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# Talking football: Discourses about race/ethnicity among Spanish youth

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## Abstract

It is commonly accepted that sports media and televised football in particular are sites where ideas about race/ethnicity are (re)produced. However, less is known about how audiences deal with these messages: do they assume these ideas are true or do they negotiate them and if so, how? Using cultural studies as our theoretical framework, we conducted 14 focus groups among Spanish youth and asked them to reflect on ideas about race/ethnicity while talking about football. Results show that interviewees had difficulty in talking about race/ethnicity and that they not only reproduced dominant discourses about race/ethnicity but also negotiated other discourses. Interviewees also described Spanish sports media as sensationalistic and money driven.

## Keywords

Audience, discourse, ethnicity, football, race, Spain, sports media

## Introduction

Mediated sport is a powerful site for the (re)production of discourses about race/ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> Large audiences watch sporting contests that feature athletes from diverse racial/

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ethnic backgrounds while narrators and analysts, mostly White males (Billings et al., 2018), describe and comment on athletes' performances. Research has shown that sports journalists tend to draw on racial stereotypes when commenting sporting events, such as football or basketball championships (e.g. Campbell and Bebb, 2022; Rada, 1996; Rainville and McCormick, 1977). Most notably, Black athletes are thought to have a natural predisposition to do well in sports, and they are more often described as naturally strong and fast (Hylton, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2003), while White athletes, and White footballers in particular, are more often described as smart players or leaders (e.g. Van Sterkenburg, 2020; Rada, 1996). In a recent study, Campbell and Bebb (2022) showed how during the men's 2018 FIFA World Cup, football commentators' positive praise differed for Black and White players, with Black players receiving significantly more praise centred on physicality and White players receiving significantly more praise directed at learned and cognitive skills such as technique or intelligence. In doing so, sports journalists provide biased representations of footballers and reproduce societal discourses about race/ethnicity that sustain inequalities and racial hierarchies. In Spain, televised football is very popular and watched by large audiences (Barlovento Comunicación, 2020), which makes it a relevant context to explore the role of sports media in the reproduction of discourses about race/ethnicity. Little research has been conducted in this area in Spain, but the few existing studies seem to show the contribution of Spanish televised football to dichotomous understandings of 'us' versus 'them' (e.g. Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg, 2022a; 2022b) and contribute to literature on racisms in Europe that disprove the idea of 'post-raciality' and reveal the different forms that racial descriptions and racist discourses can take (Salem and Thompson, 2016).

While studies on televised football have provided insightful knowledge on the role of sports commentary content in reproducing race/ethnicity discourses, little is known about how Spanish audiences deal with these messages since not much attention has been given to the study of audience reactions. This knowledge gap is noteworthy considering that communication theories and key works by media scholars such as Fiske (1999), Hall (1999) and Morley (2006) have shown how audiences are active in their meaning-making and hence, able to negotiate or challenge hegemonic meanings within media texts. Therefore, in this article, we pay attention to audience meaning-making processes with the aim of better understanding how audiences negotiate football media discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in Spain.

## **Theoretical framework**

Our theoretical perspective in approaching sports media and audience receptions is influenced by cultural studies, a field of research that explores how cultural meanings are created through cultural production. From this perspective, we understand televised football as a place characterized by its visible racial/ethnic diversity and therefore a relevant context where meanings about race/ethnicity are constructed. A central concept within cultural studies is that of discourse, which Hall (1997) defines as 'ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice' (p. 4), as with the topic of race/ethnicity. Foucault (1980) discusses the way discourses are inextricably linked to power, in part through the way dominant discourses are constructed by and constructive

of powerful groups in society. Power also hints at the way discourses *naturalize* knowledge, that is, legitimize particular ways of understanding or describing phenomena or people as *natural* instead of *socially constructed* (Hall, 1999). Considering that sport newsrooms are mostly composed of White men (Billings et al., 2018), discourses produced in newsrooms in terms of views, norms and values, and stereotypes about minoritized groups reflect the habitus of that specific group.

## Audiences' reading of sports media

As explained earlier, various content analyses have shown how televised football commentary reproduces racialized discourses. While traditional accounts such as agenda-setting theory or cultivation theory place relative emphasis on how media messages impact (and cultivate) audience discourses, a Cultural Studies approach places more emphasis on audiences' active role in the decoding process. This implies that to understand how television media discourses operate vis-à-vis their audiences, we need to understand how audiences *decode* mediated messages. This theoretical perspective suggests audiences may accept the dominant meanings encoded by the media, but also that they are able to negotiate or even oppose those meanings through their own reference frameworks (Hall, 1999).

The few existing audience studies (e.g. Van Sterkenburg et al., 2019; Buffington and Fraley, 2008; McCarthy et al., 2003) in the field of sports media have shed some light on the way this decoding process occurs, showing how audiences often read sports media texts in their intended way, but can also sometimes negotiate or oppose them. For example, Buffington and Fraley (2008) conducted an experiment that showed how a group of college students associated statements with references to athletic skills more often to Black basketball players than to White players. Unexpectedly, the participants also associated Black players with leadership skills more often than with White players. However, open-ended answers from these students showed how Black players' leadership skills were justified by their excellent physical characteristics, whereas when students explained White players' leadership, they did so by referring to mental skills. Thus, the college students also reproduced stereotypical discourses about race/ethnicity and a 'brawn vs brain' distinction in the context of sport. Only a small group of students provided critical answers that pointed out racial stereotyping. Studies also suggest that audience members' own positionality on a series of social dimensions such as gender or race/ethnicity play a role in their reactions to and interpretations of media discourses within the sporting context. For example, McCarthy et al. (2003) showed that British Black audience members critically identified Black natural physicality discourses in football commentary, while White audience members only partially acknowledged stereotypical depictions of Black players and disregarded its negative social implications.

Audience studies have provided relevant insights but are scarce and focus on a limited number of national contexts, such as the United States, the United Kingdom or the Netherlands. Moreover, they sometimes provide contrasting findings that call for further research. While McCarthy et al. (2003) found that audience interpretations of race in televised British football were connected to the racial positionalities of audience members, the study by Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers (2004) concluded that Dutch

audience discourses overlap with hegemonic sports media discourses regardless of the race/ethnicity of audiences. Also, as Hylton and Lawrence (2015) and Van Sterkenburg et al. (2019) have shown in their respective studies, football audience discourses about race/ethnicity intersect with discourses about other markers of difference such as cultural identity, nationality, gender or religion. Thus, research about audience interpretations should also attend to how meanings given to race/ethnicity go beyond the Black natural physicality discourse and intersect with various social dimensions. Recent studies have also shown audience members challenging hegemonic racial sports media discourses. In the study by Ash and Cranmer (2020), participants did not use racialized interpretative frames when evaluating the social attractiveness of student-athletes, and in the study by Van Sterkenburg and Walder (2021) a relatively large proportion of audience members expressed critical views towards racial stereotypes in football.

## Race, ethnicity and national identity in Spain

Race, which we understand as a socially constructed concept, is often used to classify people according to supposed biological differences while ethnicity is often used to refer to the shared cultural heritage of a group of people (Gunaratnam, 2003). However, although we acknowledge they are distinct concepts in analytical terms, in this article, we will use them as two conflated constructs, 'race/ethnicity', to reflect the interconnectedness of both terms. As Hall (2000) points out, ethnic characteristics are presented as 'relatively fixed; inherent within a group' (p. 110) in the same way as biological, racial characteristics are. In other words, both concepts are used to construct groups with monolithic and fixed characteristics (Gunaratnam, 2003). Moreover, in popular discourse, ethnic and racial criteria are often associated and conflated when classifying people. An example of the interrelation between race and ethnicity in the Spanish context is the category *Moro* (Moor), which 'evolved from a geographical term to one for religion to one that indicated skin colour, each connotation blurring with the others' (Marks, 2013: 53). In contemporary Spain, the category Moor has negative connotations and conflates meanings around 'race and religion, geography and culture, history and present' (Gil Flores, 2019). The term is often used in informal talk by the White hegemonic population to refer to people of Moroccan origin (Azarmandi, 2017) who are one of the largest migrant groups in Spain (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021).

Spanish identity has historically been constructed as White and Christian (Framolinero, 2009) and groups or individuals that are perceived as deviating from these identities have been and continue to be marginalized. In today's Spain, 'the main targets of racial injustice [. . .] are people of African descent, Muslims, non-white Latin Americans, Asians and Gitanos [Gypsies]' (Azarmandi, 2017: 177). These racial/ethnic groups are some of the most salient in Spanish everyday discourses. In the results and discussion sections of this article we use the categories employed by participants, thus taking a bottom-up approach to the racial/ethnic categorization of groups in Spain. As in other European countries, the term race has been replaced in Spain by terms such as 'ethnicity' or 'culture', which circumvent yet reproduce the construction of differences as biological, natural and immutable (Lentin, 2014). Despite numerous reports showing the discrimination that these racial/ethnic groups experience (Cea d'Ancona

and Valles Martínez, 2021; Mamadou et al., 2020), institutional discourses and policies, but also everyday discourses, within the Spanish context are characterized by colour blindness, assuming a post-racial Spain where racism is pictured as ahistorical, anecdotal, and is reduced to the individual level (Goldberg, 2006; Rodríguez-García, 2022; Sebastiani, 2021). These colour-blind discourses also obscure the privileges associated with whiteness and leave current forms of racisms un-interrogated (Azarmandi, 2017; Sebastiani, 2021).

Mediated international sporting competitions have contributed to the formation of collective national identities, for example, by using national stereotypes and heroes (Crolley et al., 2000; Quiroga Fernández de Soto, 2014). Spain is a pluri-national country, made up of different regions that are characterized by their own history, culture, policies and language, such as Catalonia, where the data for this study was gathered. Sports media has played an important role in the construction of the Spanish identity as well as regional identities like the Catalan one (O'Brien, 2017; Quiroga Fernández de Soto, 2014). Spanish football audiences identify with more than one national, regional or local identity, which adds complexity to the exploration and interpretation of the audiences' meaning-making processes studied in this article. O'Brien (2017) and Quiroga Fernández de Soto (2014) provide an explanation of the paradoxes and contradictions that surround *La Roja* (the Spanish national team) and the construction of national and regional identities. They explain, for example, how despite a growing support for political independence of Catalonia, the successes of *La Roja* during the Euro 2008 and 2012 and the 2010 World Cup were also widely embraced and celebrated in Catalonia (O'Brien, 2017; Quiroga Fernández de Soto, 2014). However, recent political developments and the renewal of the Spanish national team, with less renown Catalan players than in the past, call for updated accounts on the role of Spanish football in the construction of national identity.

## Spanish sports media landscape

Sport has an important place in the Spanish media landscape, with football occupying most of the sports content in television, radio and the press (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon-Vegas, 2021). According to a recent survey aimed at showcasing the sporting habits of the Spanish population, about 70% of the population consumes sport content through television (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2022) and every year, football matches are among the top three most viewed television broadcasts (Barlovento Comunicación, 2020). Given the prominence of television in the sports media landscape, this study takes television as the main point of reference when talking about sports media. Despite the relatively small body of literature on the role of sports media in the construction of race/ethnicity and national identity in Spain, there seems to be evidence to suggest that the reproduction of racial/ethnic stereotypes and the articulation of whiteness is similar across different mediums such as television, print media and the radio (Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg, 2022b; Mauro and Martínez-Corcuera, 2021; Ramón-Vegas, 2017).

Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon-Vegas, (2021) explain how the rigour and quality of Spanish sports media have drastically decreased in the past years due to the prioritization of economic profit over quality among Spanish media companies. As a result, sports

media broadcasts have turned into entertaining shows where humour and gossip prevail above rigour or quality. Rojas-Torrijos and Ramón-Vegas (2021) also explain that Spanish sports media can be considered particularly male-centred business, with most of its content focused on masculine sports and men's football. Although there are no official records on the racial/ethnic backgrounds of journalists, a sample of sports journalists reported a lack of racial/ethnic diversity with most of them being White (Longas Luque et al., unpublished). Football audiences have often been described as masculine, although recent reports show that a relatively high percentage (45%) of women also follow televised football in Spain (De la Iglesia and García, 2022).

## Methods

### *Data collection: focus groups*

The first author of this article conducted 14 focus groups of two to six participants each, interviewing in total 27 female participants and 25 male participants in Barcelona (Spain) and its surroundings. Participants were aged between 18 and 35 years old, had different racial/ethnic backgrounds and lived in Barcelona's metropolitan area. Eight of the focus groups were composed of White participants only, five groups were composed of individuals with various racial/ethnic backgrounds (including White) and one focus group was formed by Black participants only. In this classification, we understand White as individuals perceived as belonging to the dominant (and privileged) group and Black as individuals with a visible African heritage, mostly characterized by skin colour. By 'mixed' groups we mean groups with at least two interviewees with two different racial/ethnic backgrounds of any kind. With this group description we intend to provide the reader with a general idea of how homogeneous or heterogeneous the groups in the sample were, but we also acknowledge the oversimplified and essentializing nature of this classification.

Focus groups are group conversations led by a moderator that try to reproduce informal conversations with the aim of understanding participants' preferences, meanings, attitudes or opinions on a topic (Brennen, 2017). Peek and Fothergill (2009) argue that smaller focus groups may work better to address sensitive topics like race/ethnicity, especially since larger groups make it easier for dominant participants to impede the participation of more quiet individuals. We used snowball sampling and spontaneous recruitment at public spaces such as universities or parks. Focus groups were voice recorded with the consent of the participants, lasted between half an hour to 2 hours and were held at the participants' homes, university cafeterias or parks. Each of the participants received 5 euros as compensation for their participation.

The focus groups were conducted in Barcelona and its metropolitan area, situated in the autonomous community of Catalonia. They were conducted in Spanish or Catalan,<sup>2</sup> the two most widely spoken languages in the area, and moderated by the first author of this article who used a topic list structured along the following main topics: (1) Televised football consumption, (2) Participant's own discourses about race/ethnicity in the context of football and (3) Evaluation of football media coverage. The focus groups started with a presentation of the researcher and a brief description of the study, followed by a



presentation of the interviewees. After that introduction phase, the participants were asked questions touching upon the three topics mentioned previously. In four out of the seven focus groups – those who were held indoors – the participants watched a 10-minute long video of a football match, live broadcasted by a commercial TV channel, where commentators used several racial/ethnic stereotypes with the aim of triggering a discussion afterwards as well as to hear participants' comments while watching the clip. The viewing of the video did not seem to have any impact on the results obtained as we did not find any difference in discourses between the groups that did and did not watch the video fragment. At the end of the focus groups, participants were asked whether they had ever reflected on these issues before the interview in order to explore whether such a discussion on race was new to them or not. Finally, they were given the opportunity to express final thoughts on the issues discussed.

### *Data analysis*

The conversations were transcribed verbatim and analysed in Atlas.ti using insights of grounded theory and following open, axial and selective coding phases (Boeije, 2010). First, we coded relevant fragments and labelled them according to their perceived meaning. Second, we classified these codes into meaningful categories and sub-categories. Finally, we refined the analysis by integrating the data and finding relationships among the different categories to form themes that allowed us to understand the discourses that the interviewees used surrounding race/ethnicity as well as whiteness. We stopped the analysis when we reached a saturation point and could not find any more themes from further exploration of the data (Boeije, 2010). Besides the main themes, our results section will also show counterevidence found during the analysis. The following 'Results' section will present the four main themes and will be followed by a 'Discussion' section where the themes will be placed in a wider academic and societal perspective.

### *Researcher's situatedness*

Our research process is shaped from beginning to end by who we are and where we are positioned in society (Fletcher, 2014; Frankenberg, 2004). Our positionalities as two White females and one White male researcher living in White hegemonic societies have shaped the process of carrying out this study. By this, we mean the knowledge generated from this study needs to be understood as *situated* within a context of White hegemony and as the product of White researchers whose experiences and subjectivities are characterized by the privileges associated with Whiteness in academia and society. In addition, the main researcher of this study, who also moderated the focus groups, is of Catalan and Spanish origin, and grew up in the area where the data collection took place, which facilitated the recruitment of participants. On the one hand, being familiar with the social context and discourses used by the participants facilitated the moderation of the focus groups because of the shared meanings. On the other hand, it may have led to a more superficial exploration of certain topics by taking for granted certain meanings, although working within an international group of researchers throughout the research process



minimized such risks. We have used reflexivity as a tool to understand and make visible this dynamic process and we have used our theoretical framework as a guiding principle throughout all stages of research. In addition, we discussed the socio-constructed nature of race and reflected on the negative consequences of racialized discourses with the interviewees to minimize the impact that our research might have in reinforcing racial thinking (Hylton, 2009).

## Results

### *Talking about race*

Throughout the data collection, it was evident that interviewees were not used to reflect or talk about race/ethnicity. For example, when we asked them to present themselves, none of the White participants used racial/ethnic categories but instead used other dimensions such as gender, age, occupation or personality. Most White interviewees reported never having thought about their racial/ethnic background and when asked to reflect on how they would define themselves in racial/ethnic terms, many of the interviewees used the word 'Caucasian',<sup>3</sup> possibly showing the influence of North-American language where this term is more often used than in other parts of Europe to refer to White people (though also increasingly infrequent) (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Moses, 2017). 'White', 'Spanish' and 'European' were common answers too. Some White interviewees suggested that certain terms were inadequate to use, such as ethnicity being more correct than race, or Caucasian better than White ('Caucasian. Because White sounds really bad'). About half of the interviewees with a minoritized racial/ethnic background were also hesitant in defining themselves in racial/ethnic terms, suggesting that, although aware of their racialized positionings, they reproduced European and Spanish conventions of avoiding talking about race (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Sebastiani, 2021). The other half of interviewees with a minoritized racial/ethnic background, mostly women, seemed to have a clearer idea of the meaning of race/ethnicity and of their own racial/ethnic positionings as they defined themselves as 'Arab woman' or 'Black woman'. The difficulty in discussing race/ethnicity was also evident through the lack of vocabulary and hesitation that participants showed during the conversations, as illustrated in the following interviewee's answer to the moderator's question about which racial or ethnic groups were visible in football: 'There are, there are. . .but I don't know how they're called'. Interviewees also tended to conflate race/ethnicity with other dimensions such as nationality or religion. This occurred, for example, when the moderator asked participants which racial/ethnic groups they were able to identify in football players, and interviewees' answers included nationalities and religions.

In contrast with the difficulty in talking about race/ethnicity, most groups were aware of the existence of prejudice, inequalities and racism in football ('There are many Black players that have had to confront with absolute racism. I've seen in stadiums how they insult them') and in the media in general ('When you watch the news, if you see a person of colour, it is always extreme poverty, they (portray them) doing physical work and all that. About other ethnicities, they show different things'), albeit they found it difficult to identify racialized discourses in the sports media in particular.

## Stereotypes

As explained earlier, it was difficult for interviewees to name racial/ethnic groups in football. After some hesitation or further explanation from the moderator, most interviewees were able to name ‘Black football players’<sup>4</sup> in first place, and ‘South Americans’ in the second place. In everyday talk in Spain, the category ‘Black’ is often used to refer to individuals with dark skin and other physical characteristics typically associated with an African heritage. The term ‘South American’ is typically associated to individuals with a migrant background originating in Central- and South America. In three of the focus groups, interviewees did not mention the category of ‘Asian football players’, so the moderator introduced this category to facilitate the discussion. In everyday talk in Spain, the category ‘Asian’ is often associated with people of East Asian heritage, particularly Chinese, who are the largest Asian immigrant group (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2022). We considered it important to discuss this category since the Spanish league features Asian players and research shows how this social group is stereotyped in sports media in other national contexts (Park, 2014).

The Black natural athleticism stereotype was reproduced by most interviewees, describing Black football players as physically strong and especially good at running. They also provided biological accounts for it, as can be seen in the following quotation:

For example, I am into swimming . . . you will not see a person of color -I will say it in a bad way – you won’t see a Black [person] in the water, because it appears that because of how they’re built, their bones are heavier . . . And for example, all of those who run are African. And it’s because the bone structure is harder. (White woman, 18 years old)

Only three interviewees rejected the notion that Black footballers might have any kind of biological advantage. One of them, a woman with a minoritized background, argued that footballer’s abilities were related to the football league where they played or to the type of coach they had. The other two interviewees, a White woman and a Black man, offered more critical views and explained that Black football players had a physical profile because society expected them to excel in physical skills and, as a result, worked hard towards improving those skills, and also because they were often placed by coaches in positions that required such skills.

The second most salient racial/ethnic group that interviewees mentioned was South American. These players were portrayed in a positive light, described as good football players who are passionate, courageous and hardworking, which contrasts with a common stereotype that characterizes this group as ‘lazy’ (Enesco et al., 2005; Olmos Alcaraz, 2017). These players were also described as ‘team players’, ‘skilled’, ‘naughty’ and ‘a bit harsh’ (meaning that they play with a lot of physical contact). Most interviewees provided socioeconomic and cultural explanations for the positive image of South American football players. On the one hand, participants explained that poverty in the players’ countries of origin, together with the fact that people tend to spend a lot of time outdoors, were the perfect ground for good football players to emerge. Others mentioned that football was very popular in South American countries and therefore produced good, passionate, dedicated players. The following conversation among three White friends exemplifies this discourse:

South Americans. They've always been very good at football. . . . And I think it's because of that culture of being on the street. They stay on the streets since they're very little, they don't stay at home so much as maybe Spaniards . . . I haven't stayed outdoors that much. They, on the contrary, they're outdoors. And how do they have fun? Kicking a ball, which is very easy . . . you make a ball . . . (White man, 18 years old)

The cheapest they have. Because if you look at the countries . . . I don't know. Economically [we're talking about] underdeveloped countries. And they don't have goods for making ping pong tables or whatever. It's the easiest and most known in that country. (White woman, 18 years old)

Asian football players were portrayed as weak and unfit for the football game, and participants provided biological and cultural explanations for their underrepresentation in the European and Spanish leagues. For example, they were often described as 'short', 'small' and 'thin', and participants also argued that 'in their culture' football was not very popular. From the interviewees' statements it became evident that when they talked about 'Asia', they used it as a synonym for 'China' and also to a lesser extent 'Japan', reducing the category to these two national contexts.

With regard to Asians, I think that they're very good at badminton, ping pong. Because they're smaller, lighter people. And I think they're more agile. And in sports like ping pong, where you need short-range explosivity, they're good at, I guess, because . . . well also because it's more often played there. Here we don't play ping pong that much. I don't know how they play there, how popular football is there . . . Over there are other sports like karate . . . (White man, 18 years old)

Only one Black interviewee provided a more critical account of the underrepresentation of football players with an Asian background. He argued that some professional football clubs hired *one* very good, outstanding Asian player to show that they embrace diversity, in the interviewee's words: 'That sort of "cool tokenism" like "well, if we already have one, everything's fine"'.

As explained in the theoretical framework, the racial/ethnic category of the Moor, often used to refer to people of Moroccan origin, but which also conflates meanings around religion and culture, is a very salient one in Spain. However, this group was largely absent from the participants' discourses, they did not recognize or name this group in the context of football. We will elaborate upon this in the 'Discussion' section.

### *Constructing nationhood and belongingness*

Most participants reported some sort of connection with the Spanish national team, although these connections varied in intensity within and across groups. One common explanation for those with somewhat weaker identifications was that the team had recently incorporated many new young talents and participants had not yet formed a strong bond with them. Only two focus groups explicitly rejected any sort of identification with the team because of their political positioning with regards to the relationship Spain-Catalonia. Instead, they reported a stronger Catalan identity.<sup>5</sup> When this happened, we asked them to reflect on the Catalan national team,<sup>6</sup> as can be seen in one of the quotes included later in this section.

White football players such as Andrés Iniesta, Gerard Piqué or Carles Puyol were more often praised for cognitive traits than for purely physical, football-related skills, and they were often mentioned as interviewees' favourite football players. Characteristics that were appreciated about these players were their intelligence (on the field and outside of the field), their values and morality, as can be seen in the following quote about Gerard Piqué: '. . . he's someone who's very clear-headed. I think he's got a logic reasoning . . . and cool ideals'. Participants also tended to describe the Spanish national team style of play as 'not physical', but rather 'tactical' or 'technical', coinciding with dominant discourses about the Spanish national team (Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg, 2022a).

When discussing interviewee's opinions on non-White football players playing for the Spanish national team, most interviewees answered that they were 'fine with it', but also seemed to condition their openness towards diversity. Players perceived to be of a racial/ethnic minority background were indeed expected by participants to be good players, contribute positively to the team, but also to 'feel Spanish' and 'defend the Spanish values'. Thus, it can be said that interviewees implicitly referred to the importance of adhering to some shared cultural heritage for minority players to be accepted in playing for the Spanish team. The following interaction between interviewees showcases this argumentation:

I'm fine with it.

As long as they perform well and they represent us as a team, okay.

Of course. If they are willing to defend those colours, that is, the Spanish colours and they feel it that way . . . if they feel it, if they feel Spanish, there's no problem. (Two White women, 18 years old)

However, interviewees often rejected the idea of naturalising football players just for them to play with the national team, as this participant expresses here:

If they [scouts] see them playing since they're children, and they are very good or they see a future in them and they want to bring them only with the aim of playing, I'm not okay with it. But, if they're people that come here, for whatever reason, that have been raised here and have been from here their entire lifetime, then I'm fine with it. (White woman, 30 years old)

The few interviewees who expressed reluctance to racial/ethnic diversity in the Spanish national team mentioned various reasons for it. For example, one of them criticised the fact that some of the naturalised players 'get their passports ready within no time' whereas other immigrants have to wait for years, and two others used rather vague arguments around national purity as in the following quote:

Personally, if I see a Catalan national team where there is no one from Catalonia maybe I'd be annoyed. Because then, national teams would not have any sense . . . If you have a defender called Mohammed . . . you know? There's a minimum. (White man, 21 years old)

Overall, for most interviewees, racial/ethnic diversity within the national team did not seem to play a central role as long as the conditions mentioned above were met. Only two interviewees discussed racial/ethnic diversity in the national team without conditioning their acceptance. For them it was 'normal' that in a diverse, globalised country or context, national teams exhibit

racial/ethnic diversity among their players, or as one Black participant put it: 'There should be diversity in a diverse country'.

### *Sports media*

Interviewees pictured the Spanish sports media as a 'circus' and criticized it for being too sensationalistic, searching controversy and 'distorting' reality with the aim of making economic profit. They criticized how sports journalists always 'try to put footballers down' and 'focus too much on details' by 'analysing something that has already happened and that has no solution'. They also described sports media as partisan, meaning that football journalists often favoured their team of preference. It is important to mention here that, when referring to sports media in the context of Spain, participants mostly referred to football-related media, since in Spain football monopolizes most of the content of sports media (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon-Vegas, 2021). As this participant put it, Spanish sports media is seen as 'gossip journalism':

For me, Spanish sports media, I think, they've ended in a position that they don't know what to do, because they have entered the 'gossip journalism' . . . Players don't like to speak to them anymore . . . because they know that they will say a sentence and they [the journalists] will take it out of context . . . Now there are new communication forms, such as Ibai [a Spanish youtuber], who livestreams with many football players, because they're comfortable [with him]. (White man, 20 years old)

Summing up, most of the interviewees were very critical of Spanish sports media and portrayed it as a money-driven business at the expense of journalistic rigour. The researcher also asked interviewees whether they thought Spanish sports media treated football players differently or not depending on their racial/ethnic background, after explaining to them the results found in other countries that show how sports media tend to incorporate racial bias in their coverage (e.g. Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg, 2022a; Deeb and Love, 2018; Hylton, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2003) A large number of the participants in our study responded that they thought the Spanish media did the same, however, they found it difficult to provide examples. Only two interviewees were capable of doing so by pointing out the differential treatment that Ansu Fati, a young, Black football player, received from the media. They pointed out to the fact that the Spanish media often gave extra attention to his origins (he was born in Guinea-Bissau) and that the cameras in the field often spotlighted his (Black) parents:

Yes, I remember they always put the camera focus on Ansu Fati's father and say 'And this is Ansu Fati's father'. And Pedri has started playing at the same age, because you may think that they [the media] do it because they're just 16 and 'look, his father is there'. But Pedri started playing at the same age and they don't spotlight his father. (White man, 31 years old)

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The results of this study have provided preliminary insights into how young (18–35) Spanish football audiences construct meanings of race/ethnicity through football talk. Interviewees had difficulty in discussing issues of race/ethnicity despite showing varying

degrees of racism awareness. Racial/ethnic stereotypes were also articulated in interviewees' discourses, echoing those found in previous content analyses of football commentary (Deeb and Love, 2018; Hylton, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2003). Interviewees constructed 'Spanishness' through football talk and described Spanish sports media as lacking credibility and rigorousness. The theoretical implications of these results will be discussed further in the next paragraphs.

Our analysis suggests that the participants lacked resources to discuss issues of race/ethnicity, as shown by the difficulty they had in defining themselves in racial/ethnic terms as well as in identifying different racial/ethnic groups in football. These results also applied to some individuals with a minoritized background. Interviewees' hesitancy and doubtfulness when confronted with the term *race* might be explained by the fact that this term has been almost completely banished from public discourse in many countries in Europe, including Spain, partly because of the atrocities committed in the name of race during World War II. Race has then been replaced by 'ethnicity' that does not explicitly evoke the biological connotations that race has, albeit covertly reproducing similar processes of in- and exclusion (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Rodríguez-García, 2022). Even though the moderator used the words race and ethnicity together and interchangeably in the focus groups, the latter also seemed to present difficulties for the interviewees to use. Such difficulty in talking about race/ethnicity might also be seen as the result of decades of colour-blind, raceless (Goldberg, 2006) public discourses and policies that deny the existence of race and racism, and motivated by the belief that not talking about differences among people will lead to more equality (Rodríguez-García, 2022). Within this context, race and racism are sensitive topics, which might have also contributed to interviewees not feeling comfortable speaking about these issues in front of a moderator whom they did not know. That the same applied to participants with a minoritized background is more surprising as it contradicts studies that show non-White individuals perceive and articulate racial experiences better than Whites (e.g. Stokke, 2021). This might suggest racialized participants reproduced dominant colourblind narratives during the focus groups, possibly because of the presence of other White participants and of the White moderator but it could also be interpreted as a reflection of the pervasiveness of colour-blind discourses in Spanish society.

The difficulty in speaking about race/ethnicity also exposed the conflation of both terms in everyday football talk and their overlap with other social dimensions such as nationality or religion. This was evident when interviewees interchangeably used these different concepts, as previous studies also found (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2019). The conflation of race and ethnicity was also noticeable when interviewees provided biological and cultural explanations for Asian football players' performance, who were described both as being physically unfit for football and as preferring other sports because of cultural upbringing. Altogether, interviewees' difficulty and uneasiness in discussing matters of race/ethnicity exposes the lack of a public debate on racism in Spain (Sebastiani, 2021), a discussion which would be necessary given numerous examples of racial discrimination and inequalities reported in this country (Cea d'Ancona and Valles Martínez, 2021; Mamadou et al., 2020).

One key characteristic of Whiteness is the privilege that White individuals experience in being able to navigate through society without reflecting on their own racial/ethnic



background (Essed and Trienekens, 2008). This privilege was evident among our White interviewees who reported never having thought about their racial/ethnic identification. Some of the participants with a minoritized racial/ethnic background provided similar answers, further echoing the power imbalances in focus groups that may have prevented racialized participants from speaking out about their racial/ethnic identifications and experiences. Interviewees' answers also illustrated how hegemonic discourses constructed from a White, Western-centred perspective are reproduced through football talk. This happened, for instance, when participants constructed Black footballers as physically superior and Asian footballers as unfit for football. Furthermore, Spanish White football players were often praised for their intelligence, echoing dominant discourses about racial/ethnic difference that construct Blackness and Whiteness as two opposing binaries. Football talk also served to reproduce uncritical, monolithic and devaluating images of South-America as a poor, underdeveloped country and therefore reinforce the superiority of Spain.

Similarly to Tamir's (2020) and Van Sterkenburg et al.'s (2019) studies, interviewees seemed to partially accept racial/ethnic diversity in the national team. While most interviewees did not explicitly oppose racial/ethnic diversity in the national teams, the fact that their acceptance was conditional reveals an implicit normative understanding of Spanish and Catalan identity as White. Consequently, more is required from non-White players to be accepted as members of the national team. The fact that interviewees did not use explicit racial or ethnic criteria such as skin colour or culture while discussing their attitudes towards racial/ethnic diversity in the Spanish national team can be understood as a reflection of the 'raceless' (Goldberg, 2006) context in which the interviewees find themselves and where colour-blind discourses are common in public and everyday discourses (Azarmandi, 2017; Rodríguez- García, 2022; Sebastiani, 2021). However, the participants often mentioned criteria such as being born or raised in Spain or Catalonia which can be understood as covert references to sharing an ethnic background. The criterion participants mentioned most often for 'deserving' to play in the Spanish team was 'to feel Spanish', which could be interpreted as an expectation for non-White footballers to 'act' or 'do' Spanish. This suggests a solid and racialized understanding of Spanishness, even among groups that did not report a strong national identification with Spain. A suggestion for future research is thus to focus solely on the construction of national and regional identities through football talk in order to provide more nuanced accounts that take into consideration the multiple national identifications that exist in Spain.

These results also show the situatedness of discourses in time and place. This was illustrated by the interviewees' construction of South American players whom they described using similar, but more positively connoted, characteristics as those found in previous research. In other words, while previous content analyses, in Spain and abroad, have found that South American athletes are evaluated relatively negatively and constructed as 'hot tempered' (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012; Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg, 2022a), the interviewees in our study constructed them as 'courageous' and 'passionate', which can be understood as similar descriptors but with a more positive connotation. On the one hand, an explanation for this positive image could be the predominance over the years of acclaimed South American football players and coaches in the Spanish league, such as Leo Messi or Diego Simeone. On the other hand, from a cultural



studies perspective, this interpretation shift could be understood as resulting from the use of different interpretative frames of reference, in this case, the Spanish context. For instance, some studies have shown that South American immigrants are evaluated more positively than other migrant groups in Spanish everyday discourses because of perceived cultural proximity, especially through a shared language (Azarmandi, 2017; Izquierdo et al., 2003). The positive positioning of South American footballers specifically shows how audiences' frames of reference which, in this case, are informed by the Spanish context, play a role in the construction or reinterpretation of discourses. These results are inconsistent with the results of a previous content analysis of televised football commentary in Spain which showed that football commentators tended to evaluate South-American footballers more negatively than footballers with other backgrounds (Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg, 2022a), suggesting an active role of audiences in interpreting and reusing dominant discourses of televised football.

Interviewees did not name or recognize Muslim or Arab football players as a racial/ethnic group. As explained earlier, in Spain, ideas about Muslimness and Arab culture are agglutinated under the category of the Moor which is often applied to people of Moroccan origin. This category is very salient in Spanish everyday discourse and, therefore, could also be present in football talk. However, this was not the case in this study, maybe because the discourses associated with this racial/ethnic category, often surrounding terrorism and violence, may be difficult to apply to the context of football in contrast with, for instance, the Black natural athleticism discourse. However, as previous research has shown, the nature of the questions asked may also have an impact on the type of answers provided by interviewees (Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004). By this we mean that our choice for the expression *racial/ethnic groups* may have prompted interviewees to think about certain categories such as 'Black' or 'South American' but not about other categories such as 'Muslims' or 'Arabs', which interviewees might identify as *religious minorities*. Future research could explore this further.

Finally, most interviewees shared a negative evaluation of Spanish sports media, which they described as 'gossip journalism' and which translated in a loss of interest in watching televised football. Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon-Vegas (2021) argue that, in the last decade, the Spanish sports media landscape has undergone a profound transformation not only by diversifying the number of sports programmes and channels but also by spectacularising its content and using extreme sensationalism to maximize profits. While this formula may be successful to some extent, our results seem to indicate an opposite effect on the young people we interviewed, who instead, feel more attracted towards new forms of media that allow them to be informed about football, such as Twitter or live streaming platforms such as Twitch.

Overall, these results have shown how football talk reproduces dominant discourses about race/ethnicity that reinforce White hegemony, in part by constructing Spanish and Catalan identities as White in subtle ways. Findings also suggest that there is room for audiences to negotiate meanings informed from mainstream media. This article has also shown that Spanish youth lacks resources to speak about race, ethnicity and racism, as well as whiteness, which may find its explanation in the raceless and colour-blind public policies and discourses. This highlights the need to give more visibility to anti-racist voices to work towards a more inclusive society.

Future research could examine more in-depth how discourses about race/ethnicity vary according to interviewees' racial/ethnic identifications, since our results did not reveal clear differences between White participants and participants with a minoritized racial/ethnic background. It could be that because of the set-up of the focus groups, White narratives might have been amplified, thus future research should take this into consideration. Another avenue for future research could be to investigate how Spanish audiences give meaning to race/ethnicity in intersection with other markers of difference such as skin tone, for example, by exploring the case of Black South American football players. This is also relevant given the recent anti-Black racism that Brazilian footballer Vinicius Jr had to endure in Spain. Such an exploration can provide more insights into how race is constructed and how it operates in distinguishing Black South American players from White South American players. Finally, we realize these findings are based on a small group of young audiences from urban areas in Barcelona and its surroundings and should not be generalized to wider Spanish audiences, especially considering the pluri-national nature of the Spanish state and the multiple national identities which Spaniards may identify with. However, we do believe they contribute to a more in-depth understanding of discourses surrounding race/ethnicity that young people draw on within an under-researched context.

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### Notes

1. While we acknowledge the theoretical differences between race and ethnicity, in this article, we will use them as one conflated concept reflecting its use in Spanish everyday discourse. This choice is further explained in the theoretical framework.
2. Participants were allowed to choose the language they wanted to use during the focus group.
3. All quotes from the participants included in the article have been translated from Spanish to English by the first author.
4. Throughout the 'Results' and 'Discussion' sections, we will use the same terms that (most) participants used when discussing racial/ethnic groups.
5. Some participants only identify with the Catalan nation, which explains the rejection of some participants of the Spanish national team.
6. The Catalan national football team is an important symbol of Catalan nationalism and is governed by the Catalan Football Federation. Today the team only participates in friendly games

because, despite political attempts to secure its participation in international competitions, the Spanish Constitutional Court ruled out that the team cannot participate in competitions where a Spanish federation is already represented (Quiroga Fernández de Soto, 2014).

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