


# ANDROCENTRIC CLUB NARRATIVES AROUND SPANISH FOOTBALL: PRESS COVERAGE OF ATHLETIC BILBAO'S MEN AND WOMEN TEAMS

*NARRATIVAS DE CLUBE ANDROCÊNTRICAS NO FUTEBOL ESPANHOL: COBERTURA DE MÍDIA IMPRESSA DAS EQUIPES DE HOMENS E MULHERES DO ATHLETIC BILBAO* 

*NARRATIVAS DE CLUB ANDROCÉNTRICAS EN EL FÚTBOL ESPAÑOL: COBERTURA DE PRENSA DE LOS EQUIPOS DE HOMBRES Y MUJERES DEL ATHLETIC BILBAO* 

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**Abstract:** This research focuses on the androcentric hierarchy of identity narratives in football. We explore how such discourses are planned in terms of gender at the club level. We enquire into the presence of and the role played by women footballers in the narrative construction of clubs as portrayed in media outlets. Our case study focuses on Athletic Bilbao, a pioneering club in women's football in Spain. The methodology used is based on content analysis, covering three full seasons (2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21) of the front pages of four newspapers (*As*, *Mundo Deportivo*, *El Correo* and *Deia*). We found a sexist relational system with two major categories – sequential and normative – in the construction and reproduction of information. We point out the prevalence of sporting narratives focused on men and, in relational terms, the invisibility and, in a best-case scenario, the peripheralization of information about women.

**Keywords:** Androcentrism. Football. Pres. Social Construction of Gender. Case Study.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

On 30 March 2022, a new *clásico* between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid was played at Camp Nou. It was the second leg of the Champions League quarterfinals. The Catalanian side won by 5-2, thus winning the round with an overall score of 8-3. The match was attended by 91,553 spectators. At that time, this figure represented a new world record for a match of football practiced by women.<sup>1</sup> National and international mainstream media echoed the news. They used a series of foci approaches that can be classified into three models: highlighting the attendance record; underlining both the record and the sporting merit of the winner (going through to the semifinals); and claiming the clubs as part of a historical record based on their high ability to mobilize fans. These framings show a construction of identity narratives in terms of gender via football clubs, which motivates this investigation.

Scholarship on football practised by women has increased exponentially in the last decade. Most of the research conducted in the Ibero-American sphere has focused on the (under)representation of sportswomen in traditional and digital media (ROJAS, 2010; GOELLNER; SILVA; BOTELHO-GOMES, 2013; SAINZ DE BARANDA, 2014; CALVO; GUTIÉRREZ, 2016; GÓMEZ-COLELL; MEDINA-BRAVO; RAMON, 2017; GUERRERO, 2017; JIMENO; ROJAS, 2017; SAINZ DE BARANDA; ADÁ-LAMEIRAS; BLANCO RUIZ, 2020). More specifically, a research line has addressed the lack of female stories in the creation - via mediatization of football - of national identity narratives (COSTA, 2014; WOOD, 2018; MOREIRA; ÁLVAREZ-LITKE, 2019; MOREIRA; GARTON, 2021; WATSON, 2021). These accounts emphasize the invisibility of women in the task and process of constructing a national *Us*. This has led scholars to theorize about the social construction of football as a hypermasculine and hypermasculinized space (COAKLEY, 2021). In this regard, a relative lack of studies focusing on these narrative processes at the club level can be observed.<sup>2</sup> It is particularly interesting to explore how such a discursive relationship is found in the context of the rising professionalization of women's football in Spain, where more teams organize under historically male structures.

One of the pioneering clubs in the development of professional women's football in Spain is Athletic Bilbao (henceforth, Athletic). It was one of the first clubs to contractually regularize women players, as well as to actively promote attendance to women's matches at its main stadium (ZABALLA, 2019, June 26). Nonetheless, although substantial advances have been made in terms of salary and recognition aspects (ORTIZ DE LAZCANO, 2019, April 16), equality is still far from reality in football practiced by men and women.

The general objective of this study is to enquire, through the case study on Athletic, into the presence of and role played by women footballers in the construction of narratives about clubs as portrayed in the media. In the context of rising women's

1 We agree with Goellner, Silva and Botelho-Gomez (2013, p. 171) and Moreira and Álvarez-Litke (2019, p. 99) in using the construct 'football practiced by women' to stress that this is the same sports practice regardless of practitioners' gender identity. However, and for space-saving - rather than conceptual - reasons, we also use the term "women's football" along the text.

2 The work of Biram (2021) on the Brazilian club Santos is a significant exception.

football, we adopt a mixed approach to look into the treatment given to women players by both the sports and the mainstream written press. Quantitatively, we compare the media coverage received by Athletic's men's and women's teams. Qualitatively, the contents of stories about both squads are described and interpreted. During three full seasons (2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21), we conducted a content analysis of the front pages of four Spanish newspapers that follow the club closely. Comparing the coverage received by both teams is not trivial: "The presence of women in the news only gets full meaning when related with the attention that men receive, and the representation of women and men in the newspaper as a whole is tackled" (ROVETTO, 2010, p. 46). Therefore, there is a need to understand not only the role of women footballers, but also that of their male counterparts, so that the media construct about football clubs can be holistically understood.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Androcentrism is the tendency to centralize society on men, their needs, and their values while pushing women to a peripheral place (HEGARTY; PARSLow; ANSARA; QUICK, 2013; BAILEY; LAFRANCE; DOVIDIO, 2019). Moreno (1988) analyses the symbolic construction of social relations around what she calls the "virile archetype". This corresponds to the (mis)conceptualization and identification of men as equivalent to humans and as the main character in historical development. Applied to sport, several authors analyze and interpret it as a social and symbolic construct marked by a clear male hegemony that, at a relational level, tackles two objectives: to privilege, naturalize and preserve the power of men; whilst minimizing and perpetuating women's presumed inferiority (BERNSTEIN, 2002; COOKY; MESSNER; HEXTRUM, 2013; COAKLEY, 2021). The worldwide popularity of football endorses and helps spread the male hegemony while reproducing existing inequalities (POPE; WILLIAMS; CLELAND, 2022). Likewise, the historical construction of this sport as a men's terrain has automatically made it alien for women, which implies: a lack of female presence; the perception of such scarcity as an invasion; the creation of normalizing mechanisms of exclusion as a way to revert such perceived invasion; and the creation of tactics, by women, to appropriate those spaces and values that remain alien to them (PEDRAZA, 2020, p. 6-7).

The construction of football narratives is hegemonically masculine (HARGREAVES, 1994). Women play an inexistent or peripheral role in them, trying to penetrate a space whose official discourses are largely centered around men's sovereignty (GOELLNER; SILVA; BOTELHO-GOMES, 2013). In fact, Moreira and Garton (2021) show, in the case of Argentina, how the discourses on the nation through football have been (re)produced and starred by men, with the subsequent symbolic exclusion of women from that task. Wood (2018, p. 579) reflects upon "the ways in which individual subjectivities and national identities are constructed in terms of hegemonic masculinities". The author goes on to underline the role that female discourses can play "in relation to the decolonization of such issues".

<sup>3</sup> At this point, it is worth mentioning that, although a minority, the Spanish women's league also has some clubs composed of only women's sides.

The incorporation of women into competitive football takes the shape of a planned concession: women's spaces have been created in a masculine territory, stressing its physical and symbolic separation. The lack of stories about the daily work in women's football "has created and sustained the fallacy that football is a sport only for men" (MOREIRA; ÁLVAREZ-LITKE, 2019, p. 103). In fact, Kerns and Whiteside (2020) emphasize that the scarce media visibility of sportswomen reflects the cultural hegemony of men. Gómez-Colell, Medina-Bravo and Ramon (2017) underline that the reality of sportswomen adopts an androcentric point of view in the media by reiterating notably masculine sexist values and prejudices.

Bernstein (2002) points out that the sporting schedule in the media is dominated by the omnipresence of men's football, followed by other sports practiced by men and, as a last resort, activities performed by women. This female underrepresentation, when compared to the "saturation of information" about men, "exhibits the hierarchical organization and subordination of women" in the newspapers (MOREIRA; ÁLVAREZ-LITKE, 2019, p. 105-6). One effect of that hierarchical editorial organization is the invisibility of sportswomen. The studies conducted in the Ibero-American sphere point out that the presence of women practitioners as newsworthy ranges from 1% to 6%, whilst their male counterparts are featured in 90% of the articles (SAINZ DE BARANDA, 2014; CALVO; GUTIÉRREZ, 2016). These figures are similar (5,9% versus 94,1%, respectively) when paying attention to the Basque Country - the territory concerning this research (GOBIERNO VASCO, 2013). This limited representation has also been extrapolated to social media. A study covering the activity of the four main Spanish sports newspapers on Twitter shows that men were newsworthy in 96,19% of the cases, whereas women only received 3,81% of the coverage (SAINZ DE BARANDA; ADÁ-LAMEIRAS; BLANCO-RUIZ, 2020).

These results are neither incidental nor naive. They show "the fight over the imposition and the transmission of the hegemonic senses flowing in our society" (MOREIRA; ÁLVAREZ-LITKE, 2019, p. 106). Consequently, two main ideas have emerged in academia: that sport has been thought by, for and about men; and that sport creates the false impression that sportswomen have little to no value when compared to men (COOKY; MESSNER; HEXTRUM, 2013; GÓMEZ-COLELL; MEDINA-BRAVO; RAMON, 2017). In addition, the presence of women in the news does not necessarily imply a favored position in the text. As Sainz de Baranda (2014, p. 100) states, it is hard to assess the corresponding sporting achievements because "the hierarchical organization of the information determining what news are more newsworthy than others proves that women's triumphs are not relevant."

Media conglomerates must make an editorial commitment to regularly informing on sportswomen beyond sporting success. When covering men, there is a primary praise of their achievements and, after that, there is some room for issues not related to sport. When focusing on women, in turn, the order tends to be reversed to prioritize stereotyped comments, paying less attention to sporting performance (MARTÍNEZ; LASARTE; GAMITO; VIZCARRA, 2020, p. 8). Winning a title or a medal does not even guarantee any visibility for women in the media, whose coverage may be more related to activities other than sports (SAINZ DE BARANDA, 2014).

### 3 METHODOLOGY

In order to address the objectives proposed in this research, our case study focuses on Athletic Bilbao. We have conducted a content analysis of the front pages of four newspapers edited in Spain (*As*, *Mundo Deportivo*, *El Correo* and *Deia*), following the guidelines described by González Ramallal (2014) and Sainz de Baranda (2014) in their respective analyses of the mediatized construction of Spanish national identity and the representation of sportswomen in Spanish media. The common ground of all these newspapers is their preferential informational coverage of Athletic, although each of them has its own style. Two of these publications specialize in sports and are distributed throughout Spain. *As* is published in Madrid by the *Prisa* group but it has several regional editions such as the Basque Country's — the one used for this research. *Mundo Deportivo* is published in Barcelona by the *Godó* group. It also has regional editions, and we have selected the one focused on Bizkaia.<sup>4</sup> The two remaining newspapers have a general scope but are edited and distributed only in Bizkaia. *El Correo* belongs to the *Vocento* group and is based in Bilbao. Note that this media outlet has an editorial line aligned with the permanence of the Basque Country within the Spanish state, among other issues. *Deia* belongs to the *Iparaguirre* group and its headquarters are in Bilbao. It is aligned with some of the postulates of Basque nationalism that see potential political independence from Spain (CANGA-LAREQUI, 2012). This selection covers the main political, ideological and territorial sensitivities when informing about Athletic.

Content analysis of front pages allows us to systematically find the written information detailed on the inside pages of the dailies (GONZÁLEZ RAMALLAL, 2014). Besides, front pages reveal the criteria used to define the selection process as well as how newsworthy topics are on a daily basis. Therefore, they clearly indicate the editorial lines of each media outlet (ROJAS; JIMENO, 2019). The media have the power to define who belongs to and who is excluded from the corresponding narratives by deciding which athletes, competitions, clubs or events are newsworthy and how they are portrayed (GOELLNER; SILVA; BOTELHO-GOMES, 2013). Football becomes a frequent resource on the regional press' front pages, aiming to attract readers' attention as well as to endorse citizens' sense of belonging to a particular territory (JIMENO; ROJAS, 2017).

The investigation presented in this study focuses on the full 2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21 seasons. The 2019/20 season, in particular, allows us to pay attention to the period of football inactivity motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This issue becomes relevant since the women's league never resumed its activities afterward, unlike its male counterpart. We have systematically analyzed the contents of 357 front pages published between August 2018 and June 2021. These covers refer to the days in which both Athletic's men's and women's teams have played their matches in the national league, Cup and Super Cup, as well as the day immediately after it - the so-called post-match. The information collected has been registered in a matrix table featuring 11 indicators (see Table 1). The first two indicators address the

<sup>4</sup> *Bizkaia*, whose capital is the city of Bilbao, is one of the provinces of the Basque Country, where Athletic is based.



quantitative part of the analysis. They quantify the overall number of news stories and, more specifically, those regarding Athletic. The next four categories register the text in the headlines, other headlining elements (dropheads and headers), lead-ins and captions. Likewise, the 7-11 indicators deal with the lexicon used in the above-mentioned elements, through five closed categories: lexicon to define the women's team,<sup>5</sup> the men's team, the board, the fans, and the corresponding match. A total of seven Excel files have been created, two per team and season, as well as a final one summarizing all quantitative data.

**Table 1** – Template of the analysis sheet used for each newspaper

	Match date	Post-match date	Total
1.- No. of stories in front-page			
2.- No. of stories about Athletic			
TEXT			
3.- Main topic in headlines			
4.- Issue(s) in other headlining elements			
5.- Issue(s) in lead-ins			
6.- Issue(s) in captions			
LEXICON USED			
7.- To define the women's team			
8.- To define the men's team			
9.- To define the board			
10.- To define fans			
11.- To define the match			

Source: Prepared by the authors.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative study about the coverage of Athletic's men's and women's teams in the four newspapers selected reveals a significant hierarchical organization of contents. There is an asymmetric representation of men and women, favoring the former. In addition, this paper argues that such hierarchical organization is based on the use of various androcentric strategies/routines by editorialists for constructing the information (ROVETTO, 2010). We refer to routines in the sense of "customary androcentric operations: the evaluation and comparison with the 'legitimate' model, with the most important players of men's football" (MOREIRA; GARTON, 2021, p. 10). For analytic clarity, we grouped these routines as following a narrative relational system composed of two intertwined categories: sequential and normative. As it can be observed in Table 2, these categories are interrelated – so that the coverage of women necessarily implies less information about men and vice-versa (ROVETTO, 2010), particularly on the front pages, where there are clear space limitations that highlight the editorial decisions and policies followed by the different media outlets.

<sup>5</sup> Team refers particularly to players and staff (coaches and assistants).

**Table 2** – Intertwined categories of the narrative relational system

Sequential	
Continuity	Discontinuity
Matches and post-matches have guaranteed front pages. Contents show deep development of the team on a regular basis.	Matches and post-matches DO NOT have any guaranteed front page. The contents do not show the deep development of the team.
Normative	
Standard	Exception
Front pages on matches and post-matches follow standardized procedures to present the information. No extraordinary situations are needed to catch the attention of editorialists	Front pages on matches and post-matches DO NOT follow any standardized procedure to present the information. Extraordinary situations are needed to catch the attention of editorialists.
Noun	Adjective
References to the team DO NOT need any clarifying adjective (ex., men's).	References to the team need clarifying adjectives (ex., women's).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

#### 4.1 SEQUENTIAL CATEGORY (CONTINUOUS-DISCONTINUOUS)

In the current research, we have analyzed 357 front pages, comprising a total of 1,730 news stories on Athletic. Over 83.82% of them refer to the men's squad, whereas only 8.84% cover the women's team.<sup>6</sup> These results are meaningful enough to corroborate that women's representation is disproportionately lower than men's.

As stated in the methodological section, we analyzed match and post-match days.<sup>7</sup> In this context, when only the men's team plays, 99.05% (837) of the stories are related to the men's side. In other words, only 8 out of these 845 stories (0.95%) do not refer to the men's squad. Up to this point, one could suggest that these statistics follow some logic: there is a priority in front covers for the team playing. However, when there is a full/partial coincidence, 419 stories (89,15%) relate to the men's side and 51 (10,85%) to the women's one. Additionally, by looking at the 272 stories published when only the women's team plays, we observe that 68.01% of the articles (185) are associated with their male counterparts. These figures endorse those of Sainz de Baranda (2014, p. 100-101) when underlining that 41.1% of men appear in stories about women in the Spanish sports media: "The presence of men goes beyond the number of pieces of information they star [...]. In general, women are of no interest either as witnesses or as experts". In other words, we can observe a favored presence of men over women, with the former even intruding on editorial spaces and times that, following the "who plays when" logic, should prioritize the latter.

At a qualitative level, this narrative continuity applied to the men's team is observed in the thematic construction of the news. When looking at the contents regarding match scores, a reader of the front covers analyzed is able to know the

<sup>6</sup> Likewise, 7.34% of the news found refer to other issues such as fans or the board.

<sup>7</sup> In this context, there are three possible combinations according to the interval of dates corresponding to a fixture: 1.- when only the men's team plays; 2.- when only the women's squad plays; 3.- when some of the fixtures overlap so either both sides play on the same day (full-coincidence) or one plays the day before or after the other (partial coincidence).

ranking situation of the men's side ("three points to Europe", "seven points above relegation") or the historical context of the match ("third victory at home in a row"). This discourse is modulated according to the good or bad results the team is achieving in the regular league or if it goes through/gets knocked out of playoffs. For instance, it moved from "the worst possible beginning" referring to the first match of the season to "an important leap forward in the ranking" by mid-season, or "key match to exhaust its European options" in the last fixtures of the league. In most matches of the women's team, in turn, score and place are barely included. No information allows a reader to establish a historical context of the corresponding matches.

Moreover, there is a contrast between the excessive criticism aimed at male players (through the headline "they lose again [...] after Unai Simón's serious mistake and an awful match") and the more understanding headline for the women's team ("they lose again at the home of the powerful Levante"). As can be seen, the discourse pivots between the responsibility of men footballers in the loss and the virtues of the rival team in the case of women footballers. This reflects what Costa underlined in her analysis of Brazil's men's and women's national teams when claiming that

while the men's team's shortcomings are received in an extremely negative fashion by the sports media, leading to controversy and debate over responsibilities for such failures, the women's team generates a different kind of discourse in the press, marked by a more sympathetic narrative tone. (2014, p. 86-87).

When both teams coincide in matches of relatively similar relevance, we detect a systematic subcategorization and devaluation of women players (BIRAM, 2021, p. 8). Thus, regarding the Spanish Cup play-offs of the 2019/2020 season, when the women's team played a day before the men's team, the headlines that covered the matches stated: "This is the way [triumph of the women's side] (...) Also for today [when the men's team was due to play]" or "The red-and-white women take the first swipe in the Cup [expecting a second "swipe" by the men]."

In a frame of clear female underrepresentation, an invasive narrative of the masculine over the feminine is also observed. An unusually sexist interrelated sequence is found so that the unalterable narrative continuity of the men's team (all its matches/post-matches appear on the front page) contrasts with the disconcerting discontinuity of the discourse about the women footballers. These findings lead to a frame of "oversaturation of information" regarding sportsmen (MOREIRA; ÁLVAREZ-LITKE, 2019, p. 105). The female discontinuity inevitably leads to the representation of women as marginal, a historic, and dispensable, with neither a previous trajectory nor a future horizon. In other words, it normalizes sport as masculine and, consequently, pushes women to "exceptional" situations (MOREIRA; ÁLVAREZ-LITKE, 2019, p. 103).

## 4.2 NORMATIVE CATEGORY

Very linked to the previous point, we have found a series of androcentric routines that can be grouped around a normative category. This is based on two main subcategories: regularity (standard-exception) and semantic (noun-adjective).



#### 4.2.1 Regularity (standard-exception)

The regularity subcategory pivots between two poles. One finds the strengthening of masculine narratives based on their consideration as “the standard”. On the other, there is the weakening of feminine narratives, whose irregularity and discontinuity when appearing on front covers downgrades them to the category of “exception”. Thus, when the men’s team plays, the front covers of the selected newspapers (except for *As*) invariably include a headline, one or two dropheads and/or headers, one or two lead-ins, the date and time and stadium where the match will take place, the television channel that will broadcast it, and some sort of symbology of the clubs (usually crests). Likewise, a very similar structure is used on post-match days, just replacing date/time with score. Quotes from the subsequent press conferences by the coach or the players also appear with a certain frequency, although to a lesser extent.

This representation of the masculine as archetypal means that the feminine is assumed as resulting from the androcentric pattern. The front pages presumably corresponding to the women's team - because it is the only squad playing - do not count on a standardized model of presentation: headlines, lead-ins, quotes and/or symbology are not guaranteed. Effectively, none of the 153 news stories about Athletic's women's team includes quotes. This goes hand in hand with the analysis conducted by Gómez-Colell, Medina-Bravo and Ramon (2017, p. 801), where they found that, between 2010 and 2015, 90% of the news about sportswomen in Spanish sports newspapers did not include any quote. Media conglomerates lack an editorial commitment to inform regularly and in a standardized way about sportswomen, regardless of their sporting success.

Extraordinary situations catch the attention of editorialists. Among these, three main phenomena appear consistently in the four dailies analysed. First, women players appear on the front pages when they play in the main stadium of San Mamés (where men invariably play), instead of the academy grounds, their usual field. This circumstance happens two or three times per season, usually when one of the most important clubs of the tournament is visiting or if it is a relevant play-off match. During the time frame covered in this research, the women’s side performed four times under these conditions.<sup>8</sup> All the newspapers published some news related to these matches on their front pages (except for *As*, which only featured one of the matches). Significant contrast can be seen in the focus of the coverage. It swings between the primary and priority emphasis on the festive mood of the match with headlines such as “Round party” (*Mundo Deportivo*, 1 April 2019, victory against Levante) or “Passion for Athletic’s women’s team” (*El Correo*, 6 January 2020, loss against FC Barcelona) and the purely sportive analysis “The Lionesses go through to semi-finals” (*Mundo Deportivo*, 27 February 2020, triumph over CD TACÓN) or “The red-and-white are knocked out despite facing up to Atlético de Madrid” (*Deia*, 31 January 2019, loss to the aforementioned team). In any case, featuring these performances on front covers corresponds more to the exceptionality, for its unusual nature, of playing in

<sup>8</sup> The matches were against Atlético de Madrid (Cup) and Levante UD (League) in the 2018/19 season and against FC Barcelona (League) and CD TACÓN (Cup) in the 2019/20 season.

San Mamés, rather than to the matches *per se*. As a point of comparison, the fixtures happened immediately after each of these matches took place in the usual field (academy grounds). Then, only four out of the 32 potential front pages corresponding to these matches/post-matches include some news about the women's team.

The second case about extraordinary situations worth appearing on the front pages has to do with attendance data. This is especially relevant when the figures are much higher than average and, additionally, can be compared to the male regularity: "More attendance than in seven stadiums of Primera [LaLiga]" was the headline of *El Correo* after Athletic defeated Levante. However, the paradigmatic case of such exceptionality is evidenced on the four front covers published on 31 January 2019. All of them contained headlines about the by-then record of attendance to a match between professional clubs in Spain. As's main headline, on the only front page dedicated to Athletic's women's team during the three seasons of this analysis, announced "48,121 spectators at San Mamés for Athletic-Atleti[co de Madrid]". For its part, *El Correo* considered that "The victory was in the stands," whereas *Deia* highlighted that the women's players "Have the punch of the champions," next to an editorial endorsing gender equality. In all cases, we observe how attention is focused mainly on high attendance to the detriment of merely sportive information. More than that, a narrative move is noticed that, under the apparent demand for egalitarian policies, points out the underlying exceptionality of the women's team in the usual editorial practices.

Third, a new routine has become established in the Spanish press: to publish some news about sports (not necessarily football) practiced by women on March 8, International Women's Day. In the three seasons studied in this research, the men's side played on every March 8 whilst women did it only in 2021 (during the 2019/20 season, the women's league was stopped on March 1st due to the COVID-19 pandemic). We observe two intertwined dynamics. On the one hand, although every front page includes some news starred by women (in general or with a sporting scope), only one informs about Athletic's women's squad: in 2019, *Mundo Deportivo* featured the nomination of six players (women) for the *Once de Oro* trophy awarded by the Spanish forum *Fútbol Draft* on a peripheral position of its front cover. On the other hand, the men's side appears in 23 out of the 24 potential front-covers published during the March 8 fixtures. They analyze the course of those matches in detail, as evidenced by the headlines "Athletic seeks to win against a direct rival in order to get established", "Athletic extends the party of the Cup", "Athletic closes its fantastic week", or "Raúl García, the savior". In short, the construction of Athletic through the men's team is done even by invading dates and editorial policies that were supposed to give higher visibility to women (PEDRAZA, 2020).

#### 4.2.2 Semantic (noun-adjective)

The analysis of the front pages allows us to point out a semantic asymmetry. This is marked by only using the noun (Athletic) when referring to the men's team, whereas mentions of the women's squad are frequently accompanied by the clarifying adjective "female". Thus,

the need for adjectives endorses their differentiation, and eventual downgrading, in front of other fans, [...] experiences other than 'football' – the hegemonic that, therefore, does not need adjectives – need complements: women's football, football for the blind, street football (ANJOS; SILVA, 2021, p. 3).

In this case study, only 3 out of the 1,080 occasions (0.28%) in which the men's team is mentioned include adjectives: the main way to denote Athletic's men's squad is 'Athletic' (987 times) and 'the team' (93 times). However, this changes when the stories are about the women's side: in 46 out of the 99 times (46.45%), the word 'Athletic' is used alongside the adjective 'female'; in 4 out of 5 times (80%) the word 'team' is used, the adjective 'female' is added. On top of that, the direct formula 'the female is' is used 46 times, while 'the male was' was not used a single time. These results frame the representation of the women's side as a variant of the noun-based, generic and neutral Athletic, also seen as the male (RAVEL; GAREAU, 2016). Even more to the point,

football remains an area so eminently masculine that this type of vulgar gender differentiation is often hidden in plain sight, not even acknowledged by those perpetrating it, although they surely know. The return to a status quo where the women's team is sub-categorised at the same level as children within the club is symptomatic of this (BIRAM, 2021, p. 3).

To sum up, there is a pronounced androcentric construction of the media narrative resulting from the fusion of two main factors. On the one hand, there is a significant lack of stories focused on the women's team and its footballers. On the other hand, there is a semantic classification whereby men's sporting practices are referred to by nouns, whereas women's performances are supplemented through clarifying adjectives. In other words, "the masculine is represented as 'what it shall be,' more focused and more meaningful" (ROVETTO, 2010, p. 51). The male hegemony is so deeply rooted in the editorial practices of the written press covering Athletic that it eventually affects the daily narratives of the club. The androcentric look/construction provokes the generalized absence (with exceptions) of women referents in the narrative construction of Athletic. This contributes to perpetuating the image of the club as associated with the men's side. It reproduces the masculine and masculinizing football system. The interdependence of the categories included in the sexist relational system found in this study leads to the creation of a club discourse, via media, whereby Athletic's substantive history belongs to men. Women, on the contrary, appear in a supplementary role, through some stories that are constructed and defined as female. Therefore, in the task and process of constructing such a narrative identity, paraphrasing Moreira and Garton (2021), one could say that the men's team *is* Athletic; *Athletic-ing* is what men do. The women's team, in turn, *is within* Athletic; women are *Athletic-ed*, and women are a supplement in the sense that Athletic would still exist without the women's team.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The general objective of this article is to enquire into the presence and the role of women footballers in the narrative construction of clubs as portrayed by the written press. To this aim, we paid attention to the socio-historical context of Spanish football.

Particularly, we focused on the case of Athletic Bilbao as one of the pioneering clubs in the professionalization of football practiced by women. In methodological terms, we conducted a content analysis of the front pages of four newspapers that regularly cover the Bilbao-based club. The timeframe covers three full seasons (2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21).

The results of this research show an extraordinary asymmetry in the construction and reproduction of sports information in favor of the men's team. It is a structured unbalance evidenced through a series of unambiguous and repetitive communication strategies that can be defined as routines. This routine-like policy is not a trivial issue. On the contrary, it (re)produces a "constant symbolic construction of power through legitimization archetypes" that must be categorized as androcentric. In fact, "unlike the gender category, [androcentrism] refers to several aspects that serve to understand the social, economic and sexual inequalities as of the role that is played in the center of power" (ROVETTO, 2010, p. 44).

In this context, this research offers some significant quantitative and qualitative contributions to the study of androcentric hierarchical organization in football. Based on the routines registered in the content analysis, a sexist relational system comprised of two main intertwined categories is proposed. Each category is rooted in a zero-sum game in which the availability of information about women is necessarily connected with information about men. Thus, the sequential category necessarily combines the continuity of the masculine narrative – providing the sporting practice of the men with historicity – and the discontinuous and female counterpart. Our study shows that over 83.82% of the 1,730 news on Athletic refer to the men's squad, whereas only 8.84% cover the women's one. These results are meaningful enough to corroborate the absolute underrepresentation of women compared to that of men. The androcentric normative category articulates standardized protocols to present information about sportsmen, whilst announcing a simulated defense of equality based on exceptional and anecdotic stories. Likewise, this normative category includes a pair of subcategories. The regularity subcategory pivots between two poles: the strengthening of masculine narratives based on considering them as 'standard' and the weakening of female narratives downgrading them to the category of 'exception.' For its part, the semantic subcategory highly discriminates against women. This is observed in the sense that men's practices employ a noun-like approach ('Athletic,' 'the team'), whereas sportswomen are subcategorized through adjectives that depict them as a supplement to men ('female Athletic,' 'the female side').

In terms of narrative constructions of identity, the continuity, regularity and noun-based nature of the masculine discourse provide the men's side with a semblance of historicity, and legitimacy, of what is worth telling constantly. The men's squad is the norm, the normal, the regular, the standard. In other words, the men's team *is* Athletic; *Athletic-ing* is what men do; men do Athletic. The women's side, in turn, is the uncommon, the blurred, and the extraordinary in the sense that it deviates from hegemonical discourses. The women's squad is considered circumstantial or irrelevant: they offer stories to be merely narrated. The women's team *is within* Athletic; women are *Athletic-ed*; women are a supplement in the sense that Athletic

would keep being if they did not exist. The basis of the club, according to these media narratives, relies on the first men's squad and such is its representation on the front pages. These processes converge to an androcentric narrative construction of the club's image through the written press.

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**Resumo:** Esta pesquisa se concentra na hierarquia androcêntrica das narrativas identitárias no futebol. Explora-se como esses discursos são planejados em termos de gênero e ao nível de clube. Investiga-se a presença e o papel desempenhado pelas jogadoras na construção narrativa dos clubes por meio da mídia. O nosso caso de estudo é o Athletic Bilbao, um clube pioneiro no desenvolvimento do futebol feminino na Espanha. Metodologicamente, foi feita uma análise de conteúdo das capas de quatro jornais espanhóis (*As*, *Mundo Deportivo*, *El Correo*, *Deia*) durante três temporadas completas (2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21). Um sistema relacional sexista foi observado, sobretudo através de duas grandes categorias – sequencial e normativa – na construção e reprodução informativa. A onipresença das narrativas em torno das práticas esportivas dos homens é documentada. Em termos relacionais, a informação sobre as mulheres é invisível e, no melhor dos casos, periférica.

**Palavras-chave:** Androcentrismo. Futebol. Mídia Impressa. Construção Social da Identidade de Gênero. Estudo de Caso.

**Resumen:** Esta investigación se centra en la jerarquización androcéntrica de las narrativas identitarias en el fútbol. Se explora cómo se planifican tales discursos en clave de género y a nivel de club. Se indaga sobre la presencia y el rol que desempeñan las jugadoras en la construcción narrativa de los clubes mediante los medios de comunicación. Nuestro caso de estudio es el Athletic Bilbao, un club pionero en el desarrollo del fútbol femenino en España. Metodológicamente, se realiza un análisis de contenido de las portadas de cuatro periódicos (*As*, *Mundo Deportivo*, *El Correo*, *Deia*) durante tres temporadas completas (2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21). Se registra un sistema relacional sexista con dos grandes categorías, secuencial y normativa, en la construcción y reproducción informativa. Se subraya la omnipresencia de las narrativas alrededor de las prácticas masculinas. En términos relacionales, se invisibiliza y, en el mejor de los casos, se periferiza la información sobre las mujeres.

**Palabras clave:** Androcentrismo. Fútbol. Prensa. Construcción Social de la Identidad de Género. Estudio de Caso.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declared that there is no conflict of interest in this work.

## AUTHORAL CONTRIBUTIONS

**Fernando Gutiérrez-Chico:** Conceptualization; Investigation, Data analysis and article writing.

**Iñigo González-Fuente:** Methodology; Investigation, Data analysis and article writing.

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## EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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