

The manosphere and women's football: an analysis of misogynistic discourse in the comments section of Spain's most- read online newspaper

Manosfera y fútbol femenino: análisis del discurso
misógino en la comunidad virtual del diario Marca

Manosfera e futebol feminino: análise do discurso
misógino na comunidade virtual do jornal Marca

Carolina Arrieta-Castillo 

Madrid Open University (UDIMA), Madrid, Spain. Associate Professor of Communication
and Languages. carolina.arrieta@udima.es

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Abstract

The latest sporting milestones in women's football and the struggles of the Spanish national team's players to receive better treatment from the Spanish Football Federation have resulted in the media spotlight being placed on them. This study seeks to understand the discursive reception that has been given to the struggle of the female football players by the users of Marca.com, the largest sports forum in Spain, in terms of diffusion. The aim is to examine whether user comments constitute discourses close to the manosphere, digital spaces characterised by hosting and disseminating hate speech towards women. To this end, topics and representations are analysed in the comments that Marca users publish in response to two news items about the refusal of the players to be selected until they receive treatment in accordance with their professional status (the 'fifteen case' and the '#Seacabó case'). The results show that the national team players, football players or women in general are represented negatively in more than two thirds of the messages. Furthermore, almost half of the comments have been identified as potential discourses of the manosphere, as they draw on themes such as female infantilism, the deification of the masculinity or the discrimination against heterosexual men. The spread of digital misogyny in the most far-reaching sports forum in Spain should be of interest and concern for the field of communication from the perspective of sex.

Keywords

Hate speech - digital misogyny - Manosphere - Marca - online media - women's football

Resumen

Los últimos hitos deportivos del fútbol femenino y las luchas de las futbolistas de la selección española por recibir un mejor trato por parte de la Real Federación Española de Fútbol han hecho que los medios de comunicación pongan sobre ellas el foco mediático. En este estudio nos preguntamos por la acogida discursiva que los usuarios de Marca.com, el foro deportivo con mayor difusión en España, han dado

a las noticias relacionadas con la lucha de las futbolistas. Se pretende examinar si los comentarios de los usuarios constituyen discursos próximos a la manosfera, espacios digitales caracterizados por albergar y difundir mensajes de odio hacia las mujeres. Para ello, se analizan temáticas y representaciones en los comentarios publicados como respuesta a dos noticias sobre la negativa de las jugadoras a ser seleccionadas hasta lograr recibir un trato acorde a su estatus profesional (el 'caso de las quince' y el 'caso #Seacabó'). Los resultados muestran que en más de dos tercios de los mensajes se representa de forma negativa a las jugadoras de la selección, a las futbolistas o a las mujeres en general. Además, casi la mitad de los comentarios han sido identificados como discursos propios de la manosfera, pues se nutren de temáticas como el infantilismo femenino, la deificación de lo masculino o la discriminación del hombre heterosexual. La difusión de misoginia digital en el foro deportivo de mayor alcance en España debería ser de interés y preocupación para el ámbito de la comunicación con perspectiva de género.

Palabras clave

Discursos de odio - misoginia digital - Manosfera - Marca - medios online - fútbol femenino

Resumo

Os últimos marcos desportivos no futebol feminino e as lutas das jogadoras da seleção espanhola para receberem um melhor tratamento por parte da Real Federação Espanhola de Futebol fizeram com que os meios de comunicação colocassem os holofotes sobre elas. Neste estudo nos perguntamos sobre a recepção discursiva que os usuários do Marca.com, o fórum esportivo de maior difusão na Espanha, têm dado às notícias relacionadas à luta das jogadoras de futebol. O objetivo é examinar se os comentários dos usuários constituem discursos próximos da manosfera, espaços digitais caracterizados por hospedar e disseminar mensagens de ódio às mulheres. Para tanto, são analisados temas e representações nos comentários que os usuários do Marca publicam em resposta a duas notícias sobre a recusa dos jogadores em serem selecionados até que recebam tratamento de acordo com seu status profissional (o 'caso quinze' e o 'caso #Seacabó'). Os resultados mostram que em mais de dois

terços das mensagens, os jogadores da selecção nacional, jogadores de futebol ou mulheres em geral são representados de forma negativa. Além disso, quase metade dos comentários foram identificados como discursos típicos da manosphere, uma vez que se baseiam em temas como o infantilismo feminino, a deificação do masculino ou a discriminação dos homens heterossexuais. A difusão da misoginia digital no fórum desportivo de maior alcance em Espanha deve ser de interesse e preocupação no campo da comunicação com uma perspectiva de género.

Palavras chave

Discurso de ódio - misoginia digital - Manosphere - Marca - mídia on-line - futebol feminino

1. Introduction

Hate speech has been defined as messages that contain slander, insults or pejorative terms with the intention of inciting hatred and hostile attitudes towards individuals or groups who possess particular characteristics (same ethnicity, origin, sex, etc.) (de Latour, 2017; Sponholz, 2022). In this context, misogynistic discourse refers to hate speech specifically targeting women based on their sex (Siapera, 2019). These discourses can be found in gender misinformation (Herrero Diz et al., 2020) and in the *manosphere*, a term popularised by Ian Ironwood in 2012 that refers to an online community (Lilly, 2016) that promotes misogynistic and anti-feminist ideas (Ging & Siapera, 2018) and provides support and solidarity for a certain type of man (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The *manosphere* is characterised by its use of aggressive language, which sometimes manifests as explicit calls for the “harassment of women” (Benassini-Félix, 2022). In a society like Spain, where 56 incidents of femicide were recorded in 2023, highlighting verbal violence against women in digital spaces should be crucial within the field of communications research.

One of the most frequent mindsets in the *manosphere* is the undermining of women’s accomplishments in fields that are traditionally dominated by men, such as football. The media is very interested in sports due to its significant societal influence. However, female athletes usually receive less media coverage than their

male counterparts (Pérez-Ugena, 2020). The difference in representation between male and female football players has been particularly noticeable in the world of football (Roman-San-Miguel et al., 2022), a sport that receives the most attention from sports journalism in Spain and which often presents a masculine symbolism that prevents a positive portrayal of female players (Martínez-Corcuera et al., 2022). The image of female players ranges between being underrepresented (Adá-Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2022) and subjected to stereotypical and biased views that undermine their professional qualities (Ayala Quisaguano & Vega Toala, 2020) to being sexualised (Adá-Lameiras et al., 2021).

The rise of women's football in a predominantly male-dominated media environment raises the question of how the audiences of these media platforms perceive and respond to female athletes. The growing phenomena of the *manosphere* predicts a hostile discourse against women seeking to assert their presence in a space that has previously been dominated by male figures

In 2023, the Spanish national women's football team had several achievements and controversies at the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand, which was the most important event in women's football that year. The first controversy was a result of the players' discontent with the inadequate professional treatment provided by the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF). This dissatisfaction culminated in a group of players, known as 'the fifteen', resigning from the national team. However, some of these players eventually returned, leading to their triumph as world champions in 2023. The second controversy arose when the president of the RFEF, Luis Rubiales, kissed one of the players on the mouth during the medal reception ceremony. The case of 'the fifteen' soon led to the 'Rubiales' case, and as a result of both incidents, the *hashtag* #Seacabó [it's over] gained worldwide attention. Many different athletes from called for greater respect for women in the realm of sports (BBC News Mundo Editorial Team, 2023). Both cases received extensive coverage and analysis in both sports and non-sports media, exposing the female national team's football players to the discussions and debates that arose in the comments sections of these media outlets.

Of all the media specialised in sports that followed the cases, the newspaper *Marca*, the most widely read newspaper in Spain, has an significant impact and influence on Spanish society (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2016). The comments posted by digital media users on news related to the women's team enable us to objective-

ly comprehend the nature of discussions surrounding women's football inside a predominantly male-dominated communications sphere, and in one of the most prominent Spanish-speaking platforms in the sports industry.

The objective of our research study is to determine whether the most widely circulated digital newspaper in Spain permits the display of hate speech against women, and if so, whether this can be classified as a digital space characterised by sexism, commonly found in the *manosphere*. To do this, we will address the following questions:

- R.Q.1: What are the specific characteristics of the language used in this newspaper's comments section when discussing female football players (and women in general)?
 - R.Q.1a: What are the main topics in the comments?
 - R.Q.1b: What type of representation (roles and attributes) is given to female players (and women) and other individuals in society?
- R.Q. 2: What is the relationship between the typical topics discussed in the *manosphere* and those expressed by *Marca* users?
- R.Q. 3: Could it be plausible that the most read newspaper in Spain serves as a platform for the promotion and dissemination of hate speech towards women?

1.1. The *manosphere* and digital misogyny

The *manosphere* is made up of a collection of online spaces such as blogs, social networks and forums in different formats, that are fragmented and constantly evolving (Kyparissiadis & Skoulas, 2021). These platforms provide a space to bring together men who see themselves as victims of a societal structure that favours women (Díaz-Fernández & García-Mingo, 2022; García-Mingo et al., 2022), and are characterised by their opposition to feminist ideas. These anti-feminist ideas are spread by agents who are able to leverage men's unease about a perceived social crisis attributed to feminism; and they provide a space for male socialisation while presenting an identity solution to that crisis (Bijalka et al., 2022). According to Delgado-Ontivero and Sánchez-Sicilia (2023, p. 189), the *manosphere* serves as more than just a place for discussion "... the Manosphere functions as a socially

and communally beneficial space for masculinity” by offering men various advantages such as support networks, a sense of belonging, political certainties and even friendships. These communities require extensive participation from those who are able to neutralize their arguments in the digital arena: fact-checkers, gatekeepers, etc. (Anzovino et al., 2018).

The main tenets of the *manosphere* revolve around portraying males as victims (Lacalle et al., 2023). The rejection of the feminist premise of the inequality suffered by women leads males to perceive that their legitimate rights are being taken away by the feminist movement; they attribute this infringement of rights to an institutionalised hatred towards men supported by left-wing governments (Martínez-Jiménez & Zurbano Berenguer, 2019).

The construction of victim representation typically involves a series of topics or arguments (Lacalle et al., 2023), such as: *hypergamy*, which refers to women being attracted to men based on their economic status and ability to provide material goods; *infantilism* and the permanent dissatisfaction resulting from women's capricious nature, which leaves men vulnerable to their unpredictable behaviours; and the *privilege* that women receive through feminism and left-wing ideologies, which in turn discriminate against heterosexual white men. All of these topics are supported by the notion that women can attain a position of dominance over men by virtue of their sexual prowess (Azzolari et al., 2021). This, in turn, contradicts the objectification and hypersexualisation of women, as well as the use of sexually explicit language, which is prevalent in the discourses of these communities (Farrell et al., 2019).

In studies on the behaviours within the *manosphere* within specifically Spanish spaces, such as Forocoches or Burbuja.info (Lacalle, 2023a; Lacalle, 2023b; Lacalle et al., 2023), the narratives against women often emphasise the sacrifice men make as the main motive. At the same time, the discussions in these spaces exhibit a tendency to underestimate the female domain, portraying it as flawed compared to the male domain.

Finally, according to Sponholz (2022, p. 131), hate speech is not only about using offensive language, but rather about “the circumstances in which discriminatory symbolic actions acquire meaning.” Misogynistic statements can be classified as hate speech because their targeted and derogatory remarks towards women are solely based on their sex.

2. Materials and Method

This study uses a critical discursive analysis (van Dijk, 2016) that combines qualitative and quantitative methods – specifically simple statistics – to examine the comments posted in the comments section of the newspaper *Marca* regarding the decisions made by the female football players from the national team, pertaining to ‘the fifteen’ and #Seacabó cases.

2.1. Selection of the corpus to be analysed

We chose the newspaper *Marca* because it is the most read newspaper in Spain and has the greatest international influence in the sports field. With an audience of approximately one million readers (Association for Media Research, AIMC, 2023), its reach among the Spanish population and its ability to reflect the discourse of a significant part of that society has made *Marca* a newspaper of sociological interest (Rodríguez-Díaz, 2016).

The *Marca* community posts 800,000 to 1,200,000 comments per month, establishing *Marca.com* as the leading platform for Spanish sports forums. To create a profile, users must accept the terms and conditions of participation, which explicitly state that discourse promoting “hatred, contempt or discrimination based on birth, race, sex, religion, nationality, opinion or any other personal or social circumstance is strictly prohibited” (Editorial Unit, s.f.). Users can report comments that break these rules by clicking on a link. Comments can be deleted.

The comments we chose to analyse were made below articles that reported on the demand made by the female players of the Spanish national team to receive a professional treatment that aligns with their status. This began with the resignation of 15 players from the national team, and was followed with the publication of #Seacabó by the world champions after the assembly held by the RFEF. The news reported by *Marca.com* echoes these events: “Fifteen Players resign from the national team after Rubiales refused to give into blackmail regarding Vilda’s dismissal” (Díaz, 2022) and “The world champions criticise Luis Rubiales: ‘This is over, we’re with you, Jenni Hermoso’” (Marca Editorial, 2023). The analysis begins

during the week the second case takes place, when it seems certain messages have already been deleted. The first case received 1,069 comments and the second 889, bringing the analysis corpus total to 1,958 comments (N=1,958). The comments are accompanied by the hash symbol (#), and are identified in the Results section. Certain comments are included as an example to support the conclusions to which the analysis leads.

2.2. Analysis of comments

Two analysis tools were designed for the analysis and systematisation of the comments (Table 1 and Table 2) that corresponded to the coding system of the messages and that allowed an iterative analysis in two phases.

During the initial phase, a thorough examination of the comments posted in the *Marca* online forum itself was conducted and the categories related to social representations were analysed (van Leeuwen, 2003) (Table 1):

Table 1. *Analysis sheet (1st phase)*

Comments analysis sheet (N=1958)							
News							
The fifteen				Seacabó [It's over]			
Roles and attributes of social actors				Roles and attributes of social actors			
Hero or heroine	Victim	Villain (fe-male/male)	Recipient or Accomplice	Hero or heroine	Victim	Villain (fe-male/male)	Recipient or Accomplice
Type of representation of the social actors				Type of representation of the social actors			
Positive		Neutral	Negative	Positive		Negative	Neutral

Source: Prepared by the authors.

As seen in Table 1, social actors represent various roles (victim, hero, villain, etc.) and traits (kindness, privilege, sacrifice, etc.) that determine the type of representation (positive, negative or neutral) that is given. This initial phase involved categorising the comments into two groups: those that conveyed a

Table 2. Analysis sheet (2nd phase)

Analysis sheet for comments identified as 'misogynistic' in the previous phase															
News															
The fifteen								Seacabó [It's over]							
Topics and tropes								Topics and tropes							
T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8
Roles and attributes of social actors								Roles and attributes of social actors							
Hero or heroine	Victim		Villain (female/male)		Recipient or Accomplice			Hero or heroine	Victim		Villain (female/male)		Recipient or Accomplice		
Type of representation of the social actors								Type of representation of the social actors							
Positive		Neutral		Negative				Positive		Negative		Neutral			

Source: Prepared by the authors.

negative image of female football players, athletes or women and those that did not.

When we came across negative discourse, we determined whether the connotations were conditioned by sex or not. For further clarification of this point, we give the example of comment #171 regarding 'the fifteen' case [1]:

[1] Well, the under 20s, who have also been world champions, are promoted to the absolute team. Issue resolved. (Comment #171).

In reference [1], the female footballers who resigned from the national team are implicitly labelled as *expendable*, classified as a negative comment. However, the professional recognition of their female peers from different categories and the absence of explicitly misogynistic arguments or topics, i.e., those that are extendable to women because of their nature as women or to female football players because of their nature as female football players, prevents us from codifying this message as *manosphere* discourse. Conversely, there are messages that, while not containing threats or insults, attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the female football players' battle by highlighting the insignificance of the issue in relation

to others. These messages have been categorised as expressions of misogyny, as they reject the need to achieve equal conditions among football players.

In the second phase of the analysis, the comments labelled 'misogynistic' are examined according to an extended sheet that includes an additional category called 'topics' and repeats 'social representations' (Table 2).

The category of topics (Braun & Clarke, 2022) includes the seven topics established as a reference according to the scientific literature reviewed in previous sections. These topics have been validated in studies conducted by Lacalle (2023a; 2023b) and Lacalle et al. (2023), and adds a final open topic to classify other possible arguments and tropes identified in the analysis:

- T.1. Hypergamy or using men;
- T.2. Infantilism or capriciousness of women;
- T.3. Discrimination against heterosexual men;
- T.4. Undervaluation of the feminine;
- T.5. Objectification and hypersexualisation of women;
- T.6. Denial of structural inequality that affects women;
- T.7. Exploitation of women by the left;
- T.8. Others.

Therefore, the results of this research study are drawn from two phases of analysis. The percentages of the type of representation of the actors – female football players and women – that the comments yield (non-negative or negative) are obtained from the first phase, as well as the number of messages identified as misogynistic. From the second phase of the analysis, we drew results on topics or tropes that predominate in those misogynistic comments, as well as the type of representation of women and female footballers in each comment.

The main researcher manually collected and analysed the messages in the three weeks following the emergence of the hashtag #Seacabó. The results were recorded in a spreadsheet that contained the analysis categories (Table 1 and Table 2) to identify topic and representation patterns for each news item related to the cases. The spreadsheet also allowed for the inclusion of pre-established unrelated topics.

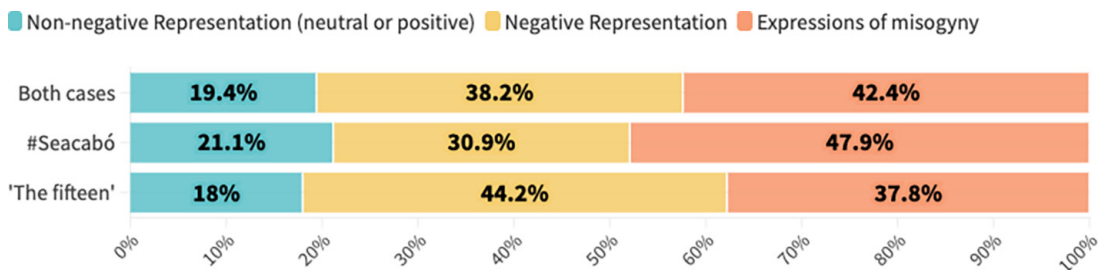
3. Results

The following sections present the results obtained from the two phases of analysis.

3.1. Representation of female players and women is mostly negative

Figure 1 illustrates that the majority of comments in both situations have a form of representation that is either unfavourable towards the individuals of the case, or directly includes expressions of hatred towards all the female football players or towards all women:

Figure 1. *Percentage of the three categories of comments in the two cases*



Source: *Prepared by the authors.*

The news covering the #Seacabó case has a higher concentration of misogynistic discourse. Out of the 889 comments analysed, 47.9% (426) were identified and classified as part of the manosphere discourse. Similarly, in the coverage of 'the fifteen' case, 37.8% (404 out of 1069) of the messages were found to contain misogynistic discourse (Figure 1). The fact that the percentage of expressions of hatred towards women is lower does not mean that the number of messages favourable to these individuals was greater. Figure 1 shows that there were slightly fewer non-negative messages (neutral or positive) in the first case (18% in 'the fifteen' case compared to 21.1% in the #Seacabó case), although the percentage is low

in both cases. When adding the negative comments towards the main actors and those of expressions of misogyny towards female footballers or women in general together, we find that 82% of the comments regarding 'the fifteen' case project a negative semantic connotation. The percentage calculated from the #Seacabó case is not much lower: 79.8% of the comments contain negative representations of the female football players in question, female football players in general and women in general.

As we can see in Figure 1, out of the 1958 comments analysed, 42.4% (830 comments in total) were found to include hate speech targeting women based on their sex. Out of the comments analysed from the two cases, 19.4% of them had messages that portrayed women in a positive or neutral light, often as heroines or victims. The remaining comments (80.6%) convey a negative portrayal of female footballers. More than half of the time (53.2%) this negative portrayal is attributed to the presence of stereotypes and tropes that contribute to the creation of a misogynistic narrative. They are identified and detailed in the following sections.

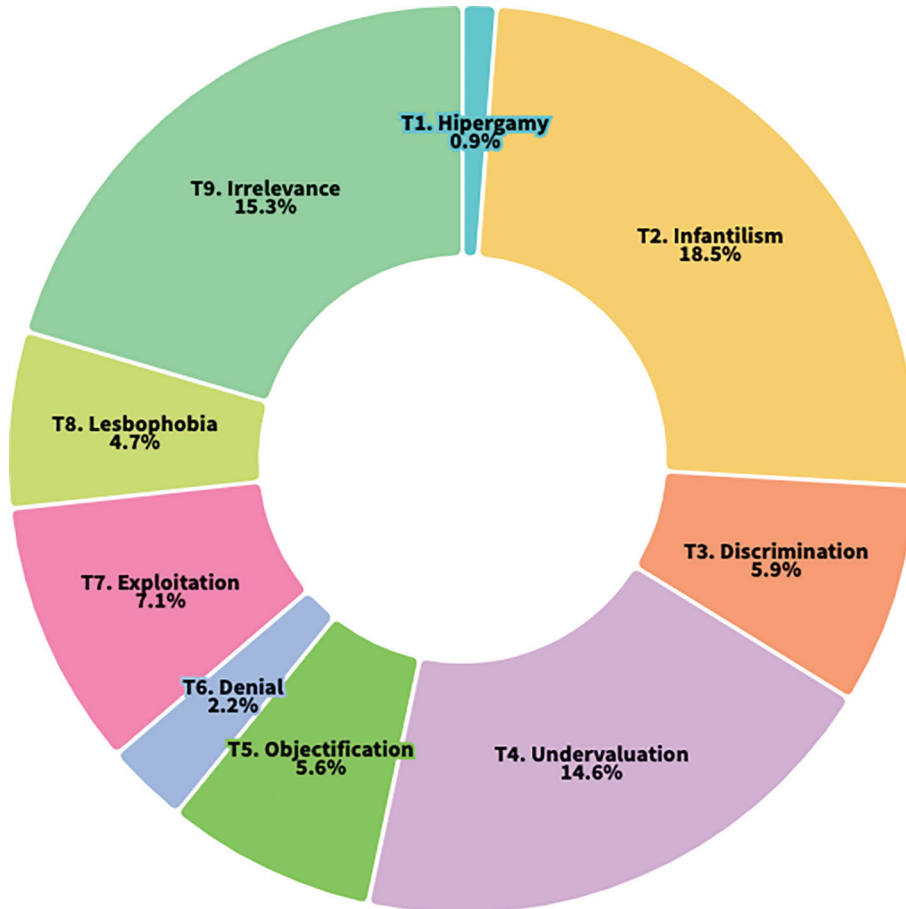
3.2. Comments regarding 'the fifteen' case: infantilism, irrelevance and idolisation of the masculine

During the second phase of the analysis, we contrasted topics from the messages and the individuals' roles as extracted from the comments already classified as misogynistic with those from the scientific literature (Table 2), and a set of the most frequent topics were identified from each of the news items (Figure 2):

The three most common tropes used by the *Marca* community in their misogynistic discourse regarding 'the fifteen' case are T2. Female infantilism (18.5%), T9. Social and media irrelevance (15.3%) and T4. Undervaluation of the feminine (14.6%).

Regarding the issue of female infantilism, female football players are characterised as "chicks" (#2119), "divas" (#1753), "brats" (#2151) and "capricious" (#1736) who do not know what they want (#1713), and whose resignation from the national team is the result of "a tantrum", as exemplified in [2].

Figure 2. *Recurring topics emerging from the comments made about 'the fifteen' case*



Source: Prepared by the authors.

[2] I don't know whether Vilda is a good coach or not.... but he is the coach and he is in charge. Resigning from the national team because of a tantrum or because you don't like the coach is an act of cowardice (Comment #1882).

Other cases where the female footballers call for the resignation of their coaches are referred to, and, as evidenced in [2], the defiant behaviour towards the hierarchical structure is condemned, regardless of the competence demonstrated by that authority. Their sex and natural lack of maturity is a reason for the

disrespectful behaviour that seems so incomprehensible to many users. Women's typically volatile and capricious attitude in this regard adversely affects men, who, in contrast, represent the traits of good reason and rationality that women lack. The role of victim falls on the national coach, Jorge Vilda, and other coaches who bear the consequences of such infantilism and whose attitudes or aptitudes are never questioned.

The second most frequently identified topic from the comments is the supposed social irrelevance of women's football and female footballers (15.3%). According to the fundamental argument of this issue, female football players occupy a social and media space that they do not deserve based on their abilities. Society is not interested in women's football, which "no one cares about" (#987), and the media and institutions try to impose it on society [3]:

[3] In my opinion, the news that makes the front pages should be what matters to people. Very few people know and even fewer care when or where the Women's World Cup will be played. Very, very few people can put a face to the names of the 15 who refuse to play in the national team (#929).

In this context, female football players are recipients of an undeserved privilege, so their representation is also negative. The media and institutions assume are they villains by artificially (through free tickets, subsidies or headlines) fostering interest that would never normally occur [4].

[4] This news is not important enough to put on the front page. Women's football is not of any interest to anyone, no matter how much they try to promote it through propaganda and ideology (#356).

While this issue receives less attention from society than the previous one, there are also comments suggesting that women's sports, in general, are less interesting than men's sports.

The third most frequent topic in the case of 'the fifteen' relates to the trope "women's football is of no interest": the idolisation of the male world and the undervaluation of the female world. If women's football is perceived as uninteresting, it is because of the limited proficiency of the female players, who are unable to play as well as males, as exemplified in [5].

[5] They've already got rid of the previous coach, now they are blatantly going for this, it is a woman's thing, it has been and will always be like this, if you don't flatter them, watch out; but anyway, considering how badly they play maybe it's for the best (#1715).

This issue usually permeates from the field of football to life experiences and is summarised in the idea "Women can't do things as well as men". The main characters of the story are women who, at times, take on the role of privileged individuals that they are not entitled to due to their incompetence. On other occasions, when their inferiority to men is displayed through immoral behaviour (as evil manipulators), they are portrayed as villains; as seen in references [6] and [7]:

[6] These things happen in companies where the majority are women. They can't even stand each other. (#1725)

[7] This is the difference between men and women, men fight and women cry (#1586)

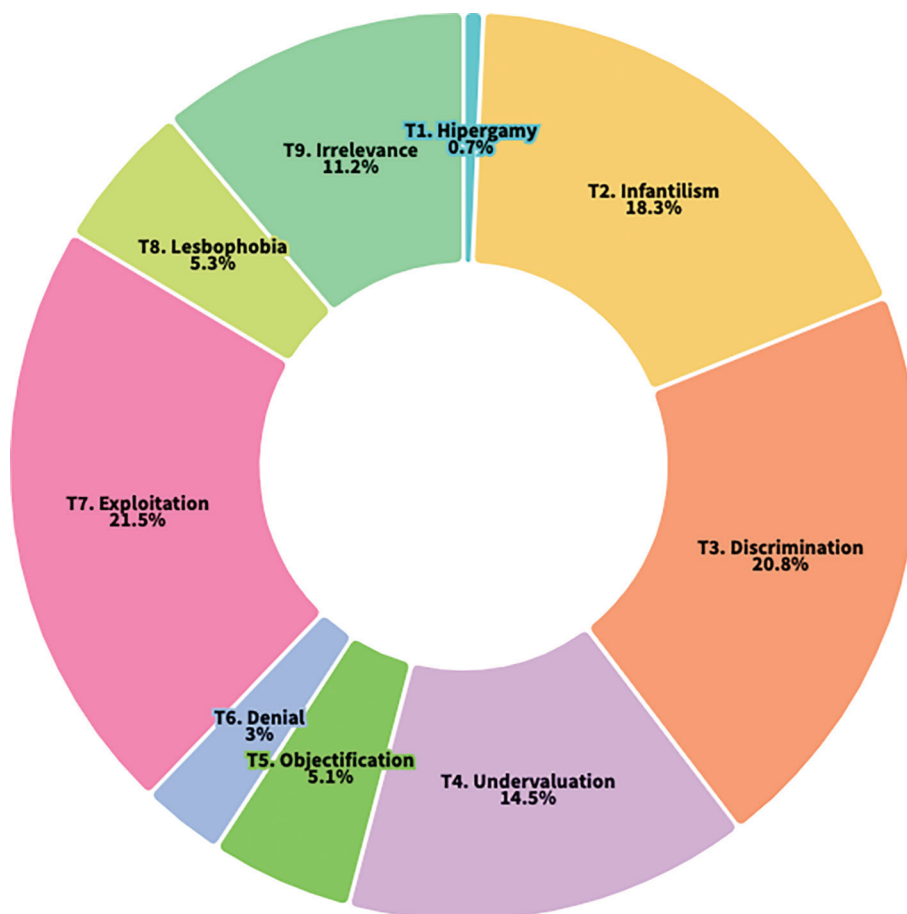
In both cases, men are positively represented with attributes that contrast with women's: they are capable and competent and morally superior. They perform the role of benefactors, as their altruistic deeds and admirable traits are what preserve the world of football and society as a whole. By undervaluing what is feminine, they elevate and idolise masculinity and its characteristics.

3.3. Comments on the #Seacabó case: discrimination against men with the complicity of the left

Below are topics emerging from the comments and roles assigned to women in comments that have been identified as misogynistic discourse in the 'Seacabó case':

The four topics that most frequently emerge from comments posted about the #Seacabó case classified as misogynistic discourse, following 'the Rubiales' case are T7. The political left's exploitation of women (21.5%), T3. Discrimination against heterosexual males (20.8%), T2. The infantilisation of women (18.3%) and T4. The undervaluation of the feminine (14.5%).

Figure 3. *Recurring topics emerging from the comments made about #Seacabó news items*



Source: Prepared by the authors.

The debate surrounding the case is perceived as a deliberate manoeuvre by the political left, sometimes represented by left-wing parties and politicians (#822), the Government (#803), the globalist agenda (#889) and the feminist movement (#303). All of them gain political advantage from something that many *Marca* users do not think is important [8] and [9].

[8] We are taking things out of context. It was a spontaneous gesture of joy during a celebration. Here we always have our pitchforks ready to attack. (#391).

[9] And meanwhile olive oil costs €10 and petrol two euros (#316).

Thus, the notion that “The left uses the case for its own benefit” is inferred, and this interest includes the dominance of women to the detriment of men’s security and well-being leading to the consequent division of Spanish society over secondary issues, such as gender. Women play two different roles in this matter: they are either victims of leftist movements, who exploit them for their political agenda, or they reap the advantages of a social system based on a sexual-affective hierarchy that favours them.

The second most commonly discussed topic in the comments made about this case is the discrimination faced by the heterosexual white man. In the statement condemning the behaviour of Luis Rubiales made by female players and professional athletes, part of *Marca’s* virtual community read the consequences of a system that stigmatises heterosexual men such as Rubiales, as referenced in [10] and [11]:

[10] It’s funny, I know people who want to leave the country because of the contrary of what comment 707 implies. For the average Spanish heterosexual man, the country is becoming impossible to live in (#814).

[11] I’ll tell you one thing, if we men don’t unite like women do, goodbye to the male race as we know it. I don’t like Rubiales at all. But I’m with you, Rubiales (#876).”

Rubiales and the men he represents are portrayed as victims of a social system that is based on the power dynamics of affection and sexuality. This system portrays women as opportunistic and therefore as villains, who exert power over men in matters such as sex-based violence, sexual assaults, and marital separations. In these situations men are perceived to be at a disadvantage in regards to social and institutional areas, as referenced in [12] and [13]:

[12] here they change things as they please... Today it’s a bit of a joke, tomorrow it’s rape... Be careful with women who can ruin lives, you just have to look at the thousands of male suicides because they have made their lives miserable (#896).

[13] I believe you Rubiales / Vilda. No man is capable of putting up with so much female manipulative and physiological nonsense for so long. For that alone, the coach and president deserve a monument (#889).

From comments similar to [13] we can deduce that living as a man in such an “unfair” feminist society is heroic, where individuals such as Rubiales are unjustly criminalised for simply expressing their masculinity.

3.4. Other topics that emerge in both cases: objectification, animalisation and lesbophobia

Not the most frequent topics for either of the two cases, objectification and animalisation (T.5) and particularly lesbophobia (T.8) are also mentioned and used to associate the hate speech seen in the comments to both cases.

The objectification and animalisation of women serve to strip them of humanity, emphasising morally negative characteristics such as the malevolence of the “vipers” (#288 in the #Seacabó case), selfish interest of the “lizards” (#1948 in ‘the fifteen’ case), malicious mischief of the “birds” (#209 in #Seacabó), lust of the “bitches” (#880 in #Seacabó) or the indiscretion of the “hens” (# 383 in ‘the fifteen’ case).

Objectification diminishes women's ability to reason and portrays them as defenceless objects subjected to influences even more perverse than women, such as progressivism and the LGBTI collective, and reduces their worth to the pleasure they experience from the attention they elicit from heterosexual men [14].

[14] Honestly, football is for men and those of us who watch women's matches are not watching because they know how to play, I watch to see if any of the players are hot and most other men do too (#734 ‘the fifteen’ case).

Lesbophobia and sexual prejudice is another topic that emerges recurrently in the comments section, as referenced by [15].

[15] The press and the other media outlets sentenced him, Jenni only betrayed him by changing her discourse. The conclusion I have taken is: Never celebrate with a woman. Especially if she is a lesbian (#413 #Seacabó).

The association between lesbianism and an absence of femininity is frequent and suggests a lesbophobic bias that assumes femininity is a trait that exists to please males. Females who deviate from a heterosexual construction are masculine,

that is, tomboys (#2204), and football, predominantly favoured by this particular group of *Marca* users, can only be played well by women stripped of the attribute of femininity.

4. Discussion

When female Spanish players resigned from the national football team, it triggered an exchange of messages in the comments section of the online platform of the newspaper *Marca*. Our study found that the majority of the messages, approximately 80%, negatively portrayed the female athletes, football players and women, generally depicting them as villains or recipients of undeserved privileges (van Leeuwen, 2003). The results of our analysis explored the comments made on the *Marca* online platform within the context of the prejudice that deprives female athletes of their professional qualities (Ayala Quisaguano & Vega Toala, 2020), which, along with the media and social networks, often objectify and sexualise them (Adá-Lameiras et al., 2021).

Regarding Q.1., our analysis of misogynistic messages identified the prevalence of four topics closely representing the *manosphere*: female infantilism and the undervaluation of the feminine were especially visible in the comments made on ‘the fifteen’ case. Both these topics seem to serve the purpose of idolising masculinity and the qualities of rationality and mental stability assigned to men, in order to reinforce masculine identity (Bijalka et al., 2022). The issue of the exploitation of women by the political left (Martínez-Jiménez & Zurbano Berenguer, 2019) and the discrimination of heterosexual men were the most recurrent topics in the comments on the #Seacabó case.

The analysis has identified specific topics and arguments that appear to be specifically targeted at undermining the legitimacy of female football players. These include an attitude of indifference towards women’s football and the women who participate in it. Another issue that had not previously been considered was lesbophobia, which manifests in the delegitimisation of female football players not because of their sex, but because of their physical appearance or sexual orientation.

Addressing Q.2, 42.4% of the comments contained messages closely representing the *manosphere*. Nevertheless, it is important to note that *Marca* differs from spaces

such as Burbuja.info or Forocoches (Lacalle, 2023a; 2023b; Lacalle et al., 2023), in that the general topics discussed in the comments sections are not chosen by users of *Marca*; it is the sports journalists, through their selection of current news, who determine the specific topics that receive attention. Although almost half of the messages can be classified as digital misogyny (Díaz-Fernández & García-Mingo, 2022), in this virtual community they coexist with users who are critical of misogynistic discourse. While the *Marca* platform has the potential to reinforce misogynistic notions that uphold the concept of masculinity (Delgado-Ontivero & Sánchez-Sicilia, 2023), users who post those comments are exposed to criticism.

In response to Q.3, although *Marca.com* exhibits differences with conventional platforms of online misogyny, discourses similar to those found in the mansphere do exist in its virtual community, characterised by the dissemination of hateful speech directed towards women (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This misogynistic discourse also benefits from the high level of exposure provided by the platform, and neither accepting the forum's terms and conditions nor moderation efforts seem to be effective enough to stop them.

It should be noted that this study has specifically chosen two cases, and this selection has restricted the potential to draw conclusions regarding the misogynistic discourse present in other types of news. Furthermore, the content analysis method can undoubtedly be complemented by using other methods to provide more information about the case.

Additionally, it seems pertinent to dedicate further study to the reactions and responses of users on digital platforms from other sports media as well as the newspaper *Marca*, and appropriate to analyse the repercussions that these reactions and comments have on the development of the case.

Overall, the study seeks to shed light on the representation of women in sports communication and to encourage reflection of the impact digital media has on the exposure and visibility of hate speech generated by the users of their forums.

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