

Special Issue
Data, Society and Sustainability
in a Digital World:
Epistemological, Methodological
and Governance Challenges

FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory,
Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors

Marina Marino

Gabriella Punziano



Editor in Chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Managing Editor: Carmine Urciuoli

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Sport and Gender in the Age of Social Media: Radicalization of Discourse in the Hermoso-Rubiales Case²

Introduction

Online misogyny manifests itself in multiple forms, ranging from cyberharassment to outright death threats or threats of sexual violence, with a particular intensification directed at women who openly identify as feminists (Garcia-Favaro & Gill, 2016; Jane, 2014). This phenomenon is especially prevalent on social media platforms, where it takes on specific configurations such as gender trolling: in these contexts, some users adopt explicitly violent and offensive language, often accompanied by direct threats against women (Mantilla, 2013). Beyond these overtly aggressive expressions, however, misogynistic discourse also becomes normalized through its routine and largely unchallenged presence in everyday interactions. When sexist jokes, disparaging remarks and hostile comments towards women circulate as a familiar and expected feature of online conversations, they cease to be perceived as exceptional and are instead treated as part of the ordinary communicative repertoire of the platform. In response to these dynamics, platforms such as Twitter have seen the emergence of hashtags and digital initiatives aimed at countering misogynistic attacks and fostering the creation of female communities based on mutual support (Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Eagle, 2015; Rentschler, 2015).

However, a study conducted between December 2013 and February 2014 showed that out of 2.7 million tweets containing the term *rape* and 6 million containing the words *whore* and *slut*, more than half conveyed misogynistic content with explicit references to violence (Bartlett *et al.*, 2014). The reduction of women to mere sexual objects, stripping them of any other value or rights, contributes to reinforcing a heterosexist hierarchy that consolidates male dominance (Grazian, 2007). This mechanism constitutes a mode of reaffirming male power and symbolically distancing from the feminine world (Moloney & Love, 2018a).

Objectification, in this framework, deprives women of their subjectivity, placing them in a subordinate position consistent with the patriarchal structures of society (Johnson, 2014). In digital environments, this logic frequently manifests in the representation of women as "collectible objects" (Moloney & Love, 2018a). According to Moloney and Pelehach (2014), the sexualization of the female figure conveys a subliminal message of constant inadequacy: the male world imposes unattainable aesthetic standards, often rooted in racist and classist criteria, which women internalize from a young age (APA Task Force, 2010).

Paradoxically, even female figures who embody these standards, such as models and actresses, become targets of male criticism on social media (Moloney & Love, 2018b). From this perspective, the criticism aimed at female representation is configured as an attempt to simulate and reaffirm male control over the woman's body and identity (Johnson, 2014).

A growing number of recent studies have deepened the understanding of these dynamics through the use of netnography, a qualitative methodology that enables the systematic analysis of online social interactions within digital environments. This approach has been particularly useful for studying misogyny directed at visible and influential women in sectors dominated by patriarchal dynamics.

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2 Francesca Romana Lenzi worked to the *Introduction*, and *Conclusion* and contributed to *Materials and Methods* (Sections 1,2 and 5). Michela Cavagnuolo worked on the *Materials and Methods* and contributed to the *Discussion* (Sections 2 and 4). Vincenzo Esposito worked on the *Results* and contributed to the *Discussion* (Sections 3 and 4).

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In the case of sports journalism, for example, online harassment against women manifests in multiple forms—contempt, insults, sexualization, physical threats, and explicit misogyny—and hits female journalists especially hard, as women operating in a heavily male-dominated field. In modern Muslim-majority countries such as Turkey, where women's social position is often contested, female sports journalists face both support and online violence. From a social-theoretical perspective, these practices can be understood as a form of gendered symbolic violence: rather than relying solely on direct coercion, they work through everyday acts of ridicule, delegitimation and hostility that mark women as “out of place” within the field of sports commentary (Bourdieu, 1998). By repeatedly questioning their competence, trivializing their presence, or framing them as illegitimate participants, these online attacks contribute to the reproduction of a gendered hierarchy in which authoritative speech about sport is implicitly coded as male. In line with Butler's reflections on the performative force of injurious language, these discursive practices do not merely describe women's alleged inadequacy but actively constitute and reiterate their subordinate position in the symbolic order (Butler, 1997). In this sense, digital harassment does not simply express individual animosity but reinforces broader structures of domination that regulate who is entitled to speak, to be visible and to be taken seriously in the public arena.

A netnographic study conducted by Demir and Ayhan (2022) analyzed the experiences of Turkish female sports journalists on Twitter, highlighting how they are frequently targeted by sarcastic and disparaging comments focused on physical appearance, aimed at excluding them from legitimate professional discourse. The forms of violence identified include emotional harassment, physical threats, and blasphemous content. Another study, also based on a netnographic approach and inspired by third-wave feminism, investigated forms of gender-based violence against top-ranked female tennis players during Wimbledon tournaments.

The analysis of interactions on Facebook and Twitter identified four main categories of violent content: physical threats; sexualization centered on aesthetic appearance; sexualization accompanied by desires or requests for sexual contact; and explicit, vulgar, and violent sexualization marked by strong misogynistic traits. The results of this study highlight how social media constitute a fertile environment for the spread of unregulated gender-based cyberhate, which specifically targets high-profile women in the workplace—a type of violence that, in intensity and visibility, often exceeds that observed in traditional sports media.

These studies, united by the adoption of netnography, clearly demonstrate how sexism and online misogyny articulate themselves through systemic and symbolic mechanisms rooted in the patriarchal structures of society, but which find new forms of expression and dissemination through contemporary digital channels. These concepts allow us to understand how the segmentation of digital informational spaces can influence not only the visibility of certain content but also the formation of opinions and the very perception of events.

The filter bubble, defined by Eli Pariser (2011), refers to the algorithmic mechanism that, through content personalization, tends to show users information consistent with their past preferences and behaviors, reducing exposure to divergent viewpoints. However, as noted by Dahlgren (2021), it is essential to distinguish between the automated influence of algorithms and users' active choices regarding selective exposure. Dahlgren indeed proposes a critical revision of the filter bubble concept, highlighting its empirical limitations and emphasizing the interaction between technological factors and pre-existing individual predispositions.

The concept of echo chamber, on the other hand, refers to a closed communicative space typical of digital environments, where individuals tend to select and frequent ideologically aligned information sources and discursive communities, predominantly exposing themselves to content that confirms their pre-existing beliefs (Guess *et al.*, 2018; Cookson, Engelberg, Mullins, 2023). In such contexts, opinions are reinforced through mechanisms of repetition and social validation, while dissenting positions are marginalized or actively rejected. As Sunstein (2001) observes, echo chambers reduce exposure to informational diversity and may foster ideological polarization. Garrett (2009) highlights how such dynamics reinforce motivated selection and ideologi-

cal homophily, hindering confrontation among differing perspectives. When applied to online debates about sport and gender, this framework helps to illuminate how comment sections can function as echo chambers in which misogynistic views are amplified and collectively legitimized: hostile statements toward women are rapidly endorsed, repeated and upvoted, whereas critical or dissenting interventions tend to be ignored, ridiculed or aggressively challenged. In this way, echo-chamber dynamics not only intensify the visibility of gendered hostility, but also contribute to its normalization within the local communicative environment.

A systematic literature review conducted by Terren and Borge (2021) has contributed to deepening the understanding of echo chambers, emphasizing that they are not merely the result of algorithmic logics but also the outcome of social, cognitive, and cultural processes. The authors stress the need to move beyond deterministic explanations to embrace a more nuanced approach that accounts for users' active role in constructing homogeneous informational environments.

In parallel, Ross Arguedas *et al.* (2022) conducted an extensive literature review on echo chambers, filter bubbles, and polarization, revealing the conceptual and methodological complexity of the field. Their study shows that although these phenomena are often treated as synonymous, they involve distinct but interconnected dynamics, and their impact strongly depends on context, platform type, and user engagement.

These dynamics assume particular relevance when sensitive topics such as misogyny, gender-based violence, or online harassment are addressed in digital environments. In such cases, filter bubbles may limit access to content critical of structural inequalities, while echo chambers can amplify hostile and sexist narratives, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. At the same time, spaces of solidarity and feminist digital networks may also configure as positive echo chambers, promoting mutual support and sharing experiences, but risking confinement within already aware environments, thereby reducing their impact on the broader public debate.

More recently, empirical studies conducted by Cinelli *et al.* (2021) have highlighted how these discursive structures significantly contribute to the polarization of online debate, reducing the effectiveness of information strategies aimed at rational deliberation. The phenomenon of echo chambers thus represents a crucial challenge for the quality of public communication in digital societies, as it fosters cognitive closure and weakens conditions for democratic confrontation among pluralistic visions.

1. Materials and Methods

This study aims to analyze how the gesture made by the president of the Spanish Football Federation, Rubiales, was received and discussed within digital spaces. During the celebrations following the Spanish women's national team's victory at the World Cup, Rubiales kissed the player Hermoso without her consent. The objective of this investigation is to understand how this episode was interpreted and debated by web users, with particular attention to the discursive dynamics and emerging social representations within online comments.

The present study employs a qualitative methodological approach based on netnography, a research technique developed by Kozinets (2010) to transpose the theoretical and empirical framework of traditional ethnography into the digital environment. As a methodology oriented towards the study of connected cultures, netnography relies on systematic, non-intrusive, and textual observation of online communicative practices, aiming to capture the symbolic and narrative dynamics that structure interactions among users within virtual communities (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2022). It differs from conventional ethnography in its focus on written discourses rather than situated interactions, allowing for a contextualized analysis of the production and circulation of meanings in digital contexts. Recent contributions emphasize how the netnographic approach is particularly suitable for studying sensitive topics and hard-to-access populations, due to its capacity to explore informal and spontaneous communicative environments (Paoli, 2022).

This work focuses on the analysis of the Rubiales–Hermoso case, which emerged following the victory of the Spanish women's national football team in the World Cup. On this occasion, the president of the Spanish Football Federation, Luis Rubiales, kissed player Jennifer Hermoso without her consent, generating widespread media resonance. Although episodes of violence, even within women's football, are unfortunately not unprecedented (Forsdike, O'Sullivan & Hooker, 2022), the media echo of this event has contributed to making it an exemplary case in public debate, both in Spain and at the European level.

This episode occurs in a historical moment in which women's football is experiencing significant growth, both in terms of stadium attendance and in the increasing number of athletes involved (Culvin & Bowes, 2023). However, this expansion has not been accompanied by a decrease in episodes of verbal and physical violence, which continue to occur even in female sports contexts (Grice, Mackintosh, Oldfield & Durden-Myers, 2023).

After defining the object of study, a meta-field approach was adopted (Delli Paoli, 2021), namely an investigative field not delimited by a specific group but constructed around an emerging discussion within the digital context. Specifically, data collection was conducted through the analysis of comments and reactions generated on social media in response to posts published about the Rubiales case by three of the main Italian newspapers.

The selected newspapers for the investigation are: *La Gazzetta dello Sport* and *Il Corriere dello Sport*, the two most widely read sports newspapers in Italy according to ADS (Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa) data, and *Il Corriere della Sera*, the generalist newspaper with the widest national circulation.³

Following a preliminary analysis of the official social media pages of the selected newspapers (*La Gazzetta dello Sport*, *Il Corriere dello Sport*, and *Il Corriere della Sera*) across various digital platforms (Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram), it was decided to use the content published on Facebook as the primary source for data extraction. This choice is motivated by two main factors. First, the comparison between different platforms highlighted that the Facebook pages of these newspapers show a significantly higher number of interactions (likes, shares, comments) and followers compared to their corresponding Twitter and Instagram pages. Second, although the analyzed articles were shared uniformly across all observed platforms, Facebook concentrated the largest volume of comments, a crucial element for the study's objective.

Accordingly, three posts were selected—one for each newspaper—all referring to the same content: the consequences arising from the non-consensual kiss between president Luis Rubiales and player Jennifer Hermoso. This thematic uniformity allows for analytical coherence and comparability among the collected data. In the following analysis, individual comments will be presented in English without quotation marks. When the comments consist of an interaction between two or more users, the entire exchange will be enclosed within quotation marks at the beginning and end of the interaction.

2. Results

All three articles selected for analysis address the consequences of the gesture made by Rubiales toward the player Hermoso. Among the posts analyzed, the one published by *La Gazzetta dello Sport* on Facebook recorded the highest number of interactions, with over 4,000 reactions and more than 10,000 comments. This figure is consistent with the newspaper's large follower base on the platform, which exceeds three million users. Conversely, the post published by *Il Corriere dello Sport* registered the lowest number of interactions, likely related to the newspaper's smaller following on the main social media platforms.

For the extraction of comments, the open-source software Simple Scraper was employed. The collected data subsequently underwent a cleaning phase, during which comments lacking significant textual content—such as those composed exclusively of punctuation marks—and those

3 ADS - Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa ; <https://www.adsnotizie.it/Dati/Index> (last visited 10/10/2025).

containing only tags to other users were removed, as they were deemed irrelevant to the analysis. Following this process, approximately 6,000 valid comments were obtained from the *La Gazzetta dello Sport* post, about 600 from the post published by *Il Corriere della Sera*, and slightly more than 100 from the post of *Il Corriere dello Sport*. These differences partly reflect the varying visibility and engagement capacity of the three newspapers on social media.

Category label	Description	La Gazzetta dello Sport (n = 6,000)	Corriere dello Sport (n ≈ 100)	Corriere della Sera (n = 600)
1. Support for Rubiales / minimisation of kiss	Comments that justify Rubiales' behaviour, deny or downplay the seriousness of the kiss, and portray reactions as exaggerated or driven by the media.	n = 7000	n = 2900	n = 3100
2. Support for Hermoso / problematisation	Comments that side with Hermoso, frame the episode as non-consensual or violent, and emphasise the importance of consent and gendered power relations.	n = 4500	n = 1500	n = 3400
3. Ironic / satirical comments	Comments that respond to the news with irony or sarcasm (e.g. jokes about football, politics or current events), without taking a clear position on the Rubiales-Hermoso case.	n = 500	n = 500	n = 500
4. Off-topic / other	Comments that diverge from the specific case (e.g. general attacks on FIFA, generic anti-feminist remarks, unrelated political rants) or cannot be clearly classified in the categories above.	n = 0	n = 0	n = 2000

Table 1- Comments from newspapers

As Table 1 indicates, comments supporting Rubiales and minimising the episode are particularly prevalent in the sports newspapers, whereas the *Corriere della Sera* thread shows a comparatively higher proportion of comments siding with Hermoso and explicitly problematising issues of consent and gendered violence. Ironic and off-topic contributions are present across all three outlets, but play a more visible role in the generalist newspaper, where the comment section also functions as a space for broader political and cultural commentary.

Gazzetta dello Sport

The audience of *La Gazzetta dello Sport* proved to be the most active in commenting on and discussing the incident, as evidenced by the volume and intensity of interactions observed in the posts dedicated to the case. Furthermore, among the analyzed newspapers, *La Gazzetta dello Sport* dedicated the greatest media attention to the episode, publishing the highest number of articles on the subject.

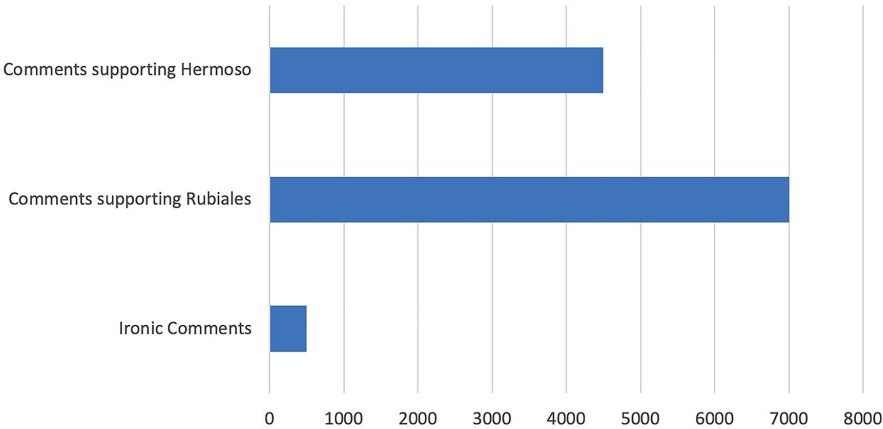


Fig. 1. Rubiales – Hermoso: Gazzetta dello Sport character count

The extraction of approximately 6,000 comments generated a textual corpus composed of over 13,000 characters. The length of individual comments is highly variable: some consist of a single word, while others present more articulated and developed arguments. For analytical purposes, the comments were divided into three macro-categories, corresponding to the main discursive modes that emerged in the debate.

The discussion quickly took on a polarizing logic, similar to that typical of sports fandom, with the formation of two opposing camps: on one side, those expressing a favorable position towards the former president of the Spanish Football Federation, Luis Rubiales; on the other, supporters of the player Jennifer Hermoso. Quantitatively, the position in favor of Rubiales prevails within the analyzed sample.

At the same time, a third, minority category also emerged, composed of users who commented on the episode with ironic or satirical tones, avoiding a clear stance within the debate.

A significant portion of the comments supportive of Rubiales express dissent towards the sanctions imposed on him, arguing that the gesture in question should not be considered particularly serious nor worthy of the media attention it received. Within this discursive orientation, the argument frequently arises that the player Hermoso consented to the kiss, thus questioning the interpretation of the event as a non-consensual act:

«What the ...? For a quick kiss ... And even consensual come on ... and the only one bothered was FIFA» (male)

«If it wasn't consensual then they're right... but the initial reactions seemed consensual. these protests came after FIFA... at this point they could be a legitimate framing or even an influence due to pressure from FIFA... a coach who gives a quick public kiss doesn't just wake up one morning and do it... it's assumed there's closeness at that level... so objectively I have doubts...» (male)

Those who embrace this position believe that the chaos erupted due to FIFA's intervention. Others minimize the gesture by saying that among football players such behavior is normal:

«I remember a great kiss between Maradona and Caniggia, so beautiful it made me jealous, I wanted that kiss from Diego!!!» (female)

«This seems like a mutual exchange and when players hug their coach in an important final, then if people want to impose sexist public rules that's one thing... I believe that, like in Hollywood, sooner or later someone will come forward».(male)

A considerable portion of comments express the belief that the significance of the gesture was excessively amplified, particularly on social media. From this perspective, the kiss exchanged between Rubiales and Hermoso is interpreted as a spontaneous and non-problematic behavior, typical of a context characterized by strong enthusiasm and euphoria, such as a sports victory. Many comments convey the idea that the gesture itself is not problematic, but that its negative over-interpretation is the result of a forced narrative imposed by public opinion and the media. This view tends to minimize the severity of the incident, shifting the critical focus away from Rubiales' action and instead onto those who proposed a problematizing reading of it:

«Talking about violence seems excessive to me... meh» (female)

«Besides, it wasn't against her will at the moment of victory and celebrations, it fits in a moment of euphoria, he grabbed her face like saying... well done!!! And planted a kiss... same thing if I go to the tobacco shop with a scratch card and they tell me I won 10,000 euros, I hug them happily and give a thank-you kiss... you want to see evil even where it's not there!!!» (male)

Conversely, some take the player's side; many of these comments respond to previous comments that minimized the event:

A (Male): Is that kiss in the video violent? What a crazy world.

B (Male): For you, either a woman is raped (and maybe you even think she asked for it) or violence doesn't exist.

A (Female): What a fuss, it's the joy of victory!

B (Female): So, if a man in a moment of joy kisses you, your daughter, your niece, or even your husband, you're okay with that?

C (Female): I wouldn't call them women but females. They don't have a shred of self-respect. But let's get treated like things and laugh at it like silly geese that men like so much! Then people get shocked when women are killed because we're treated like things if that's the attitude some females have [...] *

A (Female): What an exaggeration... once in a bookstore, some guy slapped my butt, I was with a friend, I was under 30, then he quickly walked away and I yelled after him: "Good taste!!!" We laughed a lot!"

Finally, some users employ irony to comment on the news, the most commonly used comment being: «What risk does Juventus face?».

Taken together, these exchanges show how online reactions to the Rubiales–Hermoso incident are deeply entangled with broader patterns of gendered violence and misogyny. On the one hand, many users mobilize a minimising frame that recasts the kiss as harmless euphoria, depicting critical reactions as exaggerated, "crazy" or imposed by media and feminists. In doing so, they shift attention away from questions of consent and power and reframe the problem not as Rubiales' behaviour, but as the supposed hypersensitivity of those who name it as violence. On the other hand, the thread also reveals forms of internalised and horizontal misogyny, where some women distance themselves from feminist positions, ridicule those who object to unwanted contact, and normalise everyday harassment as a source of humour. The counter-comments that link the episode to a continuum of gendered violence (up to femicide) highlight the conflict between these competing interpretive frameworks. Overall, the discussion illustrates how symbolic violence operates discursively: misogynistic norms are defended, naturalised and sometimes reproduced by women themselves, while attempts to problematise them are delegitimised as excessive or irrational.

Overall, the comments under La Gazzetta dello Sport's post show how online discussions around the Rubiales–Hermoso case become a site for the normalization of misogyny in sport. The repeated framing of the kiss as a harmless gesture of euphoria, combined with the ridicule or pathologization of those who interpret it as violence, contributes to redefining non-consensual contact as an ordinary and acceptable feature of sporting celebrations. In this context, symbolic violence operates through apparently "reasonable" or "common-sense" arguments that shift the focus away from consent and power and onto the alleged excesses of feminists, the media or "over-sensitive" women, thereby reaffirming a gendered hierarchy in which male behaviour is given the benefit of the doubt and women's objections are delegitimised.

At the same time, the exchanges reveal a polarized structure of the debate: users tend to align either with a minimising frame that denies the existence of violence or with a more critical perspective that links the episode to broader patterns of gendered abuse. Rather than converging toward a shared understanding, the discussion crystallises into antagonistic positions that are rarely reconciled, illustrating how digital public discourse around sport can both expose and exacerbate conflicts over gender norms. In this sense, the comment section functions as a micro-arena of the wider public sphere, where struggles over the meaning of violence, consent and respectability are played out through everyday interactions.

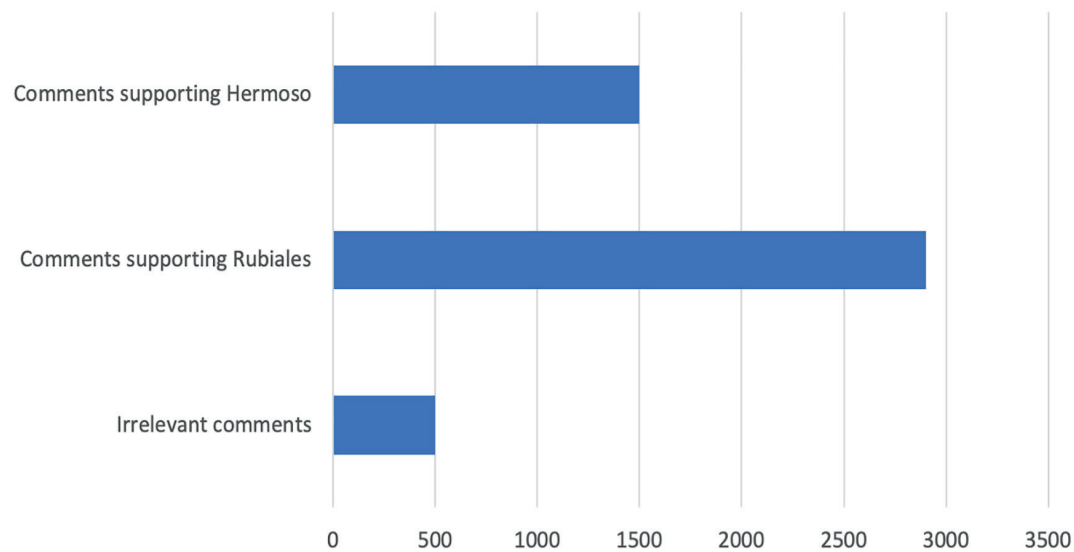


Fig 2. Rubiales – Hermoso : Corriere dello Sport character count

Corriere dello Sport, the second most widely read sports daily in Italy by circulation and readership, turned out to be the outlet with the lowest number of comments collected within the scope of the analysis. However, the comment section associated with its post was characterized by a stark polarization of opinions, with users showing a strong tendency to express forceful positions. Unlike the other cases, ironic or satirical comments were absent, replaced by contributions that often diverged from the central topic, including references to unrelated issues such as veganism or generalized attacks against FIFA, perceived as a negative institution within the international football system.

Once again, the majority of the comments expressed support for Luis Rubiales, often adopting a justificatory tone and minimizing the seriousness of the event. It was common to find contributions describing the situation as a disproportionate and unjustified reaction, the result of media and social exaggeration rather than an actual sanctionable behavior:

«Now everything is called violence! Even giving a woman a compliment is considered violence. It was just a kiss, what's the big deal.. and there's no need to put up posters about it. In the past, an unauthorized kiss would just get you a slap in the face that left a mark, and that was it. Now it's all about fame!!» (Man)

«These women are starting to take advantage of it a bit too much, now everything is sexual violence—even just asking for directions!» (Man)

Another viewpoint that emerged among the analyzed comments attributes the media coverage of the scandal not so much to the nature of the act itself, but rather to the fact that the person involved was a woman. According to this perspective, the public reaction would have been significantly milder if the recipient of the kiss had been a man. This position implies a critique of what is perceived as a hypocritical or overly sensitive tone in contemporary public discourse, suggesting that the female gender of the player amplified collective outrage and shaped the perception of the act as problematic:

«If it had been a woman president kissing Piqué on the mouth, nothing would've happened!» (Man)
«What if it had been a female president kissing a male player? Asking for a friend.» (Woman)

«If a woman had kissed her, then it would've been fine, huh?» (Man)

Comments in which the gesture was explicitly condemned were clearly in the minority and mostly came from female users. In many cases, these remarks were addressed to other women who tended to minimize or justify the incident:

A (Woman): «Okay, but seriously, you older-generation women are such a drag, sometimes even worse than the men of the same generation. If it's fine for you, does it have to be fine for everyone? Go get kissed by whoever you want and stop bothering those of us who have some dignity and don't allow just anyone to kiss us».

B (Woman): «What are you even saying? Dignity? Do you think only you have it? Good for you! I didn't say this was normal, but broadcasting it worldwide seems a bit too much. They should settle it among themselves without putting up posters!! And by the way, a proper slap in the face would've left a clear handprint and that would have been enough to preserve dignity, don't you think?»

In this case, the *Corriere dello Sport* comment section exemplifies a particularly polarized and conflictual discursive environment, in which gendered hostility and symbolic violence are both highly visible. Although the volume of comments is lower than in other outlets, users tend to adopt stark, uncompromising positions, with a clear prevalence of contributions that justify Rubiales' behaviour and minimize its seriousness. Violence is relativized or mocked ("now everything is called violence"), and the focus is shifted from questions of consent to a critique of alleged female hypersensitivity and opportunism ("these women are starting to take advantage of it a bit too much"). At the same time, several comments mobilize a narrative of gendered double standards, suggesting that the scandal exists only because the recipient of the kiss was a woman, thereby portraying women as unfairly privileged subjects of public compassion.

The exchanges between female users further highlight forms of horizontal and internalised misogyny, where women who refuse unwanted contact are depicted as exaggerated or "a drag", and where "dignity" is framed as compatible with accepting or trivializing non-consensual gestures, provided that the reaction remains private and contained. In this configuration, symbolic violence operates through the naturalization of a norm according to which women should tolerate unsolicited physical intimacy and limit their response to informal, individual sanctions ("a proper slap in the face would've been enough"), rather than appealing to collective or institutional forms of protection.

In the case of *Corriere dello Sport*, the comments point to an even more explicit entrenchment of misogynistic attitudes within the sporting field. Here, women are frequently portrayed as opportunistic, overreacting or "taking advantage" of the situation, while the kiss is reframed as a trivial or even romantic gesture that does not warrant public scrutiny. Such narratives reinforce symbolic violence by positioning women as responsible for maintaining discretion and endurance in the face of unwanted behaviour, and by presenting non-consensual contact as something that should be managed privately rather than treated as a collective or institutional problem. Misogyny thus appears not only as a set of offensive expressions, but as a normative expectation about how women should respond to male transgressions.

The configuration of the debate is also marked by strong polarization, with sharp, uncompromising stances and limited room for nuanced positions. The predominance of comments justifying Rubiales and attacking women or feminist critiques suggests a discursive environment close to an echo chamber, where like-minded users reinforce each other's views and dissenting voices are marginal. The comment section functions less as a space for deliberation than as a venue for reaffirming group boundaries and shared resentments, illustrating how segments of digital

public discourse around sport can operate as closed arenas in which gendered hostility is both amplified and collectively validated.

Corriere della Sera

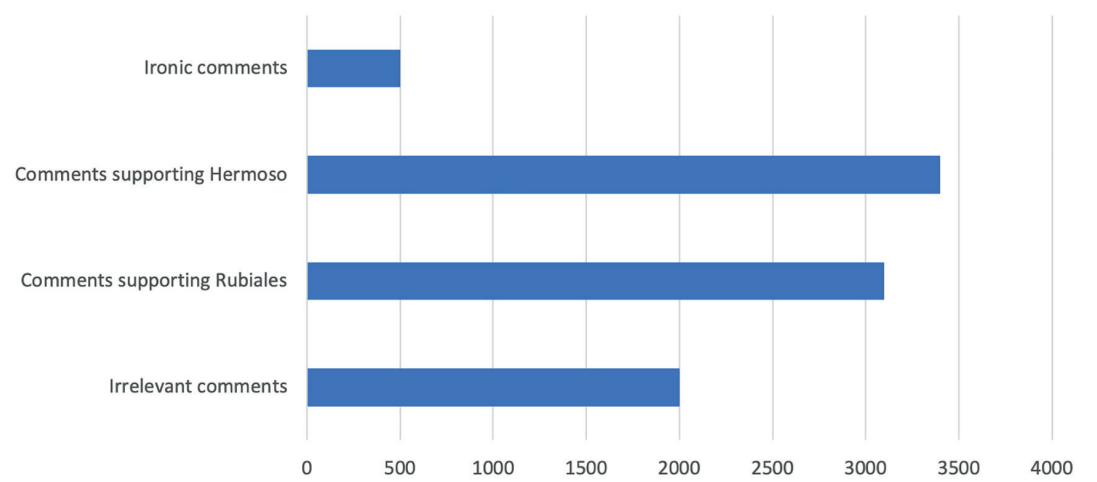


Fig 3. Rubiales – Hermoso : Corriere della Sera character count

In the case of *Corriere della Sera*, the comments are characterized by a greater presence of users expressing support for the footballer Hermoso, although comments in defense of Rubiales are also present. The comment section appears heterogeneous, including both contributions directly relevant to the article and comments unrelated to the topic.

Furthermore, the frequent use of irony is noteworthy. Unlike the comments under *La Gazzetta dello Sport*'s post—where football-related references, such as sarcastic mentions of Juventus, are common—here, the irony focuses on Italian politics or current events contemporaneous with the post's publication. Notably, the main target of satire is Orsini, a university professor well known for his media appearances on television talk shows, who was frequently mentioned in an ironic tone in comments posted in September 2023. This dynamic highlights how, within the space of the comment section, the news is sometimes used as a pretext for expressing opinions or frustrations on issues unrelated to the case under analysis.

Many comments interpret Rubiales' kiss as an act devoid of offensive intent, attributing to it a spontaneous and innocent nature. From this perspective, the action is not perceived as a form of violence, but rather as an emotional expression unworthy of condemnation. This interpretation reflects a broader tendency to downplay the symbolic significance and implications of the gesture, excluding it from the realm of problematic or harmful behavior:

«I think it's disgusting: a gesture of love and joy turned into something horrible. In this video you can clearly see—without a shadow of a doubt—that the athletes and the girl in question were all happy. She proudly tells the other girls about the kiss, she's happy about it. When the coach gets on the bus, the girls all shout 'kiss, kiss.'» (Woman)

«It's ridiculous. This man has a wife and kids. He was just thrilled that his country had won the World Cup. And now they're happy to ruin his life. Feminists are evil.» (Man)

«Now imagine it with reversed genders.» (Man)

«A spontaneous gesture in a moment of celebration for a great victory. Enough with this phony moralism.» (Woman)

«I bet many women would love a kiss from an attractive man even without consent. Let's be serious and focus on more important things.» (Woman)

Although comments seeking to downplay the act are not absent, the majority of interactions observed under *Corriere della Sera's* post appear to support the footballer's position, indicating greater sensitivity toward the issue of consent and a stronger condemnation of the episode. This trend contrasts with what was observed in the comment sections of *La Gazzetta dello Sport* and *Corriere dello Sport*, where more indulgent positions toward Rubiales and a tendency to minimize the incident were predominant:

«If you think this problem doesn't concern you, you're heading in the wrong direction. And unfortunately, there's still so much to do». (Man)

«She already said she didn't appreciate it! If there's no romantic relationship, you should NEVER touch someone without explicitly asking for their consent!!!» (Woman)

«It's a crime if you do it without my consent, and anyone who justifies this man is just as much a pervert as he is». (Woman)

Unlike what emerged in the comments under the two previously analyzed sports newspapers, in the case of *Corriere della Sera*, political interpretations of the episode also surface. This tendency can be linked to the generalist nature of the newspaper, which devotes considerable space to political and social current events, thus encouraging a reception of the case that is not limited to the sports domain but inserted within a broader framework of public reflection:

A (Man): «Ah, if you want Rubiales, since the whole country despises him except for a handful of Vox supporters, they'll send him over for free and gift-wrapped.

B (Man): «What are you talking about?!? Rubiales is left-wing, Sánchez appointed him.»

«So the player is your daughter?? I see politics only in Italy, but did you see if the player was even angry or tried to slap him??? The player is Spanish, and not even the Spanish newspapers gave the news much attention, because they see it as normal during a World Cup victory celebration. I only see the Italian rags talking about it—one of the biggest ones too—so I just say, poor Italy».

Finally, as also observed in the comments under *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, some users respond to the news with irony—this time not related to football but referencing previous Italian news stories:

«All this criticism for a kiss!! And it lasted only seven seconds—less than ten—so it's not punishable». (Man)

«LEGALIZED BY THE STATE!!!!!!» (Man)

«But what does Orsini have to say about it?» (Woman)

In this case, the *Corriere della Sera* comment section illustrates a configuration that only partially resembles an echo chamber and, at the same time, shows its limits. Unlike the sports-focused outlets, which tend to attract a more homogeneous audience and thus favour the circulation and reinforcement of similar, often minimising or misogynistic frames, a generalist newspaper

mobilizes a wider and more heterogeneous readership. This is reflected in the coexistence of comments that downplay the episode, contributions that explicitly defend Hermoso and foreground the issue of consent, and interventions that relocate the case within broader political and social debates. The presence of competing interpretive frames and cross-cutting references (to Italian politics, international current events, media figures such as Orsini) suggests that the discursive space is less “closed” than in a classic echo chamber: misogynistic or justificatory positions are still present and sometimes strongly articulated, but they are more frequently contested, negotiated and reframed. In this sense, *Corriere della Sera*’s comment section shows how the generalist nature of the outlet can weaken the mechanisms of epistemic closure typical of echo chambers, opening the way for alternative readings and for a more explicit problematization of gendered violence and consent.

Compared to the two sports newspapers, the *Corriere della Sera* comment section offers a more heterogeneous picture, revealing both the persistence of misogynistic frames and the presence of counter-voices that foreground consent and gendered violence. On the one hand, several users reproduce familiar justifications—portraying the kiss as spontaneous, innocent and unworthy of condemnation, and depicting feminists as exaggerated or malicious. On the other hand, a significant number of comments explicitly support Hermoso, insist on the centrality of consent and denounce the act as a form of violence, thereby contesting the normalization of such behaviour in sport. Symbolic violence is therefore not only enacted but also problematized and named, indicating a higher degree of reflexivity about gendered power relations.

From the perspective of polarization and digital public debate, *Corriere della Sera*’s generalist profile appears to attenuate the closure typical of echo chambers. The coexistence of conflicting interpretive frames, references to national and international politics, and broader reflections on sexism and democracy suggests a discursive space that is more open and cross-cutting than those of the sports dailies. While antagonism and sharp disagreements remain, the comment section functions as a more porous segment of the public sphere, where the Rubiales–Hermoso case becomes a prism through which users negotiate not only the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in sport, but also wider questions about gender equality, institutional accountability and the role of media in shaping public controversy.

3. Discussion

The analysis conducted suggests that a significant portion of users—comprising both women and men—tend to perceive Rubiales’ gesture as not particularly serious. Numerous comments express disagreement with the decision of the former president of the Spanish Football Federation to resign following the conclusion of the World Cup. In the comments published under *La Gazzetta dello Sport* and *Il Corriere dello Sport*, a recurring attribution of responsibility to FIFA emerges, often described as an institution lacking transparency and legitimacy in expressing moral judgments.

Commenters, unified by their engagement with sport-related content, largely tend to downplay the episode or, at the very least, regard it as unworthy of particular attention, citing the celebratory context associated with Spain’s national victory. Comments supportive of Rubiales and critical of his resignation generally rely on the belief that the gesture was a spontaneous expression of joy, devoid of offensive intent. Even among those who condemn the act, awareness of the sporting context often emerges: the behavior is criticized as inappropriate given the solemnity and visibility of the event, rather than as a violation of consent in the strict sense.

Ironical comments within these two sports newspapers also retain a football-related thematic connotation, suggesting that the editorial orientation of the outlets influences how even extra-sporting news items are received and discussed by the public.

By contrast, the comments collected under the *Corriere della Sera* post—a general-interest newspaper covering a wide spectrum of issues—present a different nature. In this case, numerous users explicitly declare that they do not follow football and therefore tend to comment on the episode itself, independently of the sporting context in which it occurred. While this space too contains positions that justify the gesture as an expression of enthusiasm, the majority of comments express a clear and unequivocal condemnation.

Moreover, in the *Corriere della Sera* case, comments frequently take on a socio-political tone, offering broader reflections on the current historical period and contemporary cultural dynamics. Even irony, present in several interactions, focuses less on the sporting context and more on aspects related to the Italian situation. A recurring example consists of satirical references to a ruling by the Italian judiciary stating that a physical harassment lasting less than ten seconds does not constitute a crime. This type of comment is used to highlight, in a critical tone, the inconsistencies of the legal system and societal perceptions of gender-based violence.

The availability of large volumes of user-generated data on social media today represents both a challenge and a strategic resource for social research, allowing access to forms of public expression in real time and within everyday interaction contexts that are not mediated by traditional instruments such as interviews or surveys. In this case, the near-real-time availability of reactions to the described episode presents notable challenges and opportunities.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative analytical approaches, enabled by the use of digital data—makes it possible to map not only the frequency of opinions expressed in the Rubiales-Hermoso case, but also the semantic complexity and discursive dynamics that characterize online public debate. The analysis of comments reveals the coexistence of explicit positions—either supportive or critical of the episode—alongside ironic, fragmented, or off-topic interventions with respect to the article's content. This discursive heterogeneity calls for interpretative tools capable of capturing the specificities of digital language, which is often marked by informality, sarcasm, or extratextual elements such as emojis.

These characteristics pose new methodological challenges for social research, not only regarding content analysis but also in terms of contextualizing messages within fluid and highly interactive communicative spaces. An additional area of reflection concerns the ethical dimension of digital data collection: although the comments analyzed were published on publicly accessible platforms, the issue of informed consent and the representativeness of the individuals involved remains unresolved.

Social media data collection offers, on the one hand, significant advantages in terms of access to spontaneous and wide-ranging opinions, while on the other hand raising critical questions regarding privacy protection, the responsible use of information, and the scientific validity of the samples analyzed. In this context, social research is called upon to rethink its practices and methodologies, integrating digital competencies with epistemological and ethical reflection suited to the transformations currently underway.

Another analytical dimension through which to interpret the diversity of reactions surrounding the Rubiales-Hermoso case involves the concepts of *filter bubble* (Pariser, 2011; Dahlgren, 2021) and *echo chamber* (Terren & Borge, 2021; Ross Arguedas *et al.*, 2022), which have become central in recent years in the study of online communicative behavior.

In this sense, the tendency of users interacting with sports-focused outlets such as *La Gazzetta dello Sport* and *Il Corriere dello Sport* to minimize the episode can be interpreted as the result of a thematic filter bubble, within which content selection, user profiles, and the centrality of the sporting narrative contribute to the construction of a relatively homogeneous information environment. This configuration shapes the reception of the event by reducing its problematic relevance through an interpretative framework focused on competitive and celebratory dimensions. In parallel, the concept of *echo chamber*—understood as the tendency of users to gravitate toward ideologically aligned discursive communities, within which pre-existing opinions are reinforced and divergent positions systematically marginalized—proves useful in interpreting

the polarization dynamics observed in the comments analyzed. Comments published under *La Gazzetta dello Sport* show a relative evaluative homogeneity, often oriented toward minimizing or justifying the episode, in line with a narrative centered on the sporting event and its celebratory context. Conversely, the comments found in *Il Corriere della Sera*, a general-interest outlet, are characterized by greater heterogeneity of positions, accompanied nonetheless by the formation of cohesive discursive clusters, marked by predominantly socio-political arguments. In such spaces, users tend to interact primarily with interlocutors who share similar views, thereby reinforcing their own beliefs and limiting engagement with alternative perspectives.

The variety of positions identified in the *Corriere della Sera* comments can thus be interpreted not as evidence of an open and cross-cutting debate, but rather as a manifestation of a plurality of coexisting echo chambers within the same communicative environment. This phenomenon aligns with recent studies (Mahmoudi, Jemielniak, & Ciechanowski, 2024; Hobolt, Lawall, & Tilly, 2024), which underscore how users tend to structure their interactions around ideologically homogeneous groups, selecting information congruent with their worldview and engaging only sporadically with members of divergent discursive communities. When such interactions do occur, they often take on conflictual tones, contributing to the radicalization of the debate and the fragmentation of public discourse.

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

This study analysed comments generated in response to a highly mediatized incident in which Luis Rubiales kissed Jennifer Hermoso during the celebrations for Spain's victory at the Women's World Cup, focusing on Facebook posts published by three Italian newspapers. Rather than treating these comment sections as simple repositories of individual opinions, the analysis approached them as digital arenas in which gendered meanings are negotiated, contested and, at times, stabilized. The comparison between two sports newspapers and a generalist outlet has shown that the expression of public opinion in digital environments is closely shaped by the editorial profile of the media, the composition of their online communities and the specific affordances of the platforms on which interactions take place.

Across the three outlets, a recurrent pattern emerges: many users do not concentrate on the problematic nature of the gesture itself but instead reframe it as a harmless expression of euphoria associated with sporting success. In the threads of *La Gazzetta dello Sport* and *Corriere dello Sport* in particular, the kiss is repeatedly normalised as a "natural" feature of football culture, while those who interpret it as violence are portrayed as hysterical, opportunistic or manipulated by the media. These dynamics exemplify how digital platforms can function as powerful devices for the normalization of misogyny: through repetition, humour and appeals to "common sense", non-consensual gestures are recoded as acceptable, and women's attempts to name and contest them are disqualified. At the same time, the comments reveal the operation of symbolic violence, whereby gendered hierarchies are reproduced not only through explicit insults, but through ordinary judgments that mark women as out of place when they demand consent or call out abuse.

The role of platforms is crucial in this process. Facebook's architecture encourages visibility hierarchies in which the most engaging, emotionally charged and polarizing comments are pushed to the top of the thread, increasing their likelihood of being seen, liked and replicated. In this context, algorithmic power does not simply distribute information neutrally but contributes to amplifying certain frames—such as the minimisation of the kiss or the attack on "exaggerated" feminists—while pushing more nuanced or dissenting voices to the margins. The interplay between platform algorithms, users' selective exposure and the pre-existing culture of sports fandom generates communicative environments that are only partially open: in the sports

newspapers, in particular, the debate often approximates an echo-chamber structure, where like-minded users reinforce each other and opposing interpretations are ridiculed or silenced rather than seriously engaged with.

At the same time, the case of *Corriere della Sera* suggests that these dynamics are not uniform. The more heterogeneous audience of a generalist newspaper, and its broader focus on political and social issues, appear to weaken some of the closure effects typical of echo chambers. In this thread, comments that defend Hermoso, foreground the issue of consent and explicitly name the episode as gender-based violence are more visible and more frequently supported. Here, the platformed public does not merely reproduce misogynistic norms but also provides space—albeit contested—for alternative framings that connect the incident to wider debates on sexism, institutional accountability and democratic values. This contrast indicates that the algorithmic and interactive logics of platforms intersect with the symbolic power of editorial brands and audience cultures to shape not only which contents circulate, but also which interpretive frames are most likely to gain traction.

More specifically, the analysis of the Rubiales–Hermoso case sheds light on a set of interrelated mechanisms through which gendered violence is discursively negotiated and, in many instances, normalized in digital environments. First, the recurrent tendency to minimise the episode, to reframe it as a harmless expression of euphoria, or to depict critical reactions as exaggerated or opportunistic exemplifies processes of normalization, whereby non-consensual gestures are reclassified as ordinary features of sporting celebrations. Second, the ways in which women who denounce or problematize the kiss are mocked, delegitimized or accused of lacking humour illustrate the operation of symbolic violence: through apparently “common-sense” arguments and casual derision, hierarchical gender relations are reproduced and women’s claims to bodily autonomy and consent are rendered less credible. Third, the dynamics observed in the comment sections—particularly of the sports newspapers—show patterns of reinforcement within relatively homogeneous communities, where like-minded users amplify each other’s views and dissenting voices are marginalized, thus approximating the structure of echo chambers and reinforcing polarized framings of the event.

By tracing these mechanisms in a specific and highly mediatized case located at the intersection of sport, gender and digital media, this study contributes to broader theoretical debates on online gendered violence and polarization. It demonstrates how seemingly “minor” or everyday controversies can function as key sites in which the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, consent and respectability are negotiated, contested and, at times, re-stabilized. The findings suggest that online misogyny in the sports domain should not be understood merely as a collection of individual hostile comments, but as part of a wider discursive infrastructure in which normalization, symbolic violence and echo-chamber dynamics interact to sustain unequal gender relations and to sharpen divisions in the digital public sphere. In doing so, the article underscores the need to integrate the study of platformed public opinion with a robust theoretical attention to power, inequality and the affective economies that underpin contemporary forms of gendered polarization.

Finally, the study has clear limitations: the corpus is restricted to a single episode and to one platform, and future research should broaden the empirical scope by including additional outlets and social media environments. A comparative and transnational perspective would also be particularly fruitful. Analysing similar controversies in other national contexts—such as Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States or Latin American countries—or in different sporting fields, including basketball, cycling or powerlifting, would make it possible to explore how local sport cultures, media systems and gender regimes interact with platform logics. Such comparisons could deepen our understanding of the conditions under which digital platforms contribute either to reinforcing misogynistic norms or to enabling counter-discourses that challenge gendered violence in sport.

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