Exploring Discourses About Race/Ethnicity in a Spanish TV Football Program

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Abstract
The aim of this study was to examine discourses about race/ethnicity in Spanish football commentary, where this type of research is scarce. Previous research in other countries has found that football commentators tend to draw on racial/ethnic stereotypes when commenting on players. This, combined with the large audiences that televised football attracts, may contribute to the (re)production of racialized discourses. In this study, we conducted a content analysis of ten broadcasts of televised post-match Spanish football commentary, using an in-depth qualitative approach. We conceptualized race/ethnicity as a layered concept instead of the commonly used Black–White dichotomy, taking into consideration the complexity of racial/ethnic categories in the Spanish context. We didn’t find evidence for the reproduction of some dominant discourses; however, we did find evidence for the reproduction of some hegemonic discourses that reinforce an “us” vs. “them” discourse. In our discussion we place these results within the larger societal and historical context.

Keywords
race/ethnicity, sports media, football, discourse, Spain

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Many will remember the time when Dani Alves, former football player of FC Barcelona, took a banana that had been thrown at him, peeled it and took a bite of it. Football stadiums are a place where players of diverse origins, especially Black, have often been racially abused, having objects thrown at them or receiving racist chants (Llopis-Goig, 2013). This type of actions can be classified into what Hall (1995) describes as “overt racism” (p. 20), because they are rather visible and explicit in their meaning. But Hall (1995) also explains that there are other, more subtle forms of racism that operate through “naturalised representations of events and situations relating to race” (Hall, 1995, p. 20), in what he calls “inferential racism”. In the realm of football, previous research has shown how football commentators can make use of racial/ethnic stereotypes when commenting upon football players, thereby contributing to “naturalising” differences between different racial/ethnic groups (Billings, 2004; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012).

The capacity of televised football to reach big audiences make it a powerful site for the (re)construction of ideas about race/ethnicity, and particularly in Spain, where football enjoys great popularity and where La Liga, the men’s top professional football division, is followed on television by massive numbers of spectators every year (Kantar Media, 2018). Throughout the last decade, the time devoted to sport in Spanish media has steadily increased, with (male) football occupying 70 to 90% of the sport media content (Rojas-Torrijos, 2016). As these figures indicate, televised football enjoys great popularity in Spain, and together with the racial/ethnic diversity that characterizes football teams, televised football can be considered a key site for the (re)production of discourses surrounding race/ethnicity.

Hall (1997) describes “discourse” as the production of knowledge in and through the way people talk and write, including the production of knowledge about racialized subjects. When players of certain racial/ethnic groupings are relatively often associated with specific characteristics, that association becomes socially constructed knowledge that may become “common knowledge” for many people and not interrogated anymore. Moreover, the power of discourses goes beyond what is being said, it also becomes evident in what is not being said. For example, frequently describing Black athletes as physically strong but rarely as smart or “tactically skilled” also provides an idea about what this racial/ethnic category (Black athletes) does not represent. A number of scholars have explored the representation of race/ethnicity in sports journalism, with some providing evidence of the existence of “race thinking” (Hylton, 2009), meaning that sports journalists use explanations related to the racial/ethnic background of the athletes, for example, to account for their successes or failures (Billings, 2004; Farrington et al., 2012).

Various of these studies have shown how the racialized discourses (re)produced by sport media entail myths and stereotypes that often find its roots in colonialism (Carrington, 2002; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). One such myth is that of the Black natural athleticism, by which Black people are thought to have an innate predisposition for sport, being naturally faster and stronger than their White counterparts who are more often described in terms of cognition or hard work (Billings & Eastman,
This particular portrait of Black and White athletes is often referred to as the “brawn vs. brain” racial bias, and has been found in sport commentary in different sports and countries, including televised football (e.g., Campbell & Bebb, 2020; Ličen, 2015). As a consequence, the success of Black athletes tends to be seen as natural and effortless, whereas the success of White athletes is attributed to hard work (Carrington, 2002; Hylton, 2009). These ideas, when incorporated into discourses, have immediate consequences in the realm of sport, as can be seen for example, in the overrepresentation of White players in positions that require mental skills. (Billings et al., 2004; Hardin et al., 2004). To a lesser extent, other racial/ethnic categories have also been studied, such as Latin American footballers, that have been associated with a lack of game mentality (Brennen & Brown, 2016; van Sterkenburg, 2012), and Asian athletes, who are relatively often associated with physical inferiority (Kilvington, 2012). However, and as Hall (1995) points out, the media is not a uniform place and some studies have failed at providing evidence of the existence of such discourses (e.g., Angelini & Billings, 2010; Park, 2015), indicating, thus, the need for further exploration.

While we understand racial/ethnic categories as social constructions that do not have a biological basis, the discourses surrounding race/ethnicity do have an impact on people’s lives by shaping their life experiences and opportunities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hardin et al., 2004; Omi & Winant, 1994). Therefore, the importance of monitoring and understanding these discourses lies in their potential to (re)produce and maintain racial inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Hylton, 2009) in new, covert, subtle ways that Hall (1995) calls “inferential racism”.

This study examines football post-match commentary in Spain and tries to answer the following main question: What are the discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in post-match football commentary and how do they relate to everyday discourses about race/ethnicity in Spanish society? In order to answer this question, we will look for patterns in Spanish televised football commentary on players of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. While such discourses in sports media have been explored in various countries, most notably the UK and US (e.g., Angelini & Billings, 2010; Campbell & Bebb, 2020), this has been under-researched in the Spanish context. Given the popularity of televised men’s football where football players from different racial/ethnic backgrounds come together and are commented upon (Rojas Torrijos, 2016), it is relevant to study these discourses in the Spanish context. Besides contributing to the body of literature in this area we also aim at advancing existing content analyses of sports commentary by using a more complex, layered approach to race/ethnicity that better applies to the Spanish context, for which the Black–White dichotomy that was widely used in earlier studies may be limiting (van Sterkenburg, 2020).

**Theoretical Framework**

This research draws on insights from Cultural Studies and Critical Race Theory, which understand the media as contributing to the (re)production of knowledge.
about race/ethnicity in and through discourses (Hall, 1997; Hylton, 2009). By analyzing discourses produced in sport from a “race-conscious” standpoint we are able to understand how the media, operating within a racially hierarchical society that generally privileges those perceived as White, contributes to the elaboration and transformation of ideas about race/ethnicity (Hylton, 2009). As Hall (1995) argues, the media needs to be understood as a complex place where ideas about race/ethnicity are not fixed but are constantly being negotiated, and where dominant racialized discourses, thus, coexist with other challenging views.

Race and ethnicity are terms that have had different meanings across historical and geographical contexts (Omi & Winant, 1994). For instance, race has been used to refer to physical traits such as skin color, and ethnicity has more often been used to describe cultural aspects such as religion or language (Wade, 2010). However, in this study we use them as conflated terms, since race/ethnicity converge in many ways and are often used interchangeably in various everyday contexts (Rodríguez-García et al., 2019; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). For example, social groups usually defined as ethnic minorities are often also defined by “racial” criteria, such as being non-White, in everyday discourse. In line with Critical Race Theory, we understand race/ethnicity as social constructs, thus, without a biological basis but as having direct consequences on people’s lives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Farrington et al., 2012; Omi & Winant, 1994), for example, through the discourses associated with them.

These discourses, as Ortega and Feagin (2016) have argued, frequently draw on stereotypes, that reduce a racial/ethnic group to a set of a few fixed characteristics (Hall, 1997) that overshadow the heterogeneity of that group. This occurs when there are power imbalances (e.g., in the access to the means of production) and one group is particularly able to produce knowledge about the other but not the other way around (Said, 1992). In Western societies, it is primarily white journalists who are employed in the sports newsrooms (Farrington et al., 2012) and therefore have the capacity to (re)produce discourses about race/ethnicity. However, journalists aren’t necessarily aware of their use of racial/ethnic stereotypes since these are articulated in larger societal discourses that are seen as “common knowledge”. Müller et al. (2007) name these subtle, everyday processes of ethnic/racial categorization “racialization” and understand it as the base for more overt forms of racism to occur in the culture of football. As cultural studies suggest that such racialized/ethnicized discourses need to be understood within their historical and geographical context, in this case contemporary Spain, we will now continue with a discussion of the specific Spanish context.

The Spanish Context

As in other European countries, the term “race” is rarely used in Spanish popular discourse, whereas other terms such as “ethnicity” or “culture” are preferred when referring to racial/ethnic groups (Rodríguez-García et al., 2019; Santaolalla, 2005).
Despite official statements against racial discrimination, the Spanish state builds upon a hegemonic idea of citizenship that does not recognize difference and does not allow for collection of racial information (Björn, 2009), impeding the collection of data on racial discrimination. However, several studies and reports confirm the existence of racial inequality and discrimination towards certain racial/ethnic groups in Spain (Rodríguez Jaume, 2019; SOS Racismo, 2017). The concept of color-blind racism coined by Bonilla-Silva (2015) is useful here to describe the situation in Spain with regard to issues of racial discrimination, since racial matters tend to be denied (Rodríguez-Jaume, 2019), while this denial actually serves to maintain existing racial inequalities (Rodríguez-García et al., 2019).

These racial inequalities are sustained by discourses surrounding race/ethnicity that have been shaped by historical processes. For example, the historical relationships between Spain and Northern Africa promoted a discourse of invasion and conquest that framed the “Arab” as the threatening enemy (Flesler, 2001) and the Spanish colonization of the Americas nurtured the idea of Spanish superiority by developing a complex system of “castas” (races) that created and maintained a racial hierarchy that privileged the (White and catholic) Spaniards (Rodríguez-García et al., 2019). An increase in labor market opportunities at the end of the 1990s attracted large numbers of international migrants (Flores, 2015), accompanied by the rise of discourses that depicted these groups negatively (Checa Olmos & Arjona Garrido, 2013), revealing the pervasiveness of these historical ideas of threat and superiority, which nowadays are manifested in less overt forms (SOS Racismo, 2017).

**Conceptualization of Race/Ethnicity in Spanish Everyday Discourse**

With immigration being perceived as a relatively recent process by Spanish society, the category “immigrant” is very salient in Spanish popular discourse and is a category to which classic ideas about the Other are projected (Checa Olmos & Arjona Garrido, 2013; López-Maestre & Scheu Lottgen, 2003). References to nationality and wider geographical origin are also commonly used when categorizing others and the Self in Spanish everyday discourse, with the largest groups in terms of nationality being Moroccan (15%) and Romanian (15%) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2018). When looking at wider “region of birth” (beyond nationality), the group of South Americans (18%) stands out in second place, following foreigners from EU countries (35%)² (INE, 2018).

While research on everyday discourses surrounding these racial/ethnic groups is scarce in Spain, a few studies have explored this in a qualitative manner and concluded that the different minority groups are described in stereotypical manners. For example, Moroccans, a category that is often conflated with the category “Muslim” (Rodríguez-García et al., 2019), are often linked to criminality and described in negative psychological/cognitive terms (Cea d’Ancona & Valles Martínez, 2013; Chakour & Portillo Fernández, 2018), while Latin Americans, despite being...
denominated as the “preferred immigrants” because of the shared language (Izquierdo Escribano et al., 2003), are also negatively described as uneducated and lazy (Enesco et al., 2005). Other studies have also shown how Black people are associated with natural physicality and often “othered” in Spanish films and series (Olmos Alcaraz & Rubio Gómez, 2013; Santaalalla, 2005; Solà et al., 2016). All in all, what the research on discourses about race/ethnicity in Spain shows is a tendency to stereotype categories that are seen as the “Other”, while the categories “Spanish” or “White” are rendered invisible or superior to that “Other” (Enesco et al., 2005). Spanish everyday discourse also uses derogatory terms to identify people who are perceived as non-White, contributing to the construction of racial/ethnic difference and maintaining an “us” vs. “them” discourse. For instance, Muslims or people with North African heritage are often called “moro” and people with a Latin American background are called “sudacas”. (Flesler, 2001; Rodríguez-García et al., 2019).

Only rarely have studies focused on the representations of athletes in the Spanish media, with notable exceptions, such as Aquino (2017) who analyzed the case of the Black Spanish football player Íñaki Williams, and showed how the media emphasized his blackness and supposed natural athleticism by describing him, as “la perla negra” (the black pearl), “el hijo del viento” (the son of the wind) or “el [Usain] Bolt de la Liga” (the [Usain] Bolt of la Liga). On the other hand, Ramon (2017) also explored the representation of athletes in several European, including Spanish, newspapers during the coverage of the London 2012 Olympics, concluding that none of the analyzed Spanish newspapers used traditional covert stereotypes related to race/ethnicity, but that they did criticize instances of racial discrimination occurring throughout the event. On another note, Vaczi (2015) also explains how discourses about the Spanish national football team (The Spanish Fury) have been used historically to construct and naturalize notions of national identity. She shows how in the early 20th century, the national team was seen as an embodiment of the characteristics of the (essentialized) “Spanish race”: virility, passion, aggression and fury, among others.

Though these studies provide us with some preliminary/early insights on the role of sports media and race/ethnicity in Spain, in general, there is a scarcity of knowledge on everyday discourses about race/ethnicity in the Spanish sports media context. Given the enormous popularity of Spanish men’s football we consider it relevant to address this knowledge gap, in particular in relation to televised coverage of the highest Spanish men’s football league, La Liga, where in the 19/20 competition, 197 players out of a total of 485 were foreign (had a non-Spanish nationality), coming from 45 different countries (Transfermarkt, 2020).

**Method**

**Data**

In order to explore discourses about race/ethnicity in Spanish televised football we conducted a content analysis of the Spanish television program Directo Gol between
February and September 2019, broadcasted on the TV channel Gol TV. The criteria for choosing the TV program were twofold: 1) the program had to devote most of its time to presenting football highlights in a more or less “credible” and serious manner—contrary to more sensationalist content that increasingly displaces more serious football commentary in Spain (Martín-Guart et al., 2017; Rojas-Torrijos, 2016), and 2) commentators had to engage in a post-match evaluative discussion of the players where meanings about players of different racial/ethnic backgrounds are (re)produced. Directo Gol fulfills these criteria by presenting the football highlights of La Liga, which are then extensively discussed by a presenter and several commentators. The program is broadcast on a free-to-air TV channel, that reaches a wider and more diverse audience than programs broadcasted on paid channels. We recorded and transcribed ten Sunday evening broadcasts, from 22:30 to 00:00, with these being the starting and ending hours according to the TV guide. The presenter of the Directo Gol broadcast is a Spanish journalist accompanied by four to six other commentators who rotate throughout the broadcasts and who are all retired (white) Spanish footballers, except for one retired Mexican referee and a retired (Black) Spanish-Equatoguinean footballer. A voice over presents the highlights of the football matches and the commentators engage in an evaluative discussion led by the presenter. Other, on-field sports journalists, also comment on the matches periodically. All comments made by the different commentators, sports journalists and the presenter were included in our analysis. The analysis of the ten broadcasts resulted in 1,810 coded comments that resulted in thematical saturation, meaning that the themes identified in the commentary were consistent throughout the broadcasts and that no new themes seemed to appear from further analysis of the commentary (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Main Themes

We used the software ATLAS.TI 8.0 for a detailed analysis of the transcripts and followed a verbal categorical content analysis method, as described by van Sterkenburg et al. (2010), which has already been applied to the analysis of football commentary (van Sterkenburg, 2012). With this method, we followed a coding process in order to “discover” the themes that appear systematically in the commentary (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; van Sterkenburg et al., 2010). First, we searched for comments about footballers which presented them in a positive or negative light as has been done in other studies (Ličen, 2015; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). We considered “positive” comments that presented the player in a favorable way, and “negative,” comments that presented the player in an unfavorable way (see also van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). Comments referring to the same characteristic or phenomenon were grouped together and coded accordingly (e.g., all positive comments about player’s shooting abilities received the same code). To ensure accuracy, we analyzed the commentary in conjunction with the visuals of the broadcast and in case
of doubts about the interpretation, we discussed it in detail amongst the authors of this article and other researchers in our team until we reached an agreement.

After this first coding phase, we created themes by grouping together the codes that referred to similar aspects or qualities of the footballers. Four different themes emerged, and we labeled them “Evaluation”, “Technical”, “Physical” and “Psychological/Cognitive”. These themes reflect those found in a similar content analysis in the Dutch context some years ago, which seems to indicate how football commentary in general emphasizes similar skills of football players (van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). The theme Evaluation (n = 755) comprised commentaries that didn’t refer to a specific skill or quality within the moment of play, but to the general performance of a footballer, for example “he is one of the best players” or “he’s got a low profile”. The Technical theme (n = 558) encompassed comments about the player’s football technique that referred to a specific action, for example “he shot very well” or “he missed a pass”. The Physical theme (n = 151) referred to comments about the physicality of a player, such as “he is very strong” or “a powerful shot”. The Psychological/Cognitive theme (n = 346) comprised comments about the player’s psychological qualities or mental state, such as “he is very smart” or “he needs to be more focused”. In addition to these four main themes, we added a fifth theme based on our data, that we coded “Mentioned Nationality” (n = 66), comprising comments that named players by their nationality, such as “the shot of the French”. Such nationality references occurred relatively often and other studies on football commentary have also accounted for this, such as the study by Lićen (2015, p. 668), which will be discussed more in depth in the Results section.

**Racial/Ethnic Categories**

A final step in the analysis was to assign racial/ethnic categories to the commentary, which was done in a layered way. Bruce (2004) and Hall (1995) explained that (football) journalists tend to “speak through” the racial/ethnic categories and terminology used in everyday discourse in the country under study (also van Lienden & van Sterkenburg, 2020; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). For our analysis this meant that each quotation about a player could receive several racial/ethnic categories, determined by the different categories to which each footballer could be associated in everyday Spanish discourse. The first layer of racial/ethnic categorization was based on nationality, as literature indicates that nationality conflates with race/ethnicity and is often used to give meaning to race/ethnicity in everyday Spanish discourse (Cea d’Ancona & Valles Martínez, 2013). For instance, it is quite common to speak of racial/ethnic groups by a reference to their national origin only, instead of using hyphenated identities, contributing to the alienation of these groups (Rodríguez García et al., 2019). So, for example, in Spanish everyday discourse, people of Moroccan origin are more likely to be labelled “Moroccan” rather than “Spanish-Moroccan”. A second layer of racial/ethnic categorization was based on what we call here “wider geographical region” (also van Sterkenburg et al., 2012), as
literature also points out that Spanish everyday discourse surrounding race/ethnicity uses this layer of categorization (Olmos Alcaraz & Rubio Gómez, 2013). Relevant categories within this second layer that are commonly used in Spain are “Asian”, “Black African”, “Latin American”, “European”, “East European” and “North African”. With the first author of this paper being Spanish herself, and by checking our categorizations with how people are described in everyday Spanish (media) talk (e.g., in popular Spanish media such as newspapers, magazines, TV programs), we are confident our categorizations square with everyday discourses in Spain. Lastly, in order to compare findings for the Spanish context with those of previous sport media studies that found a “brawn vs. brain” racial bias when depicting Black and White athletes, we added a third layer of racial/ethnic categorization that categorized players as Black or White. Within this Black–White categorization we, again, used everyday Spanish discourses to categorize players as either Black or White, meaning that physical traits such as skin color were important in the categorization process. We remained open to other possible racial/ethnic categorizations than the ones described here that the commentators may use systematically throughout the broadcasts, however this appeared not the case. Our analysis included comments about 251 football players, from 41 different nationalities. Throughout the second layer of racial/ethnic categorization, 62% were European, 23% Latin American, 7% Black African, 4% Northern African, 4% Eastern European and 1% Asian. In the third layer, 82% of the players mentioned were classified as White and 18% as Black.

Our analysis was mainly qualitative, meaning that we looked for patterns in the representations of the different racial/ethnic categories in the different themes that we found. In other words, we explored how the football commentators described systematically a specific racial/ethnic category within each theme, throughout the broadcasts. While a pattern does not necessarily mean that a specific representation of a racial/ethnic category returned in every single broadcast, it does mean that a specific representation was used repetitively across a variety of broadcasts and not tied to just one or two broadcasts. This approach also means we did not specifically look for statistical significance in explaining the differences found in the commentary among the different racial/ethnic categories (see also van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). We do however, present numerical data such as numbers and percentages to add emphasis to our qualitative findings. (Silverman, 2011). For instance, we present the percentage of comments that each racial/ethnic category received in the commentary as a whole and their share in the commentary within the different themes. In the following section, we will present our main findings based on our examination of the racialized/ethnicized patterns in the football commentary.

Results

With a total of 1,810 analyzed comments, the most frequent theme in our data was “General Evaluation” (42% of the total commentary) followed by the themes Technical (31%), Psychological/Cognitive (19%) and Physical (8%). In other words, the
football players were most frequently described in general evaluative terms and in relation to their technical abilities, with comments such as “he’s not at his maximum level” or “good pass”. Overall, most of the comments were positive in character, except for the theme Psychological/Cognitive where the number of positive and negative comments was similar. In general, the main themes we analyzed did not reveal any particular major racialized/ethnicized patterns. However, some relevant racialized/ethnicized patterns could be identified within the positive and negative descriptors of the various themes, which we will discussed in the following sections.

North African Players and the Psychological/Cognitive Theme

Our results showed that commentators used the “Psychological/Cognitive” theme to construct racial/ethnic difference in relation to players of North African origin. Contrary to our expectations based on previous literature (Chakour & Portillo Fernández, 2018; Olmos Alcaraz & Rubio Gómez, 2013), players we categorized as “North African” were often described in a positive manner, especially in relation to their psychological/cognitive skills, with comments such as “veo un hombre que quiere renovarse, que se está preparando mentalmente” (I see a man who wants to reinvent himself, who is getting ready mentally) or “Brahim ve muy bien a Isco en el segundo palo” (Brahim sees very well Isco at the far post). The numbers also confirmed this trend: they received 16% of the positive commentary in the Psychological/Cognitive theme, with this being a clearly higher percentage than their share in the overall commentary (9%). In other words, while literature has shown that those of North African heritage are often portrayed negatively in Spanish everyday discourse in general, throughout the post-match commentary we analyzed they were described as team players, leaders and intelligent. Furthermore, this group of players only received 4% of the negative commentary within this theme. It is worth noting that while the pattern that shows how North-African players were portrayed in a positive light referred to several players, the positive comments on the specific theme Psychological/Cognitive referred only to two successful Real Madrid players, Brahim and Benzema, who were described, for instance as “ha sido muy generoso de ceder el balón” (he has been very generous to concede the goal to his colleague), and “tiene madera de líder” (he’s got enough to be a leader), respectively. These findings differ considerably from the everyday discourse about those of North African origin in Spain where they are often described in a negative light and associated with negative cognitive/psychological traits (Cea d’Ancona & Valles Martínez, 2013; Olmos Alcaraz & Rubio Gómez, 2013), which seems to indicate that televised football is able to challenge (instead of reproduce) dominant discourses surrounding racial/ethnic groups. We will return to this in our Discussion.
**Physical Theme: Reversed Patterns**

Contrary to previous findings that showed how the media often tends to emphasize the physicality of Black athletes (Foy & Ray, 2019; Hylton, 2009), we did not find such a discourse in our data for the Spanish football context. Whereas Black players received 26% of the overall commentary (within the Black–White dichotomy), they only received 19% of the commentary in the Physicality theme. When looking specifically at the positive descriptors within this theme, the difference becomes even clearer, with Black players receiving only 16% of the comments.

In contrast, White European players often received positive comments on the Physical theme. While this group received 56% of all the comments in the commentary, they received 67% of all positive comments about physicality, confirming an over-representation of European players on this theme. Some of the most recurrent comments in this category referred to the strength or physical fitness of the players, with comments such as “no lo pueden parar” (they can’t stop him), “es corpulento” (he is corpulent) or “una auténtica bala incansable” (an authentic relentless bullet). Since the (White) European category was mostly composed of Spanish football players, we zoomed in on this category concluding that a large proportion of this type of commentary also referred to Spanish football players specifically (55 out of 74 comments). This included, for instance, comments referring to their power, athleticism or speed, such as “le pega muy fuerte” (hits the ball hard), “está en forma” (he is in good shape) or “tiene zancada” (he’s got good stride). These findings also contrast with earlier studies in other contexts where Black players have been found to be more often described in terms of physicality than their White counterparts (Campbell & Bebb, 2020; Hylton, 2009; Johnson & Romney, 2018; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). We will return to this finding in our Discussion section.

**Latin American Players**

In our data, players in the racial/ethnic category “Latin American” were constructed differently compared to other groups of players throughout the broadcasts. This occurred in various ways. Firstly, they were often negatively evaluated, as the percentages in the negative Evaluation theme (38%), compared to their share in the overall commentary (30%) seem to confirm. These comments referred mainly to their (perceived) poor performance, such as “su rendimiento no ha sido bueno” (his performance wasn’t good) or “apenas ha aparecido hoy” (he’s barely appeared today). Other comments expressed doubt about their future in the team, such as “no creo que esté para jugar en el primer equipo la próxima temporada” (I don’t think he’ll be on the first team next season). Commentators also constructed football players of Latin American origin as different by means of explicitly mentioning their nationality. Almost half of all references (47%) to nationality in the broadcasts were made in relation to players we labeled as “Latin American” (while their share in the overall commentary was 30%). This can be seen in comments such as “allá va el
jugador argentino” (there he goes, the Argentinian player), referring to Giovanni Lo Celso; “recorta el mexicano” (the Mexican dribbles), referring to Diego Lainez, and “aplaudiendo al jugador brasileño” (applauding the Brazilian player), referring to Vinicius. These comments show how nationality can be used by commentators as a substitute of their actual name. A similar finding was made by Ličen (2015), who showed how football commentators in the Slovenian context used references to players’ nationality as a politically correct way to construct players as the Other, or even as a substitute for their race/ethnicity.

Lastly, throughout the broadcasts, commentators referred occasionally (18 comments in total) to the innate ability of players of Latin-American heritage to play football. While some of these comments referred to Messi, such as “parece fácil para él” (it seems easy to him), other Latin-American footballers also received comments such as “tiene talento” (he’s got talent), “ha rematado con esa tranquilidad y facilidad” (he shot with that calmness and ease), or “ha usado sus reflejos” (he has used his reflexes). Given the distinctive character of these comments and its small numbers, we did not categorize them within one of the umbrella themes, however it is worth describing them here since Latin American players received this type of comment relatively often. Earlier research by scholars such as Ogasawara (2004), Eagleman (2011) and Brennen and Brown (2016) have shown how innate ability has often been associated with African or Latin-American players (especially Brazilians) and not with (White) European players. Our findings show that the players we categorized as Latin American, with 7 comments (39%), received relatively many comments about innateness, meaning that they were slightly over represented in this type of commentary (Latin Americans received 30% of the total share of commentary). These numbers are small, though, so we suggest future research elaborates on this in a more extensive manner. On the other hand, players classified as (White) European, who received most of the commentary in general (56%), only received 5 comments (28%) on this type of commentary. Our results, thus, seem to indicate a tendency to associate Latin American players with “innate” abilities.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore discourses about race/ethnicity in Spanish televised football commentary using a layered approach to race/ethnicity in order to overcome some of the limitations of the Black–White dichotomy used in previous studies (Hylton, 2009; Johnson & Romney, 2018). We found that some hegemonic discourses in Spanish everyday discourse such as the Black physicality discourse or the negative portrayal of people of North African origin were challenged in our data. We also found that the racial/ethnic category “Latin American” was in various ways constructed differently than other racial/ethnic categories. Interpretations to these findings as well as the limitations of this study and ideas for future research will be discussed in the following sections.
Challenging the Discourse About Those of North African Origin

Our results showed that players of North African origin were often portrayed positively, and specially within the theme Psychological/Cognitive, by being described relatively often as team players, leaders and intelligent, characteristics that contrast sharply with the negative depiction of people of North African origin in Spanish everyday discourse (Chakour & Portillo Fernández, 2018; Olmos Alcaraz & Rubio Gómez, 2013). This result is even more striking, considering that, in general, the comments on the theme Psychological/Cognitive were equally distributed within the positive and negative categories. However, this was not the case when looking specifically at the North African category, whose players received much more positive comment in this theme. Hence, our results show how the negative hegemonic everyday Spanish discourse about people of North African origin was challenged in the Spanish football commentary that we studied.

A plausible explanation for this counter-hegemonic finding could be the difficult incorporation of the particular negative discourse about the category of North Africans into football commentary. In other words, while football commentators can easily draw upon the often-documented physicality discourses when commenting on football, it may be less obvious for them to draw upon discourses that link a racial/ethnic category to criminality as happens in Spanish everyday discourse in relation to people of North African origin. This shows how the specific practice of (televised) football commentary may also generate its own football-specific discourses and not necessarily reflect societal discourses. Considering that all the positive commentary on the Psychological/Cognitive theme was directed towards two excellent players of North African heritage (Benzema and Brahim), and with earlier research showing how commentators tend to focus their commentary on individual “celebrity” players rather than on team play (Ogasawara, 2004; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012), it could also be possible that commentators identified these players as “exceptional players” in the first place, rather than as “North Africans,” making them less likely to rely on hegemonic discourses commonly associated to the category “North African.” This shows the dynamic nature of discourses and the constant negotiation over meaning that takes place in the media (Hall, 1995).

“Spanish” Physicality Discourse

Contrary to our expectations based on previous literature (Hylton, 2009; Johnson & Romney, 2018) our results did not reveal any specific pattern regarding the representation of Black or Black African players in terms of their physicality. Hence, once again, the results of our content analysis challenged hegemonic discourses on race/ethnicity that had been documented earlier in other countries, most notably England and the US (Bradbury et al., 2019; Deeb & Love, 2018). However, our study is not unique in this, as a few other studies also failed to find evidence for the Black
physicality discourse (Angelini & Billings, 2010; Lewis et al., 2019; Sabo et al., 1996).

The absence of the Black physicality discourse in our data could be an indication that some progress has been made in relation to biased representations of Black or African athletes in the context of (Spanish) sports. However, the lack of any notable discussion about covert racism in the sport context in Spain, combined with existing evidence of racial/ethnic discrimination in football stadiums (Aquino, 2017), renders this hypothesis unlikely.

One possible explanation could be found in our additional finding that Spanish (White) players were more often than other racial/ethnic categories described in terms of physicality. This “reversed” physicality discourse, where Black or Black African players were not described more often in terms of physicality, but instead, White Spanish players were, challenges the well-known brain vs. brawn racial bias (Cranmer et al., 2014; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). This finding may find its explanation in the conceptualization of the Spanish identity, which has been described by Spanish authors such as Pérzanck (2018) and Repinecz (2018) as “mixed” and as navigating between notions of “whiteness” and “otherness” as a result of its geographical situation and history. This ambivalent identity of “Spanishness” could explain the absence of a marked White brain vs. Black brawn bias in football commentary. In addition, traditional narratives surrounding the Spanish national team support the view of (White) Spanish football players as physically superior, as exemplified by the nickname of the (predominantly White) national football team, “La Furia Roja” (The Red Fury, in English), whose playing style was described as physical, passionate and forceful by the international press (Vaczi, 2015). However, these are early interpretations that should be explored by further examining Spanish football and sports commentary in future research.

**Othering Latin American Players?**

Our analysis revealed some interesting patterns in the discourse about players of Latin American origin. This group was relatively often criticized by the commentators, were associated with innate abilities, and their nationality was mentioned more often than that of players from other ethnic/racial categories. While none of these patterns was astounding in quantitative terms, altogether they can be considered an indication that the group of Latin American football players was subtly depicted as different from the other racial/ethnic categories by the Spanish football commentators.

One possible interpretation of the “Othering” of football players of Latin American origin, and that has already been documented for post-colonial societies such as England and the Netherlands in earlier studies (e.g., Carrington, 2002; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012), is that commentators use discourses that can be traced back to the colonial past of Spain. Quijano (2014) argued that colonizers constructed a discourse about the colonized (the Other) in opposition to them, by using binary categories
(primitive vs. civilized, mythical vs. scientific, nature vs. nurture) that positioned the colonized in a position of inferiority. Some scholars have shown how these discourses have prevailed until today and manifest themselves in different contexts in Spain (Olmos Alcaraz & Rubio Gomez, 2013; Solà et al., 2016). For example, Rubio Gomez (2017) showed how in the context of education, teachers describe students of Latin American origin as having an innate laziness and a deficient educational background. This is compatible with our findings that show how football players we categorized as “Latin American” are associated with innate abilities and evaluated more negatively. In the sports media context, Latin American and Hispanic athletes have also occasionally been associated with natural talents (Brennen & Brown, 2016; Eagleman, 2011). Finally, as Ličen (2015) suggested in relation to African footballers, it is possible that commentators mentioned the nationality of Latin American players as a way of “signaling” their “otherness” without being overtly racist.

**Conclusion**

This study adds to the international literature on race and sports media by providing new insights in the context of Spain, which is of particular interest due to its relatively “recent” status as receiver of immigration. Our analysis has yielded some insights on the discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in Spanish football post-match commentary and how these can be placed in larger societal discourses. It has shown the situatedness and complexity of discourses, by not reproducing some hegemonic discourses about race/ethnicity that circulate in Spanish everyday discourse while at the same time reproducing ideas that reinforce an “us” vs. “them” discourse and showing some signs of “Othering” that may be closely related to the Spanish colonial past. It has also showcased the salience of nationality as a possibly politically correct way of signaling the “Other”.

To conclude this article, we discuss some of the limitations of this study and suggest a few avenues for future research. While our results are very insightful, they cannot account by themselves for the impact of these media messages since audiences are conceived as having an active role in receiving and decoding mediated information (Ortega & Feagin, 2016). Therefore, it would be of interest for future research to address the role that audiences have in decoding these discourses. Similarly, it would be relevant to examine the processes that produce the media discourses including the role that the race/ethnicity of football journalists, who are mainly White males in the Spanish context, plays in these processes. Finally, the complex and bottom-up approach we used to identify themes in the commentary and conceptualize race/ethnicity allowed for a detailed analysis of racialized/ethnicized patterns in the football commentary, however we advise to do some follow-up content analyses for the Spanish context to enable a more elaborate analysis of some of our findings, maybe through the use of statistical testing. For example, in the future it would be interesting to explore how some of the patterns we have found,
such as the emphasis put on some players and the references to nationality, may be used in the (re)construction of the Other. Furthermore, it would be interesting to focus on the representations of minority ethnic footballers and examine how the so-called “second generation” minority footballers, or “hyphenated identities”, are represented, and how this intersects with notions of “Spanishness”. Finally, comparing these representations with that of players who arrived more recently to play football in Spain would also be of interest.

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**Notes**

1. In this study, race and ethnicity will be used as conflated terms, since they are often used interchangeably, also in Spanish everyday discourse. This will be further elaborated later in the paper.

2. The percentages mentioned here refer to the percentage of a particular group (e.g., “South Americans” or “those from EU countries”) within the total number of the immigrant population in Spain.

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