

# The handling of racism in the Spanish online sports press: the Vinicius case

El tratamiento del racismo en la prensa deportiva online española: el caso Vinicius

O tratamento do racismo na imprensa desportiva online espanhola: o caso Vinicius

Ernesto Villar Cirujano<sup>1\*</sup> 

Miguel Ángel Sánchez de la Nieta<sup>1\*\*</sup> 

Julio Pulido Zaragoza<sup>1\*\*\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Universidad Villanueva, Madrid, Spain.

\* Associate professor. [evillar@villanueva.edu](mailto:evillar@villanueva.edu)

\*\* Associate professor. [miguelsnh@villanueva.edu](mailto:miguelsnh@villanueva.edu)

\*\*\* Professor. [julio.pulido@villanueva.edu](mailto:julio.pulido@villanueva.edu)

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## **Abstract**

*The media possess the power to place an issue of such social importance as racism on the public agenda, in addition to their responsibility to help combat expressions of hate instead of fuelling them. This study analyses online coverage by the four main Spanish sports newspapers (Marca, As, Mundo Deportivo and Sport) of the racist insults suffered by the Real Madrid footballer Vinicius Junior in the 2022-23 season. Although similar events had occurred in the past with other players, the attacks on the Brazilian striker alone accounted for 25% of the 3,572 reports of racism in sport published by these media outlets in the player's five seasons in LaLiga. The study identifies the factors that unleashed this media storm, including the protagonist's public profile, and confirms that when faced with an exceptional situation such as this, the newspapers published in two cities with such a fierce football rivalry as Madrid and Barcelona respond with similar degrees of attention, though they do take different approaches. The capital's media (Marca and As) present the player exclusively as a victim of the attacks with no type of reproach towards him. However, one in ten texts on the Catalan portals (Mundo Deportivo and Sport) spoke of supposed provocative attitudes by the player or mention complaints of preferential treatment when compared to other sportspersons affected by similar attitudes of hatred.*

### **Keywords**

*Racism - hate - Press - sports journalism - Vinicius - football*

## **Resumen**

*Los medios de comunicación tienen el poder de situar en la agenda pública un asunto de tanta relevancia social como el racismo, además de la responsabilidad de contribuir a reducir las expresiones de odio en lugar de alimentarlas. La presente investigación analiza la cobertura que ofrecieron en internet los cuatro principales periódicos deportivos españoles (Marca, As, Mundo Deportivo y Sport) a los insultos racistas sufridos por el futbolista del Real Madrid Vinicius Junior en la temporada 2022-23. Pese a que en el pasado se habían producido hechos similares con otros*

*jugadores, los ataques al delantero brasileño acapararon por sí solos el 25% de las 3.572 informaciones sobre racismo en el deporte publicadas por estos medios en las cinco temporadas de LaLiga disputadas por el delantero brasileño. La investigación identifica los motivos que desataron esta tormenta mediática, entre ellos la relevancia del protagonista, y constata que ante una situación excepcional como esta los periódicos editados en dos ciudades con tanta rivalidad futbolística como Madrid y Barcelona responden con una atención mediática similar, pero con enfoques diferentes. En los medios de la capital (Marca y As) se presenta al jugador exclusivamente como víctima de estos ataques sin reproche alguno hacia él. Sin embargo, en uno de cada diez textos de los portales catalanes (Mundo Deportivo y Sport) se mencionan supuestas actitudes provocadoras del jugador o se recogen denuncias de un trato de favor respecto a otros deportistas afectados por similares actitudes de odio.*

### **Palabras clave**

*Racismo - odio - prensa - periodismo deportivo - Vinicius - fútbol*

## **Resumo**

*Os mídia tem o poder de colocar na agenda pública um tema de tamanha relevância social como o racismo, e têm a responsabilidade de contribuir para a redução das expressões de ódio em vez de as alimentar. Esta pesquisa analisa a cobertura o efectuada na internet pelos quatro principais jornais desportivos espanhóis (Marca, As, Mundo Deportivo e Sport) sobre os insultos racistas sofridos pelo jogador de futebol do Real Madrid Vinicius Junior na temporada 2022-23. Embora acontecimentos semelhantes tenham ocorrido no passado com outros jogadores, os ataques ao jogador brasileiro do Real Madrid representaram 25% das 3.572 reportagens sobre racismo no desporto publicadas por esses meios de comunicação, nas cinco temporadas Vinicius Jr em LaLiga. A investigação identifica as razões que desencadearam esta tempestade mediática, incluindo a relevância do protagonista e verifica que perante uma situação excepcional como esta, os jornais publicados em cidades de grande rivalidade futebolística como Madrid e Barcelona, respondem com semelhante atenção mediática, mas com abordagens diferentes. Na capital (Marca y As) o jogador é retratado exclusivamente como vítima destes ataques, sem censurar mais ninguém.*

*No entanto, um em cada dez textos dos sites de jornais catalães (Mundo Deportivo e Sport) são mencionadas supostas ações provatórias do jogador ou são reconhecidos relatos de suposto tratamento favorável a Vinicius Jr.*

## **Palavras chave**

*Racismo - ódio - imprensa - jornalismo desportivo - Vinicius - futebol*

# **1. Introduction**

The increase in sports news is a singular phenomenon that has grown exponentially in many countries in recent years (McEnnis, 2021), not least in Spain. According to the General Media Study (EGM), the daily paper Marca is the most widely-read pay newspaper with 1,001,000 daily readers, in fact, among the ten newspapers with the highest circulation, there are four sports papers: Marca, As (391,000), Mundo Deportivo (255,000) and Sport (206,000). Both in Spain and other European countries with a hundred years or more of football tradition, this is the sport that attracts most attention from specialised media, in this case, the sports press (Rojas-Torrijos, 2012).

In addition to in-depth coverage of the main sporting events in national and international competitions, Spain has also experienced a type of non-sports incident that has attracted the attention of this specialised press: racist insults and attacks directed at players of colour on soccer pitches (Duran & Jiménez, 2006; Durán & Pardo, 2008; Llopis-Goig, 2009). Reporting of this type of behaviour by the sports press contributes to raising social awareness and promoting the adoption of public measures (Escudero, 2023).

One of those recurring episodes, extraordinary due to the social and media impact it acquired, took place at Mestalla stadium (Valencia) on May 21, 2023, during the Valencia-Real Madrid league game on matchday 35. The referee had to stop the match in the 70th minute for almost ten minutes when the Real Madrid player Vinicius Junior reported that a fan had made a “monkey” gesture at him and that some of the fans were hurling racist insults at him. When such attacks have taken place in recent years, the sports press has reported on them. But media coverage was much greater than usual on this occasion. What criteria led the media to see

news value in these events? Why are some people paid more attention than others? Why is the reaction different to similar events?

There is abundant academic literature on criteria concerning news values, that is, the qualities that make an incident be perceived with singularity as regards its subsequent publication in a media outlet. Some of these studies have recently considered these criteria of newsworthiness applied to the field of sports news (Rojas-Torrijos, 2023).

Galtung & Ruge (1965) were among the first to draw up a list of news values. They identified 12 elements that marked an incident's journalistic interest: 1) Frequency: the repetition of a topic within a given timeframe; 2) Continuity: events or themes of prolonged duration; 3) Consonance: a large number of people are involved or it affects a wide geographic area; 4) Absolute intensity: it has a significant impact on people or society (losses, benefits, social changes or strong emotions); 5) Relevance: importance based on the social and cultural values prevailing in society; 6) Reference to something negative: having a negative connotation, such as scandals, crimes or disasters; 7) Reference to elites: involving people or groups of high social status, such as political leaders, celebrities or influential people; 8) Reference to persons: can be linked to or related with specific individuals or groups; 9) Unambiguity: a property of an event that can be easily agreed upon and unambiguous in its interpretation as something negative; 10) Meaningfulness: being close and meaningful to the audience; 11) Scarcity: being exceptional, unique or the "largest", "the smallest", "the fastest", etc.; and 12) Unexpectedness: events that come about in an unforeseeable manner. The authors state that the more factors an event satisfies, the greater the probability that it will become news.

A few years later, Carl Warren (1975) synthesized these news values, establishing the following criteria: topicality, proximity, prominence, curiosity, conflict, suspense, emotion, and consequences. Gans (1979) sees the factors that turn an event into news as: 1) the degree and hierarchical level of the persons involved; 2) the event's impact on the community; 3) the number of people involved; and 4) its relevance with respect to contextual situations. He furthermore adds other elements such as human-interest stories, the actions of those who break commonly accepted rules, great adventures, etc. In 1986, Jeffres drew up a similar list when referring to the binomials of opportunity and proximity, progress and

disaster, or eminence and prominence, in addition to elements such as conflict, novelty, consequences and human interest.

One of the starting points of this research will be to determine the number of variables that are met in the case study analysed. The media have not only the ability to select and publish news, but they can also determine which topics are considered relevant and worthy of the audience's attention, thus conditioning newsworthiness criteria, which do not behave as a mere mathematical rule. The theory of agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) maintains that the mass media play a major role in setting the political and social agenda. This remains the case despite the emergence of new fora such as social media, as explained by recent reviews of the theory (De Maeyer, 2020; Mast & Temmerman, 2021; Gilardi et al, 2022; Geiss, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). In this sense, the overexposure of the issue of racist attacks on Vinicius marked the public and political agendas at the time.

This unavoidable task of selection is followed by a no less obligatory focusing and hierarchisation of a news item's elements, especially in print media. By performing these three functions (selecting, focusing and hierarchising) the medium is constructing a frame. It is around that central concept that the noteworthy body of conclusions concerning the framing effect has been drawn up in scientific literature since the mid-seventies (Sádaba-Garraza, 2001).

Gitlin (1980) defined the so-called news frames as "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of small tacit theories about what exists, happens, and matters." In his view, frames act as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion" from which news stories are organised. Writing years later, Gamson (1989) maintains that a media outlet chooses a frame to attach meaning to an event and that is why it emphasises some points while ignoring others. Entman (1993) agrees pointing out that news work requires selection and emphasis and insists that the space that the media dedicates to an event constitutes the essence of framing, increasing, or decreasing the relevance that public opinion sees in it. More recently, Reese & Lewis (2009) argue that frames are "socially shared organising principles that persist over time, which work symbolically to structure the social world by giving it meaning" Other authors (Scheufele, 2006; Valkenburg et al., 1999) insist that for the press, frames are a useful tool for composing or constructing news, simplifying their work and favouring an agile and effective reception by audiences. More

recent research has continued to look more deeply into the theory of the framing effect (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019; Cavanagh et al, 2022).

In addition to studying what news values criteria made this particular incident have so great an impact in the media, this concept of framing is applied herein to compare the news coverage that the different media gave to the aforementioned episode at Mestalla stadium.

Unlike what happened on previous occasions (and, especially, with other sportspersons subject to racist attacks of similar severity), the fact that the player complained at the time, on the field of play, unleashed unprecedented media coverage (framing) and placed the issue on the social and political agendas of both Spain and Brazil (Vinicius's country of birth) for several days (agenda setting), with declarations from even the highest level of political leaders. In fact, it generated a collateral debate of considerable intensity, concerning such issues as whether Spanish society is racist, whether athletes of colour are frequently subject to attacks of this type (Beltrán & Ruiz-Gros, 2022), or whether the authorities should take more drastic measures; including everything from the closure of a stadium to heavy economic sanctions, or even the suspension of a team's participation in sport. Furthermore, there was debate as to whether the victim's fame (he is one of the most famous and best-paid footballers in the world) or the team he plays for influences the media attention given. That is to say, if there are "first-class" and "second-class" victims.

This study aims to analyse the extent to which this episode was exceptional, in the context of the usual treatment that the press gives to racism in sport, and to identify possible differences in behavioural patterns when faced with an event of this type.

Other racist incidents have occurred within the time period analysed in the study. On January 25, 2020, Athletic Bilbao forward Iñaki Williams was subjected to racist insults at the Cornellá El Prat stadium in Barcelona. On January 31, 2021, Atlético Baleares player Vinicius Tanque was yelled at from the stands in a match against Atlético de Madrid B. A further case occurred on April 4, 2021, with the Valencia player Mouctar Diakhaby and the Cádiz player Juan Cala as protagonists. On March 1, 2022, a Granada fan made the "monkey" gesture to Cádiz player Carlos Akapo. That same month in 2022 saw Nico Williams suffer insults during the

Betis-Athletic de Bilbao match played at the Benito Villamarín stadium in Seville. None of these had a significant echo in the Spanish digital sports press.

The following objectives are proposed to answer these questions:

- O1: Identify the traditional criteria of newsworthiness and, from there, determine how many are met in the case of the racist insults against Vinicius, the case that has garnered the most notoriety in recent years.
- O2: Compare coverage of this incident with others of a similar nature in order to define what criteria arouse greater press attention.
- O3: Check if there are different approaches and if the media use them to combat or encourage hate speech.

To this end, the following hypotheses are proposed for validation.

- H1: Racism in sport is a sporadic and non-recurring topic on the agenda of the Spanish sports press, save exceptional situations.
- H2: The case studied arouses particular attention because it brings together several elements of news values.
- H3: There are no significant differences between the different digital media analysed, whether from Madrid or Barcelona, in terms of the volume of news published about racism in sport.
- H4: There are differences in approach in the news coverage between the different media depending on whether they are published in Madrid or Barcelona, taking into account the football rivalry between both cities.
- H5: With their reporting, newspapers contribute to placing the problem of racism in sports on the public agenda. By denouncing racist attitudes and encouraging action against them, they help combat hate speech instead of fuelling it.

## 2. Material and methods

To carry out the research, news items corresponding to the five seasons of the Real Madrid player Vinicius Júnior in the Spanish Football League were analysed, this being the period from August 17, 2018 (start date of the 18/19 League) to June 4, 2023 (end date of the League 22/23).



News items published in their digital editions by the four Spanish sports newspapers with the largest circulation according to the EGM (marca.com, as.com, mundodeportivo.com and sport.es) have been compiled using the clipboard tool MyNews for each of these seasons, these pieces all contained the word “racism” in their headline and/or in the body of the text. The MyNews tool allows one to download, read and analyse the full texts of each of the news items in its original form. The digital editions were chosen for analysis instead of the printed versions because, especially since the pandemic, the consumption of digital media has increased in this area of specialisation (Martínez-Fresneda & Davara Torrego, 2022).

The same search was then carried out, but with items that included both the term “racism” and the word “Vinicius”.

Finally, within this search, the results obtained in the 15 days following the racist insults proffered against Vinicius from the stands of Mestalla stadium were isolated, as this constituted the most serious incident recorded during the period analysed. Analysis of the content of these news items was carried out by reading the texts referring to the case study using both MyNews and ATLAS.ti, which allows the linking of some terms with others (San Martín, 2014).

The study has special significance because it is not common for the sports press to address so profusely a topic that crosses the borders of sport, a topic, moreover, that has, as in this case, an undeniable social projection (Muñoz & Salido, 2018). Sports journalism has historically kept its distance from addressing topics and issues of heightened social sensitivity, which are not directly related to purely sporting matters (Rojas-Torrijos, 2023).

### 3. Results

The first stage of the research involved identifying the most notable racist episodes over the period analysed, considering as such those published by at least two national digital sports media simultaneously over a period of at least two days. 39 were registered in total, of which 34 were about association football, two about motorsports and one each about American football, volleyball, and tennis.

**Table 1.** *Relevant news items on racism in the 2018-19 to 2022-23 seasons*

SEASON	DATE	STORY	SPORT
2018-19	09/06/2018	Kaepernick stands up to Trump in Nike ad	American football
	09/11/2018	The first 25 seconds of England-Switzerland are to be televised in black and white	Soccer
	10/25/2018	A broadcaster is fined for telling a black player to "go for a walk in the Senegalese jungle"	Volleyball
	12/28/2018	UEFA condemns racism after insults to Koulibaly	Soccer
	02/18/2019	Racist graffiti against Mbappe on the Paris metro	Soccer
2019-20	09/16/2019	A club president saying of Lukaku: "you only stop him if you give him ten bananas"	Soccer
	09/02/2019	Lukaku, victim of racism by Cagliari fans	Soccer
	09/20/2019	Journalist fined for comparing Serena Williams to a monkey	Tennis
	09/25/2019	The League denounces chants at Sevilla-Real Madrid and Osasuna-Betis	Soccer
	09/25/2019	Ludmila denounces racism in a supermarket in a video	Soccer
	10/15/2019	Racist incidents in the Bulgaria-England match	Soccer
	12/03/2019	Racism in Verona against Balotelli	Soccer
	01/25/2020	Shouts of "monkey, monkey" at Iñaki Williams at the Cornellá el Prat stadium	Soccer
	02/17/2020	Marega case: a matter of state in Portugal	Soccer
	02/28/2020	Kiko Casilla suspended for eight games for alleged racist insults	Soccer
	06/03/2020	Borja Iglesias has his nails painted black.	Soccer
	06/08/2020	Jesús Fernández criticises the demonstration following the death of George Floyd	Soccer
	06/22/2020	A noose in Bubba Wallace's box in Nascar	Motorsport
	06/22/2020	A light aircraft displays a racist message during City-Burnley	Soccer
07/12/2020	Hamilton Black Power banner on the podium	Motorsport	
2020-21	09/13/2020	Alleged racist insults between Neymar and Alvaro González at PSG-Olympique	Soccer

*(continued)*

**Table 1.** *Relevant news items on racism in the 2018-19 to 2022-23 seasons (continued)*

SEASON	DATE	STORY	SPORT
2020-21	09/16/2020	Kameni denounces that her son was called the 'n-word' at school	Soccer
	09/31/2020	Racist cries at Vinicius Tamque in an Atlético de Madrid-Atlético Baleares	Soccer
2021-22	04/04/2021	Possible racist insult by Cádiz player Juan Cala towards Valencia player Diakhaby	Soccer
	09/10/2021	RTVE opens a file against a collaborator for a comment about Camavinga	Soccer
	10/04/2021	Insults hurled at Koulibaly in a Naples-Fiorentina match.	Soccer
	03/01/2022	A Granada fan insults Cádiz player Akapo	Soccer
	03/15/2022	Racist insults towards Athletic Bilbao player Nico Williams at the Benito Villamarín	Soccer
	03/16/2022	The league denounces racist insults against Vinicius	Soccer
2022-23	09/18/2022	Racist insults against Vinicius in the Atlético de Madrid-Real Madrid	Soccer
	12/30/2022	Racist insults against Vinicius in the Real Valladolid-Real Madrid match	Soccer
	01/26/2023	Racist insults against Vinicius before the Real Madrid-Atlético de Madrid Cup match	Soccer
	02/05/2023	Racist insults against Vinicius in the Mallorca-Real Madrid match	Soccer
	02/18/2023	Racist insults against Vinicius in the Osasuna-Real Madrid match	Soccer
	03/05/2023	Racist insults against Vinicius in the Real Betis-Real Madrid match	Soccer
	03/19/2023	Racist insults against Vinicius in the Barcelona-Real Madrid match	Soccer
	03/27/2023	Racist posts by a hotel employee against the Morocco team	Soccer
	04/12/2023	Accusations of racism against PSG coach Christophe Galtier	Soccer
	05/21/2023	Racist insults against Vinicius in the Valencia-Real Madrid match	Soccer

**Source:** created by the authors.

The next table includes the number of news items that have contained the term “racism” since the arrival of the Brazilian player in the LaLiga competition.

**Table 2.** *News items with the term “racism” in the 2018-19 to 2022-23 seasons*

SEASON	MEDIA OUTLET				TOTAL
	Marca	As	Mundo Deportivo	Sport	
2018-2019	47	145	60	67	319
2019-2020	146	413	322	137	1018
2020-2021	15	48	27	25	115
2021-2022	176	148	144	110	578
2022-2023	434	362	409	337	1542
TOTAL	818	1116	962	676	3572

**Source:** *created by the authors.*

When the word “Vinicius” was added to the search for “racism”, the results were as follows:

**Table 3.** *News item with the terms “Vinicius” and “racism” in the 2018-19 to 2022-23 seasons*

SEASON	MEDIA OUTLET				TOTAL
	Marca	As	Mundo Deportivo	Sport	
2018-2019	1	0	0	0	1
2019-2020	4	5	4	1	14
2020-2021	3	11	7	2	23
2021-2022	6	5	6	5	22
2022-2023	236	210	226	165	837
TOTAL	250	231	243	173	897

**Source:** *created by the authors.*

Finally, we proceeded to specifically analyse news coverage of the insults against Vinicius recorded during the Valencia-Real Madrid match played at Mestalla stadium on May 21, 2023, as it was the sport-related racist incident with the greatest repercussion in the media during this period. The following results were obtained:

**Table 4.** *News items with the terms “Vinicius” and “racism” in the Mestalla stadium incident (5/21/2023)*

MEDIA OUTLET	Marca	As	Mundo Deportivo	Sport	TOTAL
ANALYSIS OF THE MESTALLA INCIDENT (5/21/2023)	130	125	139	118	512

*Source:* created by the authors.

Next, a double analysis was carried out to determine if there were differences in the framing that the newspapers carried out on the same news event, especially considering that two of them are from Madrid (Marca and As) and the others from Barcelona (Sport and Mundo Deportivo), two cities with intense football rivalry embodied in their two main clubs (Real Madrid and FC Barcelona).

First, a count was made of the number of occasions on which eight representative terms were employed concerning this news event. In particular, differences were sought in the presence of the term "provoker" (and in its variants "provocation" or "provocative"), as this was the main accusation made against Vinicius on social and journalistic media. The following results were obtained:

**Table 5.** *Frequency of terms in news items with the words “Vinicius” and “racism” in the Mestalla stadium incident (5/21/2023) (as a percentage of the total number of terms)*

TERM	MEDIA OUTLET			
	Marca	As	Mundo Deportivo	Sport
Racism / racist / racists	1.13	0.79	1.49	1.25
Insult / Insults	0.43	0.3	0.5	0.37
Complaint / Complaints	0.18	0.11	0.2	0.18

*(continued)*

**Table 5.** *Frequency of terms in news items with the words “Vinicius” and “racism” in the Mestalla stadium incident (5/21/2023) (as a percentage of the total number of terms) (continued)*

TERM	MEDIA OUTLET			
	Marca	As	Mundo Deportivo	Sport
Sanction / sanctions	0.09	0.07	0.08	0.09
Hate	0.13	0.06	0.26	0.22
Crime	0.08	0.04	0.06	0.06
Provocation / provocative / provoker	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01

**Source:** *created by the authors.*

To complement this analysis, the 512 articles under study were read from the compilation made using MyNews, to identify possible criticism of Vinicius's attitude and to find out if there were differences between the newspapers. Therefore, the fundamental underpinning of the study is the detailed reading of each of the texts. Furthermore, a distinction was made between whether this criticism was the fruit of personal opinion, that is, formulated by the author of the news item in an opinion article, or whether it was reported, and the piece was limited to repeating criticism of the player made by other people or institutions, criticism of how Valencia was being treated, or critical in a comparison with other similar cases of racist insults. The following results were obtained:

**Table 6.** *Content of the news items with the words “Vinicius” and “racism” in the Mestalla stadium incident (5/21/2023)*

CONTENT	MEDIA OUTLET							
	Marca		As		Mundo Deportivo		Sport	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
No criticism of Vinicius	125	96	120	95.83	120	84.17	106	89.83
First-hand criticism	1	0.80	0	0.00	10	8.33	5	4.24
Other people's criticism	4	3.20	5	4.17	9	7.50	7	5.93
Total	130	100.00	125	100.00	139	100.00	118	100.00

**Source:** *created by the authors.*

## 4. Discussion

As with many other topical news issues, racism in sports has inconsistent coverage in the press, depending on various criteria of journalistic interest, categorisation of news, framing by the media, or presence on the public agenda.

An example of that is the aforementioned controversy unleashed in Mestalla, which led to unprecedented press coverage, and which even led political leaders to take a stance, including the Prime Minister of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the President of Brazil, Lula da Silva, as well as various international institutions. However, this was not the only racist episode in the world of sports reported by the media. Why did it have such exceptional resonance?

In the five full seasons Vinicius has played in Spain, the digital editions of the four main Spanish sports newspapers (Marca, As, Mundo Deportivo and Sport) reported a total of 39 noteworthy racist episodes (Table 1). Among the 34 concerning football there are 12 incidents similar to those involving Vinicius, with racist insults by fans.

Within this timeframe, the four newspapers published 3,572 news items touching on racism, with an average of 714 per season, but with highly unequal distribution (115 in the 20-21 season, 1,018 in 2019-20, or 1,542 in 22-23) (Table 2). In the case of the 2019-20 season, the high number of reports was due to a proliferation of racist episodes with a certain degree of media coverage (15 of a total of 39 recorded over the five years, 38.4% of the total), but this pattern is not sustained in the 22-23 season, since the increase in the number of items had practically a single protagonist, Vinicius (eight of the 10 episodes), with the particularity that until that moment the footballer had only suffered one racist attack - or at least one that the press had reflected as such - despite having been playing in the Spanish league for four seasons. Therefore, of the 897 news items counted when the words "Vinicius" and "racism" are cross-referenced, 93.3% correspond to last season (Table 3).

Therefore, racism in sport is, in the eyes of the Spanish sports media, a non-recurring issue which receives minor coverage (bearing in mind the large number of news items they publish), implying that they do not perceive, in general terms, a problem of racist attitudes in Spanish sport. However, when exceptional situations

occur, such as that in the case under consideration, the number of news items skyrockets. This corroborates the first hypothesis posited.

Once this point was identified, the next step was to analyse why the specific case of the insults towards Vinicius in the Valencia stadium aroused such particular attention in the media, when similar episodes with other sportspersons as victims had not done so to the same extent. This event alone generated one in seven of the reports on racism in sports in the four newspapers (14.3%) over five years, and 57% of the reports recorded in the 2022-23 season, which justifies it being the object of specific analysis.

Following the catalogue of news values criteria drawn up by Galtung & Ruge (1965), Warren (1975), Gans (1979) and Jeffres (1986), it is verified that the incident analysed brings together, to a greater or lesser extent, all the factors that make it a news item likely to receive broad coverage.

**Table 7.** *News values criteria satisfied in the insults against Vinicius at Mestalla stadium (5/21/2023)*

GALTUNG & RUGE		WARREN		GANS		JEFFRES	
Criterion		Criterion		Criterion		Criterion	
Frequency	Yes	Topicality	Yes	Hierarchy	Partly	Opportunity and proximity	Yes
Continuity	Yes	Proximity	Yes	Community Impact	Yes	Progress and disaster	Partly
Consonance	Yes	Prominence	Yes	# involved	Yes	Eminence and prominence	Yes
Absolute intensity	Yes	Curiosity	Partly	Relevance	Yes	Conflict	Yes
Relevance	Yes	Conflict	Yes			Novelty	Partly
Negativity	Yes	Suspense	Partly			Consequences	Yes
Elite people	Partly	Emotion	Partly			Human interest	Partly
Personalisation	Yes	Consequences	Partly				
Unambiguity	Yes						

(continued)



**Table 7.** News values criteria satisfied in the insults against Vinicius at Mestalla stadium (5/21/2023) (continued)

GALTUNG & RUGE		WARREN		GANS		JEFFRES	
Meaningfulness	Yes						
Scarcity	Partly						
Unexpectedness	Yes						

*Source: created by the authors.*

Taking Galtung and Ruge's enumeration (1965) as a base, it having served as a model for the other academics, criteria such as "Frequency" and "Continuity" are very significant, especially between the months of February and May 2023, with five racist incidents in as many matches. Such reiteration, the seriousness of the events, and the media impact led the Professional Football League to denounce the incidents and open a file. These eight episodes stand in contrast to the virtual absence of similar events in previous seasons with the participation of the Brazilian player.

Another variable that may have played an important role was "Unexpectedness", understood as Vinicius's reaction when pointing at the fan who made the monkey gestures, which led to the lengthy interruption of the match, and the even more virulent reaction from a part of the stands. The image, repeated insistently by all the media for days, had not occurred during similar episodes and possibly acted as a trigger to set off the media spiral.

There is also the element of "Consonance", involving a large number of people (league officials, club officials, referees, the Competition Committee, teammates and rivals, coloured players from other teams, fans, etc.) spread over a wide geographic area. Furthermore, being a Brazilian player (a country in which football is lived with special intensity), the matter crossed national borders.

Regarding "Absolute Intensity", the news evidently had a significant impact on society, as it involved an important player in a team with a large fan base, with the issue being one that involves social change and stirs up strong emotions. The event also involves "Relevance" which made it become news, since it is clear that racism is considered an important social issue. Furthermore, at the time the event took place, Spain was immersed in the general election pre-campaign, and the

various parties' candidates seized the opportunity to position themselves clearly against racism.

"Negativity" is also evident, since racist insults in a stadium are an obvious denial of human rights that draws the attention of celebrities and influential people ("Elite Values"). It is also unequivocal news, lacking complexity in the determination of its essential facts (xenophobic insults towards a black player in a football stadium) and therefore contains the criterion of "Unambiguity".

Another criterion of news values met in this coverage is that of "Meaningfulness", the fact that the victim is a Real Madrid striker, one of the most popular players in one of the most popular teams both in Spain and around the world, means the attacks are perceived by the audience as close and meaningful. Furthermore, although it is true that episodes such as this have been repeated with other protagonists, they remain exceptional and therefore validate the "Scarcity" criterion.

The particular character and marked personality of Vinicius in the Spanish football world mean that another of the news values criteria identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965) is verified: "Personalisation", by which the news is personified in the individual.

Hypothesis 2 is thus verified with one important caveat: although other factors are present, it is the personality of the victim of the attacks that helps unleash this media storm, possibly together with the fact that his on-pitch reaction serves to feed its nature as an "Unexpected" outcome.

Once the media relevance of the event has been confirmed, it is interesting to analyse whether there are differences in how the different newspapers handle the story both individually and according to their geographical location, that is to say whether they are published in Madrid (Marca and As) or in Catalonia (Mundo Deportivo and Sport), All this takes place against the backdrop of the fierce rivalry between Real Madrid and Barcelona, and an alleged tendency of the Madrid press to favour their city's team and of the Catalan media to be more critical of everything that surrounds the team in white.

On this point, analysis of the number of news items does not show significant differences in terms of coverage of racism in sport when Vinicius is the protagonist. That maxim is fulfilled whether the five seasons are analysed as a whole or if the Mestalla incident is taken in isolation. In the first case (Tables 2 and 3), from the total number of news items containing the word "racism", Vinicius is present

in 30.56% of those from Marca, 20.69% from As, 25.25% from Mundo Deportivo and practically the same percentage in Sport (25.59%). As a whole, the Brazilian player accounted for one in four pieces on racism in sport.

The four media also respond practically equally to the spiral generated after the Mestalla incident: 130 items in Marca, 125 in As, 139 in Mundo Deportivo and 118 in Sport (Table 4). Both results confirm the third hypothesis: there are no significant differences between the different media outlets, whether in headlines or geographical location, in terms of coverage of the manifestations of hatred towards the player in question. The importance of the player and the team he plays for give news value to the issue regardless of readers' possible preference for one club or another.

However, the fourth of the hypotheses posited, that the Madrid and Barcelona newspapers take different approaches to the issue, has only been partially corroborated. There are no significant differences in the use of terminology (Table 5), specifically with anything related to an alleged provocation on the player's part, which is his detractors' main accusation against him, their argument being that other players of colour do not suffer the same hate speech. Curiously, the presence of the terms (provocation/provocative/provoker) is even rarer in the Catalan media (0.01) than in the Madrid press (0.02).

Where differences can be observed is in the framing of the news, whether it be to turn the player exclusively into a victim (about which there is unanimity) or to also imply that he bears some responsibility due to this supposedly provocative attitude. Thus, criticism of the player is residual in Marca (3.8% of the total number of items) and As (4%), but more significant on the Catalan portals: in Mundo Deportivo criticism of Vinicius is apparent in 13.67 % of the pieces and in Sport in 10.17%.

Furthermore, as regards the Catalan media, around half of these negative comments are made by the authors of the piece themselves, while in the rest of the cases they echo criticism from third parties or institutions. Only one criticism of the player is posted in Marca, from a total of 130 news items. None appear in As (out of 125 items).

Although there are evident differences between whether the piece formulates such criticism or simply echoes it, the same intention is present in both cases: to frame the news event not only around the racist episodes, which are universally condemned,

but to question the player's attitude, or the attitude of the organisations responsible for an alleged favourable treatment of the Brazilian striker compared to other footballers who have less projection but are also victims of similar expressions of hatred.

Therefore, the fifth and last hypothesis is confirmed for the most part, although not in its entirety. The unusual and exceptional coverage of the racist incidents suffered by Vinicius in the Spanish digital sports media has served to place the problem of racism in sport on the public agenda, even if it is personalised in just one player. The news has fuelled debate, has led to the intervention of politicians and institutions, and has functioned as a soundbox for a generalised criticism of racism. Therefore, news coverage has served to combat these attitudes, raising public awareness, instead of promoting the hate speech that is so present on social media. But after analysing the content of the news items, a certain nuance is detected when verifying that in a part of the texts (one in ten in the case of the Catalan newspapers) there are mentions of a provocative attitude by Vinicius on the pitch, although always within a context of censorship of hate speech. That may be a limitation of this study, since it would seem venturesome to judge whether the fact of questioning certain of the victim's attitudes, or of echoing such questioning, in itself means feeding the hate speeches that are being reported and/or denounced, or whether it could be considered an attempt to contextualise the story.

In conclusion, analysis of the coverage that the main Spanish sports media give to the issue of racism in sport shows that it is not a hotly-followed issue except when a specific event meets all the criteria of newsworthiness, as happened with the racist attacks on Vinicius in the Valencia stadium. This is especially true when there are elements such as the victim having a strong personality or being a celebrity, or when there is an unexpected outcome such as the player pointing to a spectator as the author of an expression of hate, as proposed by the theory of Galtung & Ruge (1965) and echoed by other authors. Subsequent research could, for example, identify the importance of those criteria when it comes to explaining why other events of similar severity have had less repercussion due to not meeting some of the aforementioned characteristics.

Once a media storm such as the one analysed in this case has been unleashed, the deployment of the media is uniform (everyone deems it a newsworthy event), but their approach is not. While the two newspapers published in Madrid (and supposedly more inclined to support Real Madrid) present Vinicius exclusively as

a victim, without questioning his attitude on the field of play, the Catalan portals mention (and criticise) in some of their texts an alleged provocative attitude by the sportsman (between 10 and 13% of the news items), although without down-playing the seriousness of the manifestations of hate, and of course in a very different tone from that which characterises social media.

As future lines of research, this same comparative study could be carried out in the general news media or, even, in cases of racism recorded in the same time frame as that of Vinicius, to determine, based on news values criteria, why they did not receive as much media attention.

## Contributions by the authors

**Ernesto Villar Cirujano:** Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, resources, supervision, validation, writing – original draft and writing – review & editing.

**Miguel Ángel Sánchez de la Nieta:** Conceptualization, investigation, resources, writing – original draft and writing – review and editing.

**Julio Pulido Zaragoza:** Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, and writing – review & editing.

All the authors have read and agree with the published version of the manuscript.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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