formation of social attitudes. With a focus on a news story about gay parenting through surrogacy, the research questions addressed by this study are:

RQ1. What are the values transmitted in the news story about surrogacy?

RQ2. How does "surrogacy" intersect with "gay parenting" in the audience interpretation?

RQ3. Does interpretation differ according to the age of the audience?

## **Method**

### ***Research design and sampling***

Four focus groups were constituted with between 6 and 10 participants of Spanish nationality and of both genders (17 females and 16 males). The groups were divided according to an age variable, since the literature review indicated generational differences concerning the acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex parenting (Pew Research Center, 2017; Baiocco et al, 2013). Thus, two groups of adults (40-60 years) were put together and two of young people (20-30 years). The focus groups were held in the two largest Spanish cities: 2 in

Madrid (17 participants) and 2 more in Barcelona (16 participants), to provide discursive diversity based on the reference territory of the participants. (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Composition and distribution of the focus groups by profiles

GROUP	AGE	LOCATION	GENDER	
			Male	Female
FG1	Adults	Barcelona	5	5
FG2	Young people	Barcelona	1	5
FG3	Adults	Madrid	5	4
FG4	Young people	Madrid	5	3

Several sociodemographic aspects were taken into account when recruiting participants. A strong balance was maintained between the occupational status variables (students, employed people, retired and unemployed) and a decision was taken to prioritize a profile of secondary and university educational level, reducing the diversity of occupations to facilitate dialogue among participants. It was decided to split the groups into young people and adults to detect potential differences, in accordance with previous studies that indicated that age has an impact on attitudes towards homosexuality and gay parenting, with elders having a stronger prejudice than younger (Gerhards, 2010; Baiocco et al., 2013).

### ***Materials***

In a previous study, Olga van den Akker et al. (2016) detected three main focuses in the media framing of transnational surrogacy: gay parenting, legal complications and buying



babies (affordable only to wealthy people). Susan Markens (2012) also pointed out the media fascination with surrogacy focuses in particular on news stories about the Indian surrogacy industry. To study the participants' attitude formation, we used a Spanish news story about surrogacy that included all these key topics. The selected news story was broadcast at prime time on the Spanish public television channel (La 1), which is the television news programme with the largest audience in Spain (Kantar Media, 2016). The news story explains that surrogacy is illegal in Spain and therefore there are more and more Spanish couples travelling to other countries, such as India, to have a child. The news anchor assures that most are homosexual couples, and as such the news story is illustrated through the case of a Spanish gay couple from Barcelona who travel to India to have their children in a clinic that works with Indian surrogates. In the story, the main argument revolves around the desire of homosexual couples to be parents and the objectifying consequences that the technique of surrogacy may have on the women, who are perceived as mere wombs for hire.

This unit of analysis, "selected on the basis of typicality, uniqueness, success, and so forth" (Merriam, 2009: 41), was the perfect basis for generating discussion about surrogacy and gay parenting. The relevance is also evident if we consider Yin's definition (2013: 18): "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". In fact, the case study enables a holistic description and explanation of the phenomenon, and its contextual interpretation (Creswell, 2012).

### ***Advantages of focus group research***

The choice of the focus group method responds to the need to compile social meanings around a specific topic and to understand the role media consumption plays in this social process. Firstly, unlike the survey, this qualitative reception analysis method enables the

obtaining of responses that are not conditioned by the questions. Secondly, and unlike in-depth interviews, it provides for the identifying of a greater variety of perspectives of the research topic and observing first-hand the discussion or explanation of these topics through group interaction, encouraging comprehension beyond that of mere description (Hennink, 2014).

In fact, by encouraging interaction between psychological configuration and the specific social behaviours of group members through a safe environment, the focus group method encourages an appropriate spontaneity and flexibility for exploring the topic, as well as mitigating the interviewer's pressure and rationalization of responses (Madriz, 2003). It is through this interaction that the data generated take on a significant value, as they provide for the emergence of reasons and construction modes of cultural meanings while, in parallel, their synergetic nature offers evidence of the degree of consensus and diversity of opinions among participants (Morgan, 1997).

The focus group method that uses quota sampling guarantees a substantial representativeness in line with the analytical variables considered important, despite the fact that an analysis of the data collected –which in no way are statistically transferable to the population as a whole– may be more complex as they were generated in the collective dialogue through which the reality is reconstructed.

The focus group, completed through a TV news piece, “offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009: 50). Unlike other methodological approaches, it enables a contextualization of the media and cultural experience and further development of the interpretation and understanding of the audiences that may give rise to generalizations in which the audience itself participates (Stake, 2011).

When carrying out the focus group sessions non-directive strategies and a semi-structured discussion guide were deployed. The planned dynamics evolved in two blocks: the first part of the discussion guide contained open questions to encourage discussion among participants after viewing the informative piece about the news story, while the second part explored in further depth how participants perceived the media's discursive construction of gay parenting through surrogacy.

Once the four sessions had been carried out, the focus groups were transcribed in their original language (Spanish) and then translated into English by a professional translator. A qualitative content analytical approach was applied as the method to examine both the explicit content of the text (manifest language and word use), as well as the latent meanings (Neuendorf, 2016).

## **Results – Analysis**

Initially both groups of participants (adults and young people) indicated there was a lack of data and contextual information that prevented them from forming an evidence-based opinion on what was being explained in the news.

*It's hard for me to judge, I don't know if I'm the right person to judge these things, I don't know how to interpret it. Whether a womb for hire is right or not, whether it's the only option they have, whether it's right, wrong, if anyone loses out, whether it's an obligation for a desperate woman to earn some money, whether she's going to be affected for the rest of her life I don't know, I don't know how to interpret it, it's really hard for me (Male, FG3).*

Even so, overall both groups agreed on rejecting surrogacy after seeing the news programme. The reason that created most repudiation was the situation of the Indian women portrayed in the news whereby participants related to an unjust exploitation of women in situations of

poverty. However, as they made a more detailed analysis of the news they saw a negative message about the homosexual collective that they had not detected initially. Negative, because the message the news conveys, according to the participants, is that gays are taking advantage of the women's poverty in countries such as India and are behaving carelessly, with little consideration for the conditions in which these women live and only concerned with achieving their goal of having a baby:

*You might start to think the homosexual is bad because he's doing this* (Female, FG2).

*It's like saying, look what gays do to become parents* (Male, FG3).

*Yes, it's true that La 1 (TV channel) is putting out the news programme with the homosexual issue, as if to say: look what homosexuals do...* (Male, FG2).

Meanwhile, aside from the exploitation situation, the group of young people say they understand the desire of homosexual couples to have a child, and the huge obstacles involved. This also occurs with a part of the group of adults. However, unlike the group of young people, another part of the group of adults states they are against the idea that homosexual couples should have children, either by surrogacy or otherwise.

*That they have kids... mmm the same sex, well, I'm not going to give an opinion on that because I don't know to what extent the child might be damaged, this is a very, very ...complex issue in my opinion* (Female, FG3).

*Two men, I don't think it's natural, at least to me it's weird, that they want to adopt a child* (Male, FG3).

### ***Interpretation by the young people's group***

When the participants were asked to make a spontaneous interpretation of the news story their initial reactions were of poor engagement. Basically, what came across was an attitude

of non-interference regarding decisions or actions by people from other countries, declining to produce ethical or moral evaluations of them and avoiding controversial issues. This discourse then shifted as the focus group developed, with more critical attitudes transpiring as the debate flourished.

When discussing the news story content participants shared the sentiment that a partial and fragmented vision is put forward, which they interpreted as a lack of important information.

They note that the deficit of data and contextual information prevents them from forming a balanced opinion on what is being explained in the news story. They blame a lack of data that would enable a framing of the volume of births achieved through this method:

*They don't talk about the number of transactions every year in the embassies, or the adoption rate in Spain or abroad, or what they think is legal or illegal, or adoption and wombs for hire (Male, FG4).*

They were also surprised by the fact that there was no reflection of the viewpoint of the women taking part in this process, which –according to the participants– means it is impossible to interpret properly the news story or form an opinion about it:

*What I think's missing from this news story is what makes a woman from these countries sell her womb, or rather her baby, I mean, there must be a story behind this that makes her do it (Female, FG4).*

The young people in the groups also point out the stereotypical image of homosexuals.

*They've chosen them deliberately; they're the classic case (Female, FG4).*

During the discussion a change was noted in the young people's opinion. First of all, they evaluated the different situations that appear in the news story: that of the homosexual parents who are adopting and that of the mothers who are hiring out their wombs. On the one

hand they express certain sympathy towards the difficulty of couples who wish to have a child and are unable to do so due to legal obstacles, but most of all they stress the resulting injustice for the Indian women who choose to hire out their wombs. They also stress the cost of this situation for these women, both emotionally and in terms of health.

*And I think it's a bit sad that some people who want to have a child and don't want to adopt have to exploit the poverty of other people in the third world, for peanuts. Because they're also risking the lives of these women in unhealthy conditions, all because they want to have a child and if they can't have one they could always adopt. There are children who don't have parents... (Male, FG2).*

Other participants expressed their non-acceptance of this practice by criticizing the depravity resulting from turning maternity into a business:

*Whether it's gay or non-gay, wombs for hire I think is a business, and in the end it's a degradation of what it means to have a baby (Female, FG4).*

Some participants also called the attitude of parents who decide to adopt through this route frivolous and unnatural:

*I think a womb for hire is a whim. You've got a partner and we all know that a male and a female have offspring and two males don't, you have to accept the rules that nature enforces on you. So wanting your offspring to have part of your genes, that's a whim (Male, FG4).*

However, in one of the groups, as the discussion progressed, participants began to change their minds. A more detailed analysis of the news story led them to perceive a negative stance towards homosexuals, which they had not picked up initially. The news story, they say, is focused solely on homosexuals, when it is highly likely that there are also heterosexual couples who choose this process. At the end of the analysis several participants ended up

stating that the news story has a clearly biased approach that they had not seen at the beginning:

*Now that I've heard everyone's opinion and having analysed the news story a bit more in-depth, I think, yes, they have focused it on the area they want. Because usually when you talk about wombs for hire and when you talk about poor countries and what's going on in India, people identify with them and will say that ethically this isn't right. And here I see that they have highlighted gays as well as letting the spokesperson of an association speak about how unethical it is (...) They only let one side speak and they're trying to sell us the idea that with money people can get what they want (Male, FG4).*

### ***Interpretation by the group of adults***

In the initial examination the participants' attention is captured by the fact that there is a business behind adoption. They also underline the arbitrariness and society's lack of values, the difference between rich and poor countries and the exploitation of the women who are hiring out their wombs.

*It's as if children are a business, to start off with. There is a huge business behind adoption; it's a big money spinner. And the countries, I mean the ones that do nothing, are part of it, in a way (Male, FG1).*

The news story focuses solely on homosexuals, which is perceived as a clear lack of information. The absence of references to heterosexual couples implies it is a practice that only involves gay couples, thus painting a specific picture of this group.

*The whole time going on about gays, gays. They haven't stopped. They must have said it twenty thousand times* (Female, FG1).

During the in-depth analysis they identified stereotypes relating to the poverty of poor countries versus rich countries, with the situation of the woman in poor countries and, in particular, with the negative image of the homosexual community.

The image of the woman who hires out her womb is intimately related to the poverty of underdeveloped countries and the subhuman conditions in which a lot of people are living:

*It shows a lot of hardship: human suffering is what it conveys* (Female, FG1).

The image of the homosexual community is considered to be negatively portrayed and clearly stereotyped. Negative, as the message that the news story transmits, according to participants, is that gays exploit these women's poverty in countries such as India and are acting irresponsibly, with no regard for the conditions in which these women live and only concerned with achieving their goal of obtaining a child. This message is reinforced, according to the adults in the groups, through the fact that no heterosexual couples are portrayed and that the report only focuses on homosexual couples:

*They could have shown a heterosexual couple, not just mentioning them; they could have put the example of a heterosexual couple that does these things too like gays. It's like saying, look what gays do to become parents* (Female, FG3).

Meanwhile, the image portrayed of the gay community is also based on a series of stereotypes, such as how much money they have and how well they live.

*And they're wealthy gays, because two unemployed gays for sure couldn't pay that* (Male, FG3).



A diversity of opinions is detected among the adults. One part of the participants states they sympathize with a couple who wishes to have a baby and the need to do so through surrogacy. However, another part is totally against this kind of practice, as they consider it an abuse. Furthermore, a number of participants are also against the fact that homosexual couples should have children.

Those that are in favour of surrogacy have an understanding of people who wish to adopt. Some say they know of similar experiences to those shown in the news programme, and say that when they end up at this option it is because they have tried all other alternatives unsuccessfully.

*The thing is that the need to adopt is much stronger than what it's going to cost you.*

*There are people who have taken out second mortgages to have a child (Male, FG1).*

Another argument in favour of the practice is the example of certain famous people who have also used surrogacy, despite having a lot more resources than the rest of the population. Furthermore, they say, you should consider the future of the child adopted, who would grow up in a developed country:

*The sad thing about all this is that there's money involved isn't there? But then you think about the welfare of the children, don't you? How well they'll be looked after and how lucky they'll be (Female, FG1).*

Most participants are against this practice. One of the issues that generated most repudiation is the situation of the Indian women portrayed in the news.

*Living in unhealthy conditions, in a state of abandonment... I find it hard to accept that you want to have a child and you see how they have them all piled up and overcrowded and then you go off with the baby and don't think about them any more (Male, FG3).*

The vast inequality between the conditions of the Indian women that hire out their wombs and parents that decide to produce a child through surrogacy is condemned by many participants. These inequalities are perceived as a demonstration of how developed countries abuse poor countries, which participants describe as hypocritical. Money talks, they say, even for bypassing legislation.

*You get the feeling that... for people with money, nothing's a problem (Male, FG1).*

By extension, this disapproval is also demonstrated towards the people who lend themselves to this kind of practice and their longing to have a child does not exempt them from criticism.

*I'm not blaming so much the person who volunteers, I blame the consumer, maybe it's cruel to call it a product, but this is how they treat it, like a product... it's scandalous that people can be a part of this (Male, FG3).*

Lastly, one part is unconvinced about homosexual couples having children, whether through surrogacy or not.

*That they have kids... mmm the same sex, well, I'm not going to give an opinion on that because I don't know to what extent the child might be damaged, this is a very, very ...complex issue in my opinion (Female, FG3).*

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Constant social renegotiations about the legitimate nature of homosexuality or social acceptability of many of its practices have led current media discourse to be oriented around homonormative representations. However, the fact that homosexual couples resort to techniques such as surrogacy to have children may highlight the limits established by homonormativity. The media play a fundamental role in influencing the way an audience will interpret this issue, thus forcing a need to analyse attitudes formed by audiences. This is the

purpose of this article and its results indicate new discourse strategies that question the practices of homosexual people and may have negative repercussions on the forming of social attitudes towards them.

When examining the news stories in the focus groups, the participants (audience) situated their positions between the dialectics of subjects who wish to be parents but cannot (gay couples) and other subjects who have the capacity to help them become parents but by doing so may be placed in a vulnerable situation (women as surrogates). This fact could be connected to the Agenda Setting and the Gatekeeper theories, as we will see next.

Both groups of participants (young people and adults) spotlight evidence that makes them believe the information presented is biased. That is, at first they detect the gatekeeper function of journalists. Even so, this does not prevent them from forming an opinion and positioning themselves according to their interpretation of the news story, which would be related to the Agenda-setting of attributes (McCombs & Evatt, 1995).

In accordance with previous studies (Gerhards, 2010; Baiocco et al., 2013), differences between generational groups are confirmed, indicating age as an influential variable on attitudes towards gay parenting, with elders having a stronger prejudice than younger. However, no significant differences were found between the age groups on their attitudes toward surrogacy.

After watching the news, most participants were against the practice of surrogacy. This could be related to the theories of media (and framing) effects. Not all actual cases of surrogacy are exploitative, but the way in which the media frames surrogacy as an exploitative practice may affect participants' attitudes towards surrogacy. This conclusion is also related to one of the issues that arises from the study by Markens (2012) of media discourse on transnational surrogacy: "Why do the media focus on India?". This question is particularly relevant, given that surrogacy also takes place in many other countries where the situation of surrogates is

totally different, such as Canada. The recurring selection of images of women in dreadful conditions (not because they are Indian, but because they live in poor conditions) to represent surrogacy, leads us to consider that the media discourse is seeking to construct a certain positioning within the audience through attributes related to exploitation.

By representing the situation of surrogates with examples of Indian women in vulnerability conditions, participants automatically attributed the responsibility of this situation to the people using the technique (*I blame the consumer* – Male, FG3). In this regard, the fact that news on surrogacy focus on cases of gay families (van den Akker et al., 2016) highlights a clear connection with the contributions of Iyengar (1990, 1994), who found that one of the most effective ways of guiding the attribution of responsibilities was through episode framing. Likewise, our results also suggest that this pattern of episodic framing may induce individuals to negative attitudes towards gay couples (*look what gays do to become parents* – Male, FG3; *You might start to think the homosexual is bad because he's doing this* –Female, FG2). The homosexual is therefore represented as an oppressor of these vulnerable subjects (*exploit the poverty of other people* – Male, FG2). Meanwhile, the fact that participants attribute the responsibility of the negative consequences of this phenomenon to homosexual couples still does not reflect adequately the reality of the phenomenon. In Spain, according to surrogacy agencies (León, 2015), around 1,400 couples decided to become parents using this technique in 2014, of whom about 80% were heterosexual couples. This one-sidedness of linking homosexual couples to the adverse effects of surrogacy also means that in the ideology of the receiver, the homosexual goes from being construed as a victim of a rigid system (homophobic society) for being a homosexual, to becoming an oppressor of specific victims (women) for wishing to be a parent. As a result, the situation in which the homosexual is reconverted into oppressor exposes and unfolds a series of arguments that discredit the idea of homosexual couples having children. First, the homosexual couple using

surrogacy is perceived in a stereotypical manner as “typical wealthy gays” (*they’re the classic case* – Female, FG4; *they’re wealthy gays* – Male, FG3). This feeling also reinforces the idea that their desire to become parents is a whim (*I think a womb for hire is a whim* – Male, FG4). Second, biological arguments are reintroduced that are counter to the possibility that two men can have a child (*accept the rules that nature enforces on you* – Male, FG4), and the debate is reopened about the consequences this might have on the children (*the child might be damaged* – Female, FG3).

Our results concur with the position identified by Markens (2012) on frames used by media to construct and debate surrogacy discursively. According to her findings, most media coverage on surrogacy tends to give it a particular focus as a social problem. However, Crawshaw, Blyth, & van den Akker (2012) detected an increasingly favourable social attitude towards surrogacy, possibly fuelled by the use of surrogacy by high-profile media celebrities, such as Ricky Martin and Nicole Kidman. This might to a certain extent explain that adverse attitudes formed around gay surrogacy are closely linked to the negative ways in which the news story is framed. In any case, the power the media may exert in the formation or reinforcement of social attitudes is notable. The ways this phenomenon is represented in the media may influence audience perception, their forming (or reinforcing) of attitudes about surrogacy, and their opinion when approaching the question politically. Lastly, social opinion will be taken into account, through surveys, when establishing a political debate that will lead to approving (or not) laws on surrogacy.

In this sense, it can be seen that participants used the same terminology employed throughout the news story to refer to surrogacy (“wombs for hire”) and build the majority of their opinions within the economic approach used in the news, with notable antagonistic connotations around the ideas of business, consumer-product, unfair trade practices, exploitation, etc. The emphasis on highlighting the commercial nature of the phenomenon is

closely related to the idea of promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation that Entman (1993) explained from the Framing Theory. In this regard, the feminist claim that frames surrogacy as a commodification of the body of a woman is staged through the media in terms of exploitation. Nevertheless, in accordance with several scholars (Humbyrd, 2009; Markens, 2012; Riggs, 2012), the negative consequences of transnational surrogacy, related to the exploitation of poor women, are more related to the neoliberal dynamics of globalization and unequal distribution of power and wealth, than the practice of surrogacy itself. Wilkinson (2003) concluded that those who oppose exploitation should concentrate on improving the conditions under which paid surrogates 'work', or on changing the underlying conditions that generate exploitative relationships, rather than attempting to stop particular practices such as commercial surrogacy. The recommendation, therefore, is that international surrogacy must be regulated, either under the form of Altruistic Surrogacy, or Fair Trade Surrogacy. Humbyrd (2009) termed "Fair Trade Surrogacy" as a proposed regulatory mechanism focused on minimizing potential harm to all parties and ensuring fair compensation for surrogates.

Lastly, situating the discussion on surrogacy within the dispute of homosexual couples who wish to be parents, on the one hand, and the feminist rejection of the commodification of a woman's body on the other, may have very negative consequences for the traditional bond between the feminist movement and the LGBT collective. As we saw in the results of our study, the use of frames of "responsibility attribution" may fuel discriminatory attitudes toward same-sex couple families and generate a clash between the feminist cause and the LGBT cause, obliging the audience to adopt a position on one of the two sides interpreted as being in dispute.

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