Constructing ‘race/ethnicity’ and nationality in Spanish media: a content analysis of international football coverage

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Abstract
Televised football in Spain enjoys great popularity as it is watched by millions of people every year. It has also been suggested as a site where ideas about race/ethnicity are (re)produced and national football teams have been proposed as key elements in the formation and/or confirmation of national identities. In this qualitative research we analyse the transcripts of 11 televised football matches of the Spanish national team with the goal of understanding how football commentators contribute to the construction of meanings about race/ethnicity and its intersections with nationality. Results showed how football commentators constructed racial difference by describing football players of diverse backgrounds in different ways. Furthermore, commentators made use of warlike language and national heroes in their construction of a narrative about the nation. These results will be interpreted and placed within the larger socio-historical context in the Discussion section.

Keywords
content analysis, discourse, ethnicity, football, race, racism, Spain, sport media

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On 21 October 2020, after a brilliant performance of the African-Spanish football player Ansu Fati, a Spanish sports journalist described him as a ‘gazelle’ and compared him to a ‘black mantero’,¹ a group of mainly African street vendors that are often chased by the police (The Guardian, 2020). The journalist was accused of racism for calling Ansu ‘black’ and for the comparison with the street vendors, however, hardly any of these criticisms pointed out that comparing the player with an animal such as the gazelle also carries racial meanings, and contributed to perpetuating discourses that link Blackness with animalistic features. In this paper we will explore the role of Spanish sports media, and of football commentary more specifically, in the (re)production of discourses surrounding race/ethnicity,² as well as its intersections with notions of nationality.

Research has shown how sports media can (re)produce racial ideology through the use of stereotypes and myths, for example by describing players of different racial or ethnic backgrounds in specific ways. For instance, decades ago, Rainville and McCormick (1977) found in their analysis of American football commentary that commentators constructed racial difference by praising White players’ cognitive abilities more often than those of Black players, thereby contributing to the reproduction of a discourse that constructs race in binary oppositions: White people as ‘rational’ and Black people as ‘physical’. Following Rainville and McCormick’s foundational study, a number of scholars have researched the construction of racial difference in sports media, finding on many occasions the use of racial stereotypes associated with different racial/ethnic categories, thereby validating sports media as a key site for the (re)production of ideas about race (e.g. Carrington, 2011; Coakley and Pike, 2009; Ličen, 2015). The most common finding is, as suggested earlier, the association of Black athletes with supposedly natural athletic abilities such as strength or power, and of White athletes with positive cognitive traits such as intelligence (Campbell and Bebb, 2020; Eastman and Billings, 2001; Ogasawara, 2004). To a lesser extent, some scholars have also found the use of racial/ethnic stereotypes about other racial/ethnic categories, such as Brennen and Brown (2016) who found Latin Americans being associated with poor team play and innate physical skills, and Oh (2019) who showed how the media portrayed an Asian athlete as fragile and weak.

These racial stereotypes are articulated in discourses, which Hall (2019: 160), describes as ‘ways of talking, thinking, or representing a particular subject or topic [. . .]’ thereby producing ‘meaningful knowledge about that subject’. Thus, the stereotypes found in sports media commentary are often part of larger, long-standing discourses about racial difference that ‘naturalise’ differences between supposed existing races. These discourses have circulated in society and can be considered the foundation of more modern discourses that legitimise discriminatory practices based on race (Coakley and Pike, 2009), and sports media serves then as a site where these discourses can be reproduced. Moreover, discourses not only construct meaning by what is being said or how, they also construct meaning by repeatedly omitting certain ways of talking about a particular subject. For example, in the previously mentioned study by Rainville and McCormick (1977), Black players were rarely praised for their cognitive skills, which implicitly conveys the idea of these players as possessing lesser cognitive skills.

The focus of this research is on televised football, which is one of the most popular genres within the realm of mediated sport worldwide, including Spain, where almost every year the most watched broadcast of the year is a football match (Barlovento
Comunicación, 2020). Hence, for a lot of people televised football is a window to racial/ethnic diversity and hence, it informs its viewers of characteristics or traits that are typically associated with certain racial/ethnic categories. Therefore, televised football can be considered as playing a critical role in the construction of meanings about race/ethnicity and national identities (Mauro, 2020; Ziaee et al., 2021). Several scholars have shown how sports journalists make use of national stereotypes when describing the performance of a national football team; for example, O’Donnell (1994) described how football teams from Southern European nations such as Spain were often described as ‘temperamental’ and ‘passionate’, whereas teams from more Northern countries were described as ‘cold’ and ‘rational’. In the Spanish context, Quiroga (2013) also explains how the Spanish national football team has been instrumental in the construction of a Spanish identity ‘by associating a number of national features, myths and stereotypes with the selección española [Spanish national team] and by correlating playing styles to the psychological and cultural characteristics of the nation’ (Quiroga, 2013: 1). Besides defining nationhood, televised football also reproduces nationalistic discourses that evolve with time and are dependent on the socio-political context (Cox et al., 2015; Mauro and Martínez-Corcuera, 2020; O’Donnell, 1994). Garcia-Martí (2018) provides an account of how during Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975), the Spanish national team was portrayed as physical and passionate, and surrounded by patriotic and nationalistic discourses in line with the dictatorship’s values. With Spain’s democratisation process years later, discourses surrounding the national team became less nationalistic, in an attempt to embrace the multiple national identities in Spain, such as the Basque or the Catalan. In more recent years, in particular the Catalan nationalistic movement has found a place in football to claim and give visibility to its political and identity demands (Whigham et al., 2019), for example, by using FC Barcelona’s stadium to showcase nationalistic symbols such as the independentist flag. This also shows how football can be a site for minoritised groups to challenge dominant discourses (Coakley and Pike, 2009).

Theoretical framework

Taking on a Cultural Studies perspective, this study understands the media as a place for the construction of meanings (Hall, 1995), and sports media, and more specifically televised football, as a key site for the (re)production of knowledge about race and ethnicity. The concept of human races has typically been used to classify people on the basis of supposed biological differences, whereas the concept of ethnicity is often used to make sense of groups of people that have a shared history and culture (Coakley and Pike, 2009). From a Cultural Studies perspective, we understand race and ethnicity as social constructs that do have consequences in real life, for example in the form of racial discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Even though we realise that the two concepts can be separated analytically, in this paper we use both terms as conflated constructs (‘race/ethnicity’), since several studies have shown how people in everyday meaning making tend to confound both concepts, for example by naming racial characteristics, such as skin colour, when being asked for an ethnic description (Hylton and Lawrence, 2015; van Sterkenburg et al., 2010). Ultimately, both racial and ethnic criteria are used in
categorisation processes that construct difference among people. As we shall see later, this conflation is also common in the Spanish context, where characteristics that have historically been associated with notions of ‘Spanishness’ include both racial and ethnic/religious criteria, such as being White and Christian (Rodríguez-García, 2022). Racial and ethnic categories interplay with the idea of national identity in that certain physical traits (race), cultural practices (such as ways of dressing, norms and values or religious practices) and histories (ethnicity) are articulated as being part of a specific nation, defining the boundaries of those who belong and those who don’t.

The role of televised football

Journalists, mostly in unconscious ways, make use of longstanding ideas, stereotypes and myths associated with certain racial/ethnic groups when talking about or describing football players (Campbell and Bebb, 2020; Ličen, 2015; van Lienden and van Sterkenburg, 2020). These ideas, stereotypes and myths are articulated in discourses that become part of ‘popular knowledge’ and that are accepted as true, producing what Hall (2019), following Foucault (1980: 131) calls a regime of truth. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that discourses are never one-sided nor fully cohesive (Hall, 1995), meaning that counter-narratives can also find their way in televised football and challenge dominant discourses, as previous research has shown (Longas Luque and van Sterkenburg, 2020). Discourses are closely linked to power, meaning that the dominant social group(s) in society are the ones with the most power to make their discourses dominant, amongst others those related to race/ethnicity. In so doing, they tend to ‘construct’ a racial Self and a racial Other in terms of binary oppositions (Hall, 2019; Said, 2003). Therefore, in this study we consider the Spanish sports media as also being able to construct meanings about ‘them/the Other’ and ‘us/the Self’. Our research explores both the construction of the racial/ethnic Other (often defined in Western countries in racial terms as non-White) and the Self (often defined in racial terms as White) within the Spanish football media context, squaring with Hall’s (2019) argument that we are all racially/ethnically positioned and that we should thus not only direct our research lens onto the racial Other, but also on the White Self and on Whiteness.

Discourses about race/ethnicity in Spain

Spain has a population of 47 million people, of which 11% are categorised as ‘foreigners’; that is, citizens who live in Spain without a Spanish passport (Instituto Nacional de Estadstica [INE], 2019). The largest group of ‘foreigners’ hold a Moroccan passport (14% of the total number of foreigners), representing about 1.5% of the total Spanish population. However, when looking at larger geographical regions, South Americans represent the largest group of foreigners (18%), and Africans are the second largest group (15%). These groups are often labelled as ‘immigrants’ and presented as either victims or as a threat in media and political discourses (Barbero, 2016; Toasijé, 2009). These discourses extend not only to individuals with a recent migration history, but also to individuals that are perceived as foreigners by the White majority. Throughout history, Spanish identity has been constructed in racial and religious terms, mostly as White and
Christian, and a discourse of superiority has been circulating with regard to other populations, who have often been represented as inferior (Grosfoguel, 2012). These representations and discourses have pervaded until today, and are a source of racial stereotypes and ideas that form the basis for newer, more subtle types of racial/ethnic discrimination against groups perceived as immigrants, which in the Spanish context are often those who are neither perceived as White nor Christian (Bañón-Hernández, 1996; Bonilla-Silva, 2015). For example, people of North African origin, often labelled as ‘moros’ [moors], a racial/ethnic category that often extends to anyone perceived as Muslim, are often linked to criminality, violence and social conflict in popular discourse (Alcántara-Plá and Ruiz-Sánchez, 2017; Cervi, 2020; Chakour and Portillo Fernández, 2018). Discourses about South American people, often categorised under the label ‘sudamericanos’ [South Americans], are more heterogeneous and depend often on the country of origin. For example, Colombians are often linked to violence and drug dealing in the media, while Argentinians are quite positively evaluated by Spaniards (Cea D’Ancona and Valles Martínez, 2014). South American women, in particular, are often exoticised and hypersexualised in the media and everyday talk (Santaolalla, 2005; Solà et al., 2016). Another racial/ethnic category often represented as the Other are ‘Sub-Saharan’, a term often used by the media and public institutions to refer to immigrants that originate mostly from West Africa. However, in informal everyday talk the derogatory word ‘negro’ [Black] is still widely used, and it is often used to refer to anyone perceived as being of African descent. The discourse associated with this racial/ethnic category is often that of the ‘illegal immigrant’, who arrives in Spain by ‘patera’ [small boat] (Martínez-Lirola, 2013), but century-old myths, such as the black physicality myth, are also found in Spanish films (Santaolalla, 2005) and political discourses (La Razón, 2021).

Televised football may be an important catalyst for such discourses given the racial/ethnic diversity on the pitch and its popularity amongst the Spanish population; however, this field of research has been under-researched in the Spanish context. In this research we try to understand how Spanish football commentary (re)produces discourses about race and ethnicity by exploring patterns in the description of football players of different racial/ethnic categories, as well as how these discourses intersect with notions of national identity. In doing so, we will contribute to the body of literature on sport media and the construction of racial difference in the Spanish context, which at the moment is quite scarce, with only a few studies having explored the construction of racial difference in quality newspapers (Ramón, 2017), the radio (Mauro and Martínez-Corcuera, 2020) and television (Longas Luque and van Sterkenburg, 2020).

**Methods**

**Data**

We analysed the transcriptions of the live commentary of 11 broadcasts of the Spanish national football team against a variety of other teams. This sample included matches that took place between 2013 and 2020, that were exclusively broadcast in Spain on the Spanish national TV (TVE1) or the commercial channel Telecinco. Both channels
broadcast free to air and have been in the last decades, among the leading TV channels
with regard to football broadcasting rights (Alcolea-Díaz and García-Santamaría, 2019).
We selected the most recent matches played by the Spanish national team, but we also
looked a bit further in time in order to include matches against national teams not only
from Europe, but also Africa and South America. We included in the analysis all com-
ments made by the sports journalists that covered the matches and also those from former
football players that were invited as guests and analysts, all of them being Spanish White
males.

Analysis

The live commentary of the 11 football matches was transcribed and analysed on Atlas.
ti using a verbal categorical content analysis method as described in van Sterkenburg
et al. (2010). Inspired by grounded theory, this bottom-up methodology does not focus
on the analysis of pre-established themes such as Physicality and/or Mentality as some
earlier content analyses of football have done (e.g. Ličen, 2015; McCarthy and Jones,
1997) but instead emphasises the ‘discovery’ of themes in the text itself (Corbin and
Strauss, 2015). Moreover, instead of using a pre-defined binary definition of race/ethnic-
ity (many content analyses of sports media have used a Black-White definition of race,
thus examining how Black and White athletes are represented) we used racial/ethnic
categories in a more contextual way, as used in everyday Spanish discourse. In other
words, the categories that we use to group the players under analysis correspond with
those used in everyday life by many Spanish people to understand their world (Brubaker
et al., 2004). Nevertheless, as grounded theory suggests, we remained open to the pos-
sibility that entirely new racial/ethnic categories appeared in the commentary itself,
although it transpired that this was not the case.

The first step entailed coding every positive or negative comment made about football
players in the commentary according to its meaning. Comments ranged from single
words to full sentences and allowed us to discover the different themes that were recur-
rent across the transcripts. Every comment was coded as positive or negative, depending
on whether the player was being presented in a positive or negative light. Similar to a
previous study (Longas Luque and van Sterkenburg, 2020), we found four main themes
that indicate how players are mainly described in the broadcasts, and we named them
Technical, Evaluative, Cognitive and Physical. Within the themes Technical, Cognitive
and Physical, we also coded each comment into two subthemes that appeared throughout
the transcripts, labelled Description and Action, which allowed us to differentiate
between comments that either referred to attributes of the players that are represented as
stable over time (Description) or to comments about a specific action in the match
(Action). So, for example, a comment such as ‘what a powerful shot from Sané’ was
coded as Physical – Action – Positive, whereas ‘Sané is a strong player’ was coded as
Physical – Description – Positive. The most prominent theme was Technical (n=75),
which included comments that referred to the technical skills about players, such as
‘He’s got good dribbling’. The theme Evaluative (n=484) consisted of comments that
provided a positive or negative evaluation of the player in a general manner, for example
‘A solid player’. The Cognitive (n=466) theme included comments about psychological
traits of the players, for example ‘He’s smart’, or comments about actions that mostly required the use of cognitive skills such as ‘They have coordinated very well’. Lastly, the Physical theme \((n=331)\) encompassed comments about the physical attributes of the football players, such as ‘He’s got a very physical profile’, and comments about actions that mostly required physical ability such as in ‘that shot lacked power’. We found two other minor themes, which we named Originating and Belligerent style. The minor theme Originating included comments about the national or the ethnic/racial background of a football player, and the minor theme Belligerent style included warlike and violent language used throughout the text, as well as comments that portrayed football players as national heroes. This step ended when thematic saturation was reached; that is, when no more themes emerged from further exploration of the data and themes started to repeat themselves.

The second step concerned attaching racial/ethnic categories to each comment that was coded in the first step. This was done by first evaluating to which racial/ethnic categories each football player could be perceived as belonging. In this process, we were mainly informed by dominant everyday discourses about race/ethnicity in Spanish society. The first layer of racial/ethnic categorisation corresponded to the most widely used categories in everyday talk in Spain to differentiate amongst people in racial/ethnic terms. In this layer the following categories were included: ‘African descendants’, ‘Muslims’, ‘Southern Europeans’, ‘Central Europeans’, ‘Eastern Europeans’, ‘Scandinavians’ and ‘Latin Americans’. The second layer that we used in the analysis was based on nationality, as literature shows how nationality often intersects with notions of race/ethnicity and how certain sports-related discourses are specifically linked to nationality – for example, when certain national teams within (men’s) football are seen as having a country-specific playing style (Hylton and Lawrence, 2015; O’Donnell, 1994). Also, as explained earlier, nationality is sometimes used as a proxy for race/ethnicity and vice versa in the Spanish context (Cea D’Ancona and Valles Martínez, 2014). We acknowledge the complexity and subjective nature of the process of attaching such racial/ethnic labels to the football players, and therefore we tried to be as accurate as possible in taking Spanish everyday discourse as our point of reference. We were also aware of our positionality as White researchers and were reflective of how it may influence the way we conceptualised race/ethnicity. While there is no ‘objective gaze’ nor an ‘objective truth’ (Fletcher, 2014), we consider it important to note our privileged position as White researchers don’t experience racial/ethnic discrimination on a daily basis. It is also important to note that one of the researchers is Spanish herself and, therefore, has extensive knowledge of Spanish everyday discourse. Moreover, it is important to mention that our analysis was open to all possible findings and categorisations, and that we merely used these pre-defined layers of categorisations as ‘spotlights’ in our analysis given their prominence in everyday Spanish discourse.

Once all the data had been coded, we examined within each theme whether any patterns could be identified that indicate that football players who belong to a specific racial/ethnic category were described differently by commentators. By ‘pattern’ we mean here that a specific racial/ethnic category of players is described differently than the other categories consistently, that is, across most of the different broadcasts. This examination of patterns is characteristic of the qualitative study that we do where the focus is on
exploring the meanings that football commentators give to footballers of various racial/ethnic origins. Though our study is qualitative, in the results section we will also present percentages as they help illustrate the prominence of certain themes and patterns (Silverman, 2011).

**Results**

The analysis comprised a total of 2056 comments distributed across the themes *Technical* (38%), *Evaluative* (23%), *Cognitive* (23%) and *Physical* (16%). Most of the commentary was positive in nature, and as the presented percentages indicate, the great majority of comments fell into the theme *Technical*. Several patterns were found that shed some light on the role of football commentary in reproducing discourses surrounding race/ethnicity and its intersections with the nation. We will describe these patterns in this section and place them in a wider academic perspective in the Discussion section.

**The racialised Other**

Our analysis showed that football commentators often described African descendant players as fast, strong and well-built, in line with the natural physicality discourse that attributes a ‘natural’ predisposition of Black individuals to excel in activities that require physical skills. That is, their physicality, mostly in a positive way, was emphasised relatively often, more so than football players in other categories. This was accomplished through the use of similes like ‘getting off like a bullet’ or by describing these players as having ‘a very physical profile’. This result was further supported by the fact that, while African descendant players received 11% of the total commentary we analysed, this figure rose to 21% when looking only at the *Physical – Description* theme. It is worth remembering that this category not only included football players born in Africa, but also diaspora members born in European countries and Latin America. However, large part of these comments were directed towards members of the Nigerian team, and, although we couldn’t identify a recurrent pattern about these players across the broadcasts (they only appear in one broadcast), we did observe that the Nigerian team as a whole often and explicitly received comments about their physical superiority compared to the Spanish team. Comments were made such as ‘They are well-built and more physical than Spain’ or ‘Physically, Spain is being overcome by Nigeria, that is true’. While this is anecdotal evidence as it is based on one broadcast featuring the Nigerian team, it squares with the discourse that constructs Black football players as physically superior to White players. Other comments further constructed such racial difference, as can be seen in the following comment which naturalises difference by use of the preposition ‘of course’: ‘A demanding match, a good rival, physically superior, but of course, not technically superior, but a demanding match’. A further comment described the Nigeriab style of play as ‘anarchistic’, which further reinforces a more intuitive style of play lacking in tactical/conceptual skills.

Another finding related to physicality was about players we categorised as Muslim. They received relatively frequent comments within the theme *Physical-Action*, meaning that commentators often mentioned actions from these players that required mainly
physical skills. The numbers also show this trend: while players in this category received 13% of the total commentary under analysis, they received 29% of the commentary within this specific sub-theme, *Physical Action*. Most of these comments were negative in nature, and criticised the physical fitness of football players, with comments such as ‘He ran out of oxygen’, or presented them as physically aggressive, as can be seen in this comment: ‘Look, look how he smacks him over there. Have you seen how he smacked [name of player]?’ or ‘He knocks over anything, he knocks over anything in front of him’. On one occasion, a Moroccan football player was particularly criticised: ‘It’s something terrible. He’s obsessed with absolutely everyone, he’s done with one [player], he goes for another one. Check how he puts his leg in. He deserves to be kicked out’. Noteworthy is the fact that a large part of these negative comments towards the group of players we labelled as Muslims were players of the Moroccan national team (which appeared in one broadcast in the analysis). Moroccan players only received 6% of the entire commentary that we analysed, yet they received 27% of the total number of comments within the subtheme *Physical-Action*, usually in a negative manner.

Another finding indicating how Spanish televised football confirms and reinforces everyday racial distinctions based on racial/ethnic background was the fact that football commentators tended to place particular emphasis on non-White players playing for a European national team. These comments were often relatively short, with comments such as ‘Emre Can, the player of Turkish origin [playing for Germany]’. Sometimes, they were longer, like in the case of the African-Spanish football player with which we opened this article, Ansu Fati, where commentators elaborated a story that squares with the narrative of the ‘good, hard-working immigrant’. Previous research has found evidence of this type of discourse, which places an emphasis on the effort that non-White athletes have had to make in order to achieve success, and has been interpreted as a ‘resistance’ discourse to dominant discourses that portray racialised people in a negative light (van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004):

By the way, Ansu Fati arrived in Spain when he was 7 years old. He arrived in Sevilla, well, a village in Sevilla, Herrera, and his father was already working. He arrived as an emigrant, his father also did it, but his start in football was meteoric from the first day, and they helped him, a lot of people helped him and Ansu Fati undoubtedly has taken advantage of it very well. Then Barça saw him, and they hired him.

**Southern Europeans and Spanish**

The analysis revealed a specific pattern regarding players classified as Southern European. Whereas they received relatively little commentary about their physical abilities (39% of the commentary on the Physical theme while receiving 58% of the total commentary), they often received positive comments about actions that we considered to be technical (69% of the commentary in the Technical theme while their share of the overall commentary was 58%). These were comments like ‘He’s had very good precision’ or ‘The shot on goal is really good’. A closer examination of these results revealed that most of these comments referred to Spanish players, which were obviously a large subgroup within the group of Southern Europeans in our data. Looking at the
percentages, again, we see that Spanish players were often praised for their technical actions. In contrast with the 65% of comments that Spanish players received in the overall commentary, they received 77% of all the comments within the subtheme Technical-Action, meaning that commentators relatively often congratulated Spanish players for their technicality, with comments such as ‘Isco’s shoot was really good’ or ‘There it is, the fantastic pass’. Such positive comments could be due to the fact that the Spanish commentators tend to favour ‘their own’ national team (Mauro and Martínez-Corcuera, 2020), however such positive comments were particularly evident in relation to the technicality of the players. In contrast, for instance, Spanish players were less often associated with a strong physicality, whereas Spanish football players received 65% of the total commentary under analysis, this percentage decreased to 54% when we look at the Physical theme (Table 1).

A belligerent style

A last theme that our analysis revealed was the use of warlike language and the framing of football matches as ‘battles’ between nations. This exaltation of the nation was accomplished through the use of militaristic or violent language and the presentation of every football match as a ‘battle’ that the Spanish national team needed to win. For example, commentators made use of words such as ‘gunpowder’ to refer to the contribution of football players and ‘tank’ to refer to well-built players. Furthermore, commentators also used expressions such as ‘serves in foreign leagues’ (‘foreign’ to their country of origin). The Spanish national team was presented as ‘superior’ to the other national teams and as ‘dominating’ the other teams in almost every match, as exemplified in the following quote:

> It’s important in these first minutes that Turkey knows who is going to command in the pitch, that they know who is going to dominate and that is important so that they get used to it, that they know that they are going to have to run.

On the other hand, the national teams against which Spain played were presented as ‘rivals’ that had to surrender to the Spanish national team. The perceived superiority of the Spanish team was symbolised by particular players, most notably the White Spanish

|                          | Within topic (%) | Total (%) |
|--------------------------|------------------|-----------|
| African descendant – Physical (description) | 21               | 11        |
| Muslim – Physical (action)     | 29               | 13        |
| Moroccan – Physical (action)   | 27               | 6         |
| Southern European – Physical    | 39               | 58        |
| Southern European – Technical   | 69               | 58        |
| Spanish – Technical (action)    | 77               | 65        |
player Sergio Ramos, who was sometimes represented as a national hero by means of using statistics to exalt his achievements and by making reference to his long career in the national team. So, for example, he was often referred to as ‘the grand captain’ and described as ‘the most international Spanish footballer in history’. Previous authors have argued that the creation of national heroes is a way in which televised sport contributes to nation-bonding and that these national heroes, portrayed as leaders and captains in the field, tend to be White football players (e.g. Peeters and van Sterkenburg, 2017; Mauro, 2020), as it was the case in our study with the prominence of the White captain Ramos. This can be linked to the phenomenon of ‘stacking’, by which White players are often in positions of leadership whereas Black players are more often assigned positions that require speed such as wingers (Maguire, 1988).

Discussion

The aim of this paper is to advance our understanding of discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in Spanish football commentary and to explore how they intersect with notions of national identity. We found several patterns that demonstrate that the live commentary of the analysed football matches constructed racial/ethnic difference by describing or talking differently about football players depending on the racial/ethnic background of these players.

Reproducing hegemonic discourses through physicality

One of the major patterns that our analysis revealed was that football commentators tend to describe and talk about football players differently depending on whether they are perceived as being part of the dominant group or of a racialised minority group. Scholars such as Said (2003) and Hall (2019) have explained how the West has historically constructed the Other in opposition to the image and values of the Western man, who was constructed and self-defined in line with the values of the Enlightenment, where reason played a central role. As Grosfoguel (2012) explains, Spain constructed an image of the Other -those perceived as not belonging to the dominant group- as primitive, and closer to animals than to the Western or, in this case, the Spanish man, and in so doing reduced the Other to its physicality and their body. Our findings also show how physicality plays an important role in the process of Othering that takes place within the popular realm of football commentary. In particular, the group of football players we categorised as African descendant, which included those perceived as having an African heritage, were often described as strong, fast and well-built, aligning with the ‘Black natural physicality’ discourse that has been documented in previous studies (Campbell and Bebb, 2020; McCarthy and Jones, 1997). It seems that football commentators relied upon transnationally circulating, Western stereotypes and myths about the Black body when describing players of visible African descent, in line with previous international research (Campbell and Bebb, 2022; Eastman and Billings, 2001; van Lienden and van Sterkenburg, 2020), and demonstrating that discourses about race/ethnicity within a specific country can be situated and understood within larger socio-historical contexts. At the same time, this emphasis on physicality may implicitly be
undervaluing other characteristics such as, for example, cognitive skills, meaning that commentators would not only be constructing African descendant players as players with excellent physical characteristics, but they would also be restricting the possibilities for them to be associated with other types of skill or ability such as intelligence or leadership. Hall (2019: 144) argues that the West ‘came to represent itself in relation to these “others”’, and our analysis provided evidence of how the racial/ethnic categories of Southern European and Spanish players were constructed in opposition to the previously discussed category of African descendants. The analysis allowed us to understand how football commentary constructed the ‘Self’ within the Spanish context and revealed that both categories, Southern European and Spanish players, were relatively little associated with physical skills, and instead were more often associated with technical skills.

Spanish players constituted a large subgroup within the group of Southern European players which could, of course, explain the fact that similar results were found for both groups. This way of representing the Spanish national team as ‘technical’ differs from how it was represented during the early and mid 1990s, when its style was described as physical and passionate (García-Martí, 2018; Quiroga, 2013). This again shows how football discourses construct and reconstruct national identities (Maguire et al., 1999) in accordance with the current socio-political context since, as some scholars have argued, this shift in the way of representing the Spanish national team could be understood as an attempt to approach Spain, which often was represented as a ‘backward’ European nation, to the image of a ‘modern’ European country (García-Martí, 2018; Quiroga, 2013). Despite this attempt to ‘Europeanise’ Spanish national identity, our results don’t support previous research in football commentary that found a tendency to associate White football players with positive psychological skills (Campbell and Bebb, 2020; McCarthy and Jones, 1997), since Spanish football players in our sample, ethnically and racially defined as White in the Spanish context, didn’t receive significantly more comments in this theme. Earlier research in the Spanish context conducted by the same authors also failed at finding evidence for this type of discourse (Longas Luque and van Sterkenburg, 2020). A plausible explanation could be that the hegemonic discourses that associate Whiteness with reasoning capacities and intelligence are less salient in the Spanish context. Persánch (2018) explains how Spanish identity has navigated in-between notions of Otherness and Whiteness, as belonging and not belonging to Europe as a result of being orientalised by other European nations, which might be an explanation of why the Spanish commentators didn’t use psychological or cognitive themes in association with White players to construct racial difference. Moreover, our results also showed how football commentators often commented on the physical aggression of Muslim football players. This finding is consistent with Islamophobic discourses that circulate transnationally as well as societal discourses surrounding people who are perceived as being Muslim in Spanish contemporary society, where they are often linked to violence, criminality and even terrorism (Alcántara-Plá and Ruiz-Sánchez, 2017; Cervi, 2020; Chakour and Portillo Fernández, 2018). A large part of this type of commentary was towards players of Moroccan nationality playing for the Moroccan national team, which also coincides with the largest group of Muslim foreigners in Spain (INE, 2019), showing again, the situatedness of discourses within global and local contexts.
Intersections with nationality

Since earlier research has suggested that discourses about race/ethnicity may intersect with notions of national identity (Hylton and Lawrence, 2015), we were also interested in exploring this aspect in our study. Indeed, our research showed how the racialising patterns explained in the previous paragraph were connected to specific nationalities. For example, African descendant football players often received comments about their physicality, but these comments became much more explicit when they were directed towards players of the Nigerian national team, for example, by explicitly emphasising their ‘physical superiority’ over the Spanish team. Also, it was mainly players of the Moroccan national football team that received comments about perceived physical aggression, despite that there was also another national team -Turkey- whose players would be perceived as Muslim in everyday Spanish discourse. This finding highlights the relevance of considering the sociohistorical contexts when studying discourses about race/ethnicity, as such contextual factors may explain why some discourses are more likely to be linked to certain racial/ethnic categories than others. For example, the Nigerian team was the only ‘Black’ African team in our sample, which could have triggered football commentators to rely upon the ‘natural Black physicality’ discourse. On the other hand, Moroccans are one of the largest immigrant groups in Spain, and certainly the largest Muslim immigrant group. The strong connection between the category ‘Moroccan’ and the category ‘Muslim’ in the Spanish context may thus explain why football commentators heavily relied upon hegemonic discourses surrounding ‘Muslimness’ when commenting upon the Moroccan national team, a connection that is much less evident with the Turkish nationality, since Turkish people do not represent a large ethnic group in contemporary Spain. This shows again the interplay between global discourses about race/ethnicity and more local, context-dependent discourses. We also observed that football commentators often remarked on the backgrounds of non-White football players playing for European national teams (for instance, where they were born or where their parents came from). In other words, commentators provided explanations for the racial/ethnic background of non-White players who played for nations whose racial identity is typically seen as White, such as the Spanish or Swedish national teams. Ličen (2015), who, in his analysis of football commentary in the Slovenian league found that commentators often mentioned the nationality of Black football players, explains that this may be a way for commentators to talk in a ‘politically correct’ way about race within a White-dominated social context. The end result, however, is a reproduction of a process of Othering of those players seen as non-White and the reinforcement of fixed understandings of national identity. Perhaps, commentators tried to provide explanations for the presence of football players who, in terms of race, did not conform to the imagined White racial/ethnic identity of the national team they played for, thus constructing these players as deviant in an implicit manner. Finally, we also noticed that football matches were presented as battles amongst nations, which was further emphasised through the use of warlike language and the creation of national heroes. This last resource is particularly interesting since previous research has shown how it is often White football players who are seen by the audience as leaders and role models (Peeters and van Sterkenburg, 2017), which reinforces racial hierarchies in which White is rated higher than non-White (van
Our analysis showed how it was mainly Sergio Ramos, a White Spanish football player, who was often portrayed as a national hero. It could be argued that this is not surprising since there aren’t any other (non-White) football players that regularly play for the Spanish national team, however, this can at the same time be considered a reproduction of a hegemonic discourse in which being White is associated with representing ‘real’ or ‘ideal-typical’ ‘Spanishness’, thus reinforcing an already existing rigid understanding of the Spanish identity. The warlike language, the use of national heroes and the excluding definition of ‘Spanishness’ can be considered mechanisms contributing to the construction of national identity through televised football (Llopis-Goig, 2008; Maguire et al., 1999).

Conclusion

From this study we can conclude that international Spanish televised football seems to reproduce hegemonic discourses about race/ethnicity that reinforce a racial/ethnic hierarchy through the use of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ frame and that it reinforces exclusionary understandings of national identity. Together with previous analyses of football commentary in Europe (e.g. Longas Luque and van Sterkenburg, 2020; Campbell and Bebb, 2020; Ličen, 2015), this study challenges the idea of a post-racial Europe by demonstrating how race and ethnicity do in fact continue to matter and by showcasing the subtle mechanisms through which racial and ethnic inequalities are perpetuated, in what critical race scholars have called ‘colorblind racism’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2015) or ‘everyday racism’ (Essed, 1991). It shows the situatedness of discourses about race/ethnicity within global trends but also within national contexts, while it also shows how international sporting competitions continue to be important sites for the construction of national identities (Alabarces et al., 2001; Cho, 2009; Maguire et al., 1999), even in a context of globalisation and increasing mobility. In relation to the latter, future research will have to monitor whether discourses surrounding national football, which have been said to promote unity, will evolve to be more inclusive towards diasporas in Spain and the increasing racial/ethnic diversity of its citizens or will instead foster nationalistic and exclusionary discourses. Further research in Spain should also address the intersections between (representations of) national and regional identities, of special relevance in the plurinational state of Spain. Last but not least, and whilst these results should be considered preliminary, they stress the need for more responsible and unbiased sports journalism.

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Notes

1. In political, media and everyday talk the word *mantero* is used to refer to Black or African street vendors. They are often criminalised and seen as a threat to local businesses or victimised by being described as victims of mafias.

2. In this article we will use the concepts race and ethnicity as two conflated constructs, therefore it will be referred to as ‘race/ethnicity’. This conflation will be further addressed in the theoretical framework.

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