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Media visibility and symbolic recognition: Press coverage of Portugal at the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup

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Abstract

The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand, marked a moment of expansion and heightened global visibility for women's football. In this context, the debut of the Portuguese national team represented a symbolic milestone within the national sporting landscape. This article offers a comparative analysis of media coverage produced by the Portuguese sports press and the general press, examining how distinct journalistic fields discursively framed this event. Drawing on Foucauldian Discourse Analysis applied to a corpus of 24 newspaper articles, the study demonstrates that, despite narrative differences between the two fields, both converged in producing a regime of visibility grounded in the symbolic recognition of female athletes. The centrality of national identity, technical performance and heroic narratives legitimised women's presence within the sporting sphere, while simultaneously limiting sustained engagement with structural gender inequalities. Media visibility thus operates ambivalently, articulating recognition and discursive containment.

Keywords

women's football, sports media, media discourse, national identity, gender representation, media visibility

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Introduction

The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand and held in July and August, was widely understood as a turning point in the global trajectory of women's football. With the expansion of the tournament to 32 national teams, it was described as an undeniable commercial and competitive success, breaking records in attendance, broadcast audiences, merchandise sales and sponsorship revenue (FIFA, 2023).

The international visibility of the competition assumed particular significance for women's football in Portugal, marking the national team's first appearance at a World Cup finals. Drawn in a group alongside the reigning world champions and runners-up, the United States and the Netherlands respectively, as well as fellow debutants Vietnam, the Portuguese team was mobilised within the public sphere as a symbol of modernisation, equality and national projection.

This international projection must be situated within a broader process of institutionalisation of women's football in Portugal, characterised by increased federative investment, the entry of major professional clubs into the women's game and growth in competitive participation. This development has unfolded within a sporting landscape historically dominated by men's football, where women's professionalisation remains comparatively later and structurally uneven. Nevertheless, growing institutional consolidation has expanded participation, improved competitive conditions and intensified the media visibility of women's football in the Portuguese public sphere. Within this context of heightened public exposure, participation in the 2023 tournament constituted a privileged site for the production and circulation of discourse, through which the media reproduced, negotiated and stabilised meanings associated with gender, nationhood and sporting merit (Allison, 2023; Dashper, 2022; Horne, 2017; Whannel, 2002).

Against this background, this article argues that moments of heightened media visibility, such as Portugal's debut at the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup (FWWC 2023), do not necessarily entail critical engagement with the structural inequalities that have historically shaped Portuguese women's football. In this sense, media visibility is approached as an ambivalent discursive configuration, capable of fostering symbolic recognition while simultaneously delimiting the terms within which structural inequalities are articulated and contested in the public sphere.

Beyond identifying editorial differences across the two journalistic fields represented in the corpus, this study examines how they converge in constructing symbolic recognition that integrates women's football into stabilised national narratives while marginalising engagement with the structural inequalities that have historically shaped its development. Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How do the sports and general press configure media visibility in their discursive construction of the Portuguese women's national team's participation in FWWC 2023? (2) To what extent do these configurations converge within a shared regime of symbolic recognition that delimits structural contestation?

To answer these questions, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on a balanced corpus of 24 articles published in six Portuguese daily newspapers: 12 from the sports press (*A Bola, O Jogo and Record*) and 12 from the general press (*Público, Correio da Manhã* and *Jornal de Notícias*). The analysis draws on Foucauldian Discourse

Analysis and is theoretically informed by cultural hegemony theory, particularly in its emphasis on consent and symbolic stabilisation, as well as by critical scholarship on gender, media and sport attentive to the gendered structuring of the sporting field.

This article contributes to the literature on media, gender and power by shifting attention from the mere intensification of media exposure to the structural limits of visibility. In doing so, it engages broader debates in media and cultural studies on the ambivalent politics of visibility and recognition. By demonstrating that coverage of the Portuguese women's national team at FWWC 2023 produced a regime of symbolic recognition that was broadly convergent across distinct journalistic fields, the study argues that this regime of media visibility emerges as an ambivalent device, expanding the public legitimacy of female athletes while simultaneously restricting sustained engagement with structural inequalities. It therefore proposes an understanding of visibility not as automatic evidence of social transformation, but as a site of negotiation in which recognition and containment coexist.

Literature review

Media, sport and regimes of visibility

Media and sport are deeply intertwined in contemporary societies, functioning not as parallel domains but as mutually constitutive fields involved in the production and circulation of symbolic meanings (Boyle and Rowe, 2023; Rowe, 2004). From this perspective, communication operates not merely as a vehicle of representation but as a central mechanism through which sporting experience is constructed and shared (Billings, 2026). Kassing et al. (2004) argue that participation in and affiliation with the sporting community are communicatively achieved and sustained, with communication constituting that experience.

Within this framework of structured visibility, the sport–media field operates as a contested ideological terrain (Messner, 1988), where gender inequalities become particularly salient. Extensive research shows that sports media have historically reproduced gender hierarchies through symbolic marginalisation, selective visibility, trivialisation, sexualisation and the exceptionalisation of women's sport (Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al., 2015; Fink, 2015). These dynamics reflect the persistence of hegemonic masculinity as a structuring ideology organising symbolic value, institutional authority and journalistic norms within sport (Connell, 2005; Messner, 2002). As Billings (2026) argues, gender remains central because it structurally organises patterns of privilege and access in mediated sport, shaping representation as well as the institutional mechanisms regulating visibility and legitimacy. Even where explicit stereotypes decline, structural patterns of omission, episodic attention and limited critique continue to delimit the scope of gender contestation (Cooky and Messner, 2018).

Sports journalism and the general press occupy differentiated positions within the journalistic field, producing distinct logics and framing practices (Burns and Matthews, 2018). Beyond these positional distinctions, both journalistic domains remain shaped by institutional and professional constraints that influence what becomes visible, legitimate, and narratively central. Within this framework, one can analyse not only positions and

hierarchies within the field, but also the discursive regimes regulating discourse production (Marchetti, 2005). In Foucauldian terms, media coverage can be understood as a discursive practice governed by regimes of knowledge that delimit the sayable, the intelligible, and the socially recognisable (Markula-Denison and Pringle, 2007). Visibility is not a neutral amplification of events, but a patterned distribution of attention structured by professional routines, institutional dependencies and dominant cultural norms that continue to shape coverage of women's sport (Cooky and Messner, 2018). In this process, the sports editor and the broader cultural and market context of the media organisation function as regulatory structures that filter, hierarchise, and frame what emerges as central in news discourse (Boyle, 2006).

The marginal positioning of women's sport within this regime of visibility is less the result of overt bias than of institutionalised routines and audience logics embedded within news production (Sherwood et al., 2017). This configuration reflects a form of institutional resistance to the stable integration of women's sport into everyday editorial practice (Franks and O'Neill, 2016). Media visibility thus emerges as the outcome of sedimented institutional hierarchies rather than as a neutral reflection of sporting performance, helping to explain the slow pace of transformation in coverage patterns (Petty and Pope, 2019).

Beyond institutionalised forms of resistance, this dynamic also operates through less visible discursive mechanisms. As Tuchman (1978) argues, journalistic objectivity frequently functions as a strategic ritual that stabilises dominant interpretations while restricting the range of legitimate critique. In the context of women's sport, celebratory narratives, meritocratic framings and affective identifications may coexist with a systematic absence of structural analysis (Cooky and Antunovic, 2022). Such configurations generate what may be conceptualised as ambivalent regimes of visibility: women become symbolically recognised yet remain circumscribed within dominant interpretative frameworks. This discursive configuration reinforces the tendency for celebratory narratives around women's sport to obscure the structural conditions that continue to limit equality (Rowe and Silva, 2023).

The centrality accorded to news reports and match coverage in traditional sports journalism does not constitute a mere effect of professional routine (Mirer and Harker, 2021) but rather operates as a narrative device that favours emotionalised readings of sport, anchored in figures of heroism, dramatisation and collective belonging, frequently articulated through national metaphors and processes of affective identification (Whannel, 2002). This logic is further reinforced by the systematic reliance on official discourses and institutional sources, which function as legitimating resources, consolidating consensual framings and restricting critical readings, particularly with regard to gender issues (Whiteside and Hardin, 2013).

Although these narrative practices remain central to journalism, they now operate within hybrid media environments in which legacy media coexist and interact with digital and social media (Chadwick, 2013). The emergence of this hybrid media ecosystem has reshaped both sport and journalism, transforming the ways in which sporting narratives are produced, circulated and consumed (Boyle and Haynes, 2009). Despite these transformations, newspapers continue to occupy a distinctive institutional position in producing, selecting and legitimating sporting narratives, contributing to the

reproduction, contestation and transformation of sport as a social institution (Boyle and Rowe, 2023).

Mega-events and national identity as amplified visibility

As mediated events, mega sporting events constitute temporal and spatial sites of global cultural flows of people, information and images (Roche, 2000). Their understanding requires recognising the structuring centrality of the media (Gruneau and Horne, 2016). In this sense, they may be understood as intensified arenas of symbolic production (Tomlinson and Young, 2006), within which regimes of visibility become particularly observable.

Global competitions such as the FIFA Women's World Cup mobilise narratives of national belonging, collective pride and historical continuity, amplifying the symbolic reach of media representations (Antunovic and Bartoluci, 2023; Whannel, 2008; Yanity, 2025). As Billings and Wenner (2017) note, these events function as seminal sporting moments that organise media attention while consolidating narratives and collective memories. From a constructivist perspective, Hall (1997, 2000) emphasises that media do not merely reflect national identity but actively participate in its construction through selective representation, narrative hierarchisation and symbolic repetition. Megaevents, in this regard, function as privileged sites for the (re)articulation of national myths, collective memories and shared values, often drawing on historically embedded narratives of nationhood (Hobsbawm, 1990) that are reactivated and mediated in contemporary sport contexts (Vincent and Harris, 2014). These narratives are not gender neutral. As Yuval-Davis (2011) argues, national belonging is deeply gendered, with symbolic representations of the nation historically anchored in masculinised codes of heroism, sacrifice and competitive excellence.

Research on women's participation in international sport suggests that megaevents may temporarily expand media visibility and generate narratives of modernisation and progress (Allison, 2023). However, such visibility remains structured by persistent hierarchies that have historically marginalised women's sport within dominant coverage (Cooky et al., 2015). Studies of front-page prominence demonstrate how editorial hierarchisation structures symbolic recognition even in moments of victory, reinforcing existing news logics (Coche and Bell, 2024). Yet this intensified exposure operates within pre-existing symbolic frameworks (Toffoletti, 2017), in which the incorporation of women athletes into national narratives must be understood through the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). In this sense, their integration occurs through adaptation to masculinised codes of national representation rather than structural redefinition (Vincent et al., 2011).

Gender, recognition and the limits of the sayable

Against this backdrop of structural marginalisation, the ambivalence of media visibility becomes analytically central to understanding gendered power in sport media. This ambivalence can be understood within broader hegemonic configurations of power (Connell, 2005) and through the lens of recognition theory (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

For Fraser and Honneth (2003), recognition constitutes a precondition for social legitimacy and participation; media visibility may thus function as symbolic empowerment. Yet recognition does not necessarily entail structural transformation. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, the popularisation of feminist discourse has amplified women's visibility without disrupting the hierarchies that sustain gender inequality. When detached from material redistribution, recognition risks leaving regimes of privilege intact (Billings, 2026).

Contemporary sport media illustrate this tension. Increased visibility may operate as a form of conditional inclusion, celebrating individual success while diverting attention from institutional asymmetries and the ideological dynamics that structure the discursive articulation of gender, power, and identity (Cooky, 2018; Cooky and Antunovic, 2022). Hall's (1997) theory of representation underscores that regimes of representation are structured through processes of selection, omission and symbolic hierarchisation; within the sport–media context, such processes define what may emerge as visible and intelligible in the public sphere and what remains discursively marginalised (Bruce, 2016).

Beyond the representational dimension, these limits may be understood, in Foucauldian terms, as effects of discursive formations that regulate the intelligible and delimit what may emerge as legitimate knowledge within a given relational conjuncture, being inscribed in strategic relations through which power is exercised and reconfigured (Markula-Denison and Pringle, 2007). In this sense, they configure regimes of visibility that structure symbolic authority in the media sphere and, when operating through omission, reinforce asymmetries of legitimacy, contributing to the persistence of a gendered treatment of sports coverage (Boyle and Haynes, 2009). Even during major international tournaments, where women's success is framed as national symbolism, such visibility tends to be event-bound and seldom produces structural change (Pope et al., 2024).

This dynamic is particularly evident when heroic narratives and meritocratic framings symbolically integrate women athletes into national imaginaries while simultaneously stabilising existing power relations (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 2002). Such patterns are reflected in media coverage, where female athletes, even during the Olympic Games, are more likely to receive attention when competing in socially acceptable individual sports rather than team sports (Tuggle et al., 2007). Feminist sport scholarship has consistently demonstrated that differences in sporting opportunities are fundamentally questions of power, not only between genders but also within them (Boyle and Haynes, 2009). As LaVoi (2009) argues, the media should therefore be understood not as mere mirrors of sporting reality but as active agents in the social construction of gender. In this vein, Guyot et al. (2024) note that media recognition of women's sport may symbolically challenge the dominant gender order without necessarily reconfiguring the discursive regimes that structure the journalistic and sporting fields.

Methodology

This study adopts a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analytical approach aimed at identifying discursive regularities, regimes of visibility and the conditions of possibility that structure what can be articulated, foregrounded or silenced in media representations. The analysis is situated within broader debates on cultural hegemony and within critical

Table 1. Corpus of analysis: Generalist newspapers.

Newspaper	Code	Article title (original)	Date	Page
Público	P1	"Uma bad girl demasiado talentosa e difícil de segurar"	28 July 2023	34
Público	P2	"Portugal–EUA: um grau diferente de impossível"	31 July 2023	26
Público	P3	"Os primeiros de muitos"	28 July 2023	35
Público	P4	"A geografia do futebol feminino está a mudar"	4 August 2023	27
Correio da Manhã	CM1	"Seleção vive emoções muito fortes no Mundial"	23 July 2023	30
Correio da Manhã	CM2	"Bola parada trama Portugal"	30 July 2023	30
Correio da Manhã	CM3	"Vitória inédita permite sonhar com os 'oitavos'"	28 July 2023	3
Correio da Manhã	CM4	"Acreditar que é possível ganhar"	30 July 2023	28–30
Jornal de Notícias	JN1	"Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa recebe a seleção feminina"	9 July 2023	28
Jornal de Notícias	JN2	"Tatiana Pinto garante navegadoras preparadas para tudo"	18 July 2023	40
Jornal de Notícias	JN3	"Em dia histórico basta à seleção 'jogar à Portugal'"	23 July 2023	38
Jornal de Notícias	JN4	"Navegadoras fazem história e Telma entra para a história do Mundial"	28 July 2023	38

Source: Author's corpus.

scholarship on gender, media and sport, particularly research examining media representation, symbolic power and the structuring of gender hierarchies in sport.

The research follows a qualitative comparative design, examining journalistic coverage of the Portuguese women's national team's participation in the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup. Rather than describing content, the study interrogates how media discourse produces and stabilises meanings surrounding gender, national identity and sport across distinct editorial contexts.

The corpus comprises 24 text-based articles drawn from six Portuguese daily newspapers: three specialised sports titles (*A Bola, O Jogo and Record*) and three general newspapers (*Público*, *Correio da Manhã* and *Jornal de Notícias*). Each journalistic field contributes 12 articles, distributed evenly across the three outlets to ensure comparative balance and to avoid over-representation of a single editorial voice. The selected texts were published during the team's participation in the tournament and in the immediate aftermath of public repercussion. Data collection was conducted through the official digital archives of each newspaper, ensuring access to the full published versions of the articles. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the distribution of the analysed articles by outlet, date and page positioning, allowing for consideration of editorial hierarchisation within and across journalistic fields.

The selection prioritised historically established daily newspapers with sustained agenda-setting influence within Portuguese media culture. Although digital-native

Table 2. Corpus of analysis: Sports newspapers.

Newspaper	Code	Article title (original)	Date	Page
A Bola	AB1	"Nada está perdido"	25 July 2023	16
A Bola	AB2	"Sentimento é de total injustiça"	28 July 2023	2
A Bola	AB3	"Continuamos a acreditar!"	29 July 2023	16
A Bola	AB4	"O importante é acreditar"	30 July 2023	16
O Jogo	OJ1	"O capítulo mais belo de uma história épica"	26 July 2023	22
O Jogo	OJ2	"A fé depois da amargura"	30 July 2023	16
O Jogo	OJ3	"Muita ambição para continuar a sonhar"	27 July 2023	21
O Jogo	OJ4	"Orgulho, o sentimento"	4 August 2023	16
Record	R1	"Vitória histórica alimenta o sonho"	28 July 2023	2
Record	R2	"O Jardim de Telma / Kika supera Ronaldo"	28 July 2023	3
Record	R3	"Os mais machistas estão esmagados"	4 August 2023	16
Record	R4	"Jéssica e a conquista do respeito mundial"	4 August 2023	17

Source: Author's corpus.

outlets play an increasingly significant role in sports communication, legacy newspapers continue to function as central sites of public debate and symbolic legitimation, particularly in the field of football. The Portuguese sports press occupies a structurally dominant position within the national media ecosystem, shaping narratives that are frequently reproduced or reframed by generalist outlets and influencing the broader public agenda.

Record, A Bola and *O Jogo* are commercially dominant titles historically structured around football coverage and inter-club rivalries, operating as key actors in the production of symbolic framings of sport in Portugal. Among the general press, *Público, Correio da Manhã* and *Jornal de Notícias* represent distinct editorial profiles within the Portuguese media landscape, differing in format, style and target readership, while maintaining sustained agenda-setting influence.

The size of the corpus reflects the principle of theoretical saturation rather than statistical representativeness. Saturation was reached when successive readings no longer generated substantively new patterns of representation but instead reinforced already identified dynamics of visibility and symbolic recognition. The bounded nature of the dataset enables interpretative depth consistent with the Foucauldian analytical framework adopted.

Corpus selection followed four criteria: (i) direct thematic relevance to the national team's participation in the tournament; (ii) the presence of interpretative, evaluative or contextual elaboration; (iii) diversity of journalistic formats; and (iv) relevance to gender and national identity framing. Articles limited to purely factual reporting of results, schedules or statistical data were excluded, as were syndicated or agency pieces lacking

independent editorial construction. This ensured the corpus focused on discursive sites of symbolic production rather than routine informational reporting. The unit of analysis is the journalistic text considered as a coherent unit of meaning.

Empirical analysis is grounded in Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, understood as an examination of discourse as productive of knowledge, power and subjectivity (Foucault, 1980, 2000). Similar approaches have been employed in recent analyses of football as a site of political articulation and identity negotiation, demonstrating the usefulness of discourse-analytical frameworks for examining the relationship between sport, power and national imaginaries (e.g. Gouveia and Pereira, 2025; Liao and Markula, 2009).

In this study, the concept of regime of visibility refers to the patterned distribution of thematic centrality, legitimacy and evaluative framing through which certain actors and narratives are authorised while others are marginalised. In line with a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a regulated practice that structures the field of what can be said (Foucault, 1980), regimes of visibility are analysed as discursive formations that shape conditions of intelligibility and produce effects of legitimacy within a given media event.

The operationalisation of this concept focused on the analysis of thematic distribution, narrative hierarchisation and evaluative intensity within the texts. Particular attention was paid to patterns of naming and reference to players, the presence or absence of structural contextualisation of women's football, explicit or implicit comparisons with men's football and the positioning of protagonists within the narrative economy of the articles. These indicators enabled the identification of differentiated forms of legitimation, marginalisation and discursive normalisation within the corpus.

The analysis proceeded through iterative comparative readings conducted by the authors, allowing for progressive familiarisation with the empirical material and the identification of recurrent discursive formations, narrative regularities and structured silences. Analytically salient excerpts were selected to illuminate broader patterns of thematic centrality, evaluative framing and symbolic positioning across the corpus. The focus remained on tracing the conditions under which particular meanings became stabilised, authorised or marginalised, rather than on micro-linguistic detail.

Recognising the interpretative character of discourse analysis, the authors adopted a reflexive stance, discussing emergent categories and considering alternative readings. In line with a Foucauldian perspective, the study does not seek to assess truth claims or journalistic intentionality; rather, it examines how discourse operates as a regulated practice that produces effects of legitimacy, stabilises particular meanings and circumscribes the field of intelligibility within a specific media event. Quotations are strategically mobilised to provide evidential grounding and analytical density, enabling the empirical material to function not merely as illustration but as constitutive of the interpretative argument (Lingard, 2019).

Analysis

The analysis shifts the focus from thematic coverage to the discursive functions through which media framings operate as productive practices of meaning-making, mobilising rhetorical and stylistic resources as mechanisms of legitimation, visibility and normalisation across distinct analytical axes.

National identity, emotional language and regimes of visibility

National identity is discursively constructed in both the sports and general press through differentiated framings that vary in symbolic intensity and narrative function. In *Record* (R1), it adopts a sober and moderate register, drawing on expressions such as "historic victory fuels the dream" or "good image," which project the image of a resilient nation oriented towards the future, reinforced by the statement "you conquered the country" (R3), attributed to the President of the Republic. In *O Jogo*, identity construction is more intense and symbolic, inscribing the women's national team within a heroic national narrative through formulations such as "the most beautiful chapter of an epic story," associated with lexicons of overcoming that naturalise progress as an axis of identity, such as "ambition to keep dreaming" (OJ3). Institutional moments, such as the reception at the Presidential Palace, are emphasised as rituals of symbolic consecration, in which the lexicon of "pride" (OJ2) elevates the team to the status of representative of the nation. *A Bola* reinforces this framing through a strategy of personalisation centred on Telma Encarnação as an exemplary subject, mobilising metaphors of perseverance such as "keep believing," articulated with emotional hyperboles, "it is special to play for Portugal" (AB2), which intensify a contained emotional register associating national identity with values of humility, effort and meritocratic ascent and inscribing "making history" (AB3) as a marker of belonging and symbolic legitimation of collective success.

In the general press, national identity is framed on a broader scale. *Público* mobilises a reflexive and contrastive enunciative structure when presenting the team as "a team that challenges the traditional imaginary of Portuguese football" (P2), integrating performance into a process of reinterpretation of national sporting memory. Formulations such as "At the World Cup there was Portugal, much Portugal" (P2) privilege the collective dimension of identity, while expressions of strong symbolic impact, such as "they definitively conquered the country" or "you are Portugal," inscribe women's football within a broader field of social and ideological affirmation. *Jornal de Notícias* reinforces this shift by highlighting participation as "a change in the symbolic map of the nation" (JN2), drawing on discursive images of strong historical density that produce an epic-patriotic and celebratory tone. Expressions such as "Navigators," "playing the Portuguese way" or "historic day" operate in this sense, reinforcing the team's symbolic inscription within the national imaginary. *Correio da Manhã*, in turn, adopts an emotional and forward-looking register, associating national identity with affective belonging through intensifying constructions such as "allows us to dream" or "to give their best for Portugal" (CM3).

Despite differences in symbolic intensity and narrative style between the sports and general press, framings of national identity converge in celebrating the participation of the women's national team as a historic milestone and an element of symbolic cohesion. This mobilisation of the nation operates as a device of symbolic consecration, integrating women's football into stabilised identity narratives and absorbing the perceived novelty of women's participation without interrogating the structural conditions sustaining its marginality within Portuguese football.

Differences between the sports and general press are also articulated through contrasting uses of emotional and factual language, which play a central role in configuring regimes of visibility and delimiting the scope of discursive contestation. Factuality is

mobilised less as a purely technical evaluation of performance than as a discursive resource that stabilises identity framings and limits structural problematisation of the team's participation. *A Bola* establishes an effective articulation between emotional and factual language, drawing on evaluative and metaphorical expressions such as "what matters is believing" (AB4), privileging an affective register that brings the reader closer to the team's subjective experience, in which emotion functions as a device of symbolic mobilisation. *Record* uses the expression "A debut without the cherry on top" to convey contained but undramatised disappointment, alongside neutral and descriptive terms such as "could have surprised," "fell short" and "good image." *O Jogo* combines the factuality characteristic of the sports press with an intentional emotional charge designed to elevate the significance of the event. On the one hand, it draws on expressions such as "epic story" and "most beautiful chapter," inscribing participation within a narrative of symbolic consecration. On the other, formulations such as "bitter defeat" and "faith after bitterness" introduce an evaluative tone that acknowledges failure without compromising the overall positive framing of performance.

The general press uses emotion more as a resource of social contextualisation than as sporting dramatisation. *Correio da Manhã* states that "the team is experiencing very strong emotions at the World Cup" (CM1), yet this emotion operates as a narrative of cultural framing rather than of the match itself. In *Público*, language assumes a neutral and analytical tone, with contained emotional presence and a sober discursive style, drawing on expressions such as "influenced by her father" or "her love of football began early," closer to a biographical profile. Factual formulations such as "it has no price" function as a synthetic evaluation of the team's symbolic impact without compromising the dominant informative tone. In *Jornal de Notícias*, language adopts a clearly emotional and expressive register, drawing on the players' own expressions to amplify the affective charge of the discourse, such as "pride," "emotion" and "historic milestone." The newspaper also adopts motivational language, visible in formulations such as "the determination always to be better" (JN1).

Although mobilised in different ways, emotion performs a convergent discursive function in both journalistic fields: framing the participation of the women's national team as a shared affective experience, shifting the focus from institutional analysis to the symbolic experience of the event. This centrality of emotion, whether as sporting dramatisation or social contextualisation, contributes to the construction of a narrative of celebration and collective engagement, privileging the symbolic experience of the event over structural problematisation.

Performance, factual framing and symbolic visibility

The team's performance is constructed in the sports press through the predominance of operational and prescriptive enunciative forms centred on execution and control of the game. *Record* draws on tables, statistics and individual evaluations, such as "positive aggression" and "offensive flow" (R1), producing an effect of technical objectification of performance. In *O Jogo*, framing combines sporting analysis and symbolic narrative, even in contexts of defeat, described as "bitter" yet accompanied by a positive reading of performance and projections of continuity, "Portugal left a good impression" (OJ1),

alongside imperative and conditional verbal forms such as "not allow transitions" or "start strong," configuring the match as a tactical problem to be solved (OJ3). *A Bola* adopts a critical realism, "it did not go as we wanted" (AB1), privileging a factual framing of limitations while mobilising references to Telma as a vantage point for observing collective effectiveness, visible in expressions such as "the first goal," "tears" and "proof of competence."

By contrast, the general press mobilises declarative and relational enunciative structures, in which performance exceeds the strictly competitive plane. *Jornal de Notícias* inscribes the team's display within a broader and collective symbolic field, highlighting formulations such as "The Quinas make their winning debut at a World Cup" and references to "international visibility," through stable predications that fix the team as a collective subject of meaning. This framing is reinforced by epic discursive images, such as the metaphor "a very difficult mountain to climb," projecting participation within a register of overcoming and symbolic conquest. *Público* (P2) articulates factual data, structural comparison and hypothetical projection, drawing on contrastive constructions such as "Portugal and the USA are worlds apart," producing both an effect of hierarchisation and of problematising inequalities, integrating performance into a debate on the structural conditions of women's football. *Correio da Manhã* adopts a hybrid framing, combining factual description with hyperbolic syntax and modal expressions of possibility, "could have accelerated and scored heavily," emphasising individual impact and projecting a potentially superior performance than the actual result obtained.

The discursive construction of performance reveals a significant convergence between journalistic fields, despite differences in language and analytical focus. By privileging technical, symbolic or meritocratic readings of the match, both the sports and general press tend to decontextualise the team's performance from the structural conditions that frame it, such as disparities of resources or delayed professionalisation. This shift contributes to an apparently neutral evaluation of sporting performance which, in practice, depoliticises its interpretation and reinscribes it within a register of technical neutrality and merit.

Heroism, responsibility and discursive containment

Narratives of heroism and responsibility take differentiated forms. In the sports press, heroism is frequently meritocratic. Record describes Telma as "Telma's garden" (R2), transforming the player into a symbol of technical execution and inspiration, and further states that "Kika surpasses Ronaldo," through metaphors and comparisons that construct symbolic heroism. In *A Bola*, the statement "When Telma was born, Madeira was already too small for her talent" (AB2) mobilises a hyperbolic utterance constructing a precocious heroic narrative around the athlete. The sports press attributes defeat to factors internal to the match, "we did not start the way we wanted," without personalising blame. Defeats are treated as circumstantial or as the product of the opponent's superiority. In *O Jogo*, heroism assumes a dominant role, with the team presented as an example of overcoming and historic merit through expressions such as "courageous" and "determined." The tone is markedly celebratory and mobilising, drawing on exhortative formulations such as "there is no room for mourning," "we must focus on the next one" and "keep believing."

In the general press, heroism is generally amplified to the social plane. In *Jornal de Notícias*, this framing manifests in the valorisation of collectivity and commitment, attributing heroism to the team as an agent of social transformation, as expressed in the statement that the team "took a step towards redefining the role of women in Portuguese sport." This positioning is reinforced by a discourse centred on merit, emotion and ambition, visible in expressions such as "fight," "pride" and "we will work harder," which operate as forms of symbolic visibility without mobilising narratives of responsibility. *Público* values individual trajectories through narratives of personal overcoming, "it was not supposed for a girl to play football" or "prejudices she overcame," privileging a sociocultural form of heroism when describing the team as a "catalyst for new national imaginaries," in a framing likewise marked by the absence of institutional accountability. *Correio da Manhã* mobilises a narrative of emotional and collective heroism, presenting the team as resilient and reinforcing a positive image through the recurrent use of "Portugal" as collective subject, "Portugal made its debut with a defeat. . .," within an affirmative discourse devoid of pressure or negative imputation.

Heroic narratives, although distinct in configuration, meritocratic in the sports press and sociocultural in the general press, converge in the absence of institutional accountability. The valorisation of effort and resilience operates as a mechanism of symbolic recognition that shifts attention to the individual plane, contributing to the protection of organisational structures from critical scrutiny and to the naturalisation of inequalities.

Gender representation and gendered silence

Beyond these narrative dynamics, it is important to examine how gender is explicitly represented within the corpus. Gender representation in the sports press does not reveal the explicit mobilisation of feminine stereotypes. *A Bola* constructs a neutralised representation of gender, reinforcing the legitimacy of players as competent agents evaluated according to technical criteria, such as the "irreverence of Kika Nazareth" or Telma's "pressing capacity," albeit with a noticeable emotional dimension. This emotion manifests in references to affective intimacy, "genuine simplicity," "shared emotion," "she cried with emotion," without implying a symbolic reduction of the athlete. *Record* likewise evidences a clear rejection of feminine stereotypes, representing players as professionals and agents of national development. The statement "the most sexist have been crushed" (R3), attributed to the then Prime Minister, is highlighted as a form of political legitimation of feminism through sport. In *O Jogo*, the women's team is treated as a legitimate national representative in the tournament, through a discourse centred on evolution and effort, without references to appearance, fragility or emotional excess. This framing contributes to a regime of visibility in which gender difference is neutralised at the level of representation while structural asymmetries remain largely unarticulated, extending to institutional moments such as the meeting with the President of the Republic, where the women's team is symbolically equated with the men's national team.

In the general press, gender emerges as a structural analytical category. Articles discuss the historical invisibility and structural inequalities traversing women's football, framing participation in the tournament as a moment of symbolic rupture. Yet this symbolic rupture operates within a visibility framework that foregrounds recognition while

circumscribing deeper institutional critique. *Público* observes that the World Cup "exposed persistent inequalities while simultaneously demonstrating the players' capacity for affirmation," articulating structural critique and symbolic recognition. *Jornal de Notícias* highlights the "unprecedented visibility of women in historically masculinised roles" and their value as a "symbol of equality," contributing to the legitimation of athletes as agents of the nation within a space traditionally reserved for men. *Correio da Manhã* presents an overall neutral and positive representation of gender, valuing players as athletes and avoiding references to appearance or emotionality. Nonetheless, a tone of "special occasion" can be observed in some of the analysed pieces.

The analysis of gender representations reveals an absence of explicit feminine stereotypes and a tendency towards the symbolic legitimation of players as athletes and representatives of the nation. However, this discursive neutralisation, although seemingly positive, contributes to a depoliticised normalisation of women's football, insofar as, within this regime of visibility, equality is symbolically celebrated without any articulation with persistent material inequalities, thereby reinforcing a logic of symbolic inclusion compatible with the maintenance of gender hierarchies in Portuguese football and delimiting the field of the sayable.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the media coverage of the Portuguese women's national team at the 2023 World Cup produced, within this specific event, a regime of visibility grounded primarily in symbolic recognition rather than structural critique. Across the corpus, national identity, performance and heroism functioned as dominant axes of thematic centrality, shaping the distribution of legitimacy and evaluative framing across both journalistic fields. The mobilisation of national identity integrated women's football into stabilised historical narratives and functioned as a mechanism through which the perceived "novelty" of women's participation was discursively absorbed. Within this configuration, the sports press privileged emotionally charged and meritocratic heroic framings, whereas the general press adopted more institutional and reflective registers. However, despite these formal distinctions, both journalistic fields configured media visibility in a structurally convergent manner, delimiting the scope of structural contestation.

This pattern resonates directly with the literature on regimes of visibility in women's sport. As Cooky and Messner (2018) demonstrate, increased media attention does not in itself entail a reconfiguration of existing symbolic hierarchies and may instead operate in conditional and depoliticised ways. Recent evidence similarly indicates that intensified coverage of women's football may coexist with framings that constrain the problematisation of structural inequalities (Pope et al., 2024). The recurring mobilisation of national narratives, historical metaphors and discourses of collective pride reinforces this dynamic, framing women's football as an element of symbolic cohesion and identity modernisation rather than as a site of political and institutional contestation, in line with Hall's (1997) account of representational processes.

In conjunction with this identity framing, the second analytical axis highlights the role of technical normalisation in the production of media visibility. The centrality attributed to performance and factual reporting rests on apparently neutral criteria that generate effects of objectivity and professionalisation yet detach sporting performance from the

structural conditions that shape it. This mode of evaluation contributes to the symbolic legitimation of women's football while situating it within a depoliticised regime of visibility, in which inequalities in investment, professionalisation and resources remain outside the scope of sustained scrutiny.

The third axis shows how narratives of heroism operate as mechanisms internal to the regime of visibility, functioning as forms of discursive conflict management. The celebration of effort, resilience and individual or collective overcoming symbolically recognises the athletes but is accompanied by a systematic absence of institutional accountability. In both the sports and the general press, results are frequently decontextualised, attributed to circumstantial factors or incorporated into narratives of perseverance, thereby symbolically shielding football institutions from critical examination. Heroism, far from functioning as a tool of contestation, emerges as a mechanism of discursive stabilisation that renders inequality less visible, in line with the logic of hegemony outlined by Connell (2005) and further developed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). This dynamic is consistent with recent analyses showing that media recognition of women's sport may symbolically challenge dominant gender orders without transforming the discursive regimes that structure the journalistic and sporting fields (Guyot et al., 2024).

Finally, the fourth axis foregrounds the delimitation of the sayable in representations of gender. The discursive neutralisation observed avoids explicit stereotypes and legitimises the players as professional athletes and national representatives. However, it simultaneously contributes to an uncritical normalisation of women's football. Equality is affirmed symbolically without being articulated as a material relation of power. As Cooky (2018) argues, the absence of stereotypes does not equate to the presence of a critical gender agenda; rather, it may operate as a form of symbolic inclusion compatible with the maintenance of existing hierarchies.

Taken together, identity framings, performance-based evaluations, heroic narratives and neutralised gender representations operate in a complementary manner, generating visibility, affective engagement and legitimacy while delimiting the scope of discursive contestation. Despite narrative differences between the sports and general press, both journalistic fields displayed recurring discursive patterns that limited the transformation of heightened symbolic visibility into sustained structural critique. While this analysis is confined to a specific corpus and event, the consistency of these configurations across journalistic fields suggests not an isolated tendency but a patterned formation of visibility within this moment of international consecration.

This convergence stems less from discursive homogeneity than from shared silences that cut across distinct journalistic framings, revealing the limits of journalistic mediation as an agent of symbolic transformation within a deeply institutionalised cultural field (Rowe, 2004). Although grounded in a specific national and temporal context, these findings contribute to broader debates on the ambivalence of media visibility in women's sport. In this sense, the media coverage analysed mobilises a feminism of recognition that promotes visibility and self-confidence yet tends to restrict the space for structural critique by legitimising formal equality without consistently interrogating the material and institutional conditions of the sporting field. The Portuguese case therefore suggests that moments of international consecration may simultaneously expand public recognition and reinforce the boundaries of the sayable, highlighting the structurally ambivalent nature of regimes of visibility in contemporary sport.

Conclusion

This study has examined Portuguese press coverage of the women's national team at the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup through the lens of regimes of visibility. Rather than equating increased media exposure with structural transformation, the analysis demonstrates that heightened visibility operated within a patterned configuration of symbolic recognition that simultaneously delimited the scope of structural critique. Across both the sports and general press, national identity, performance and heroism emerged as dominant axes of thematic centrality, generating affective engagement and public legitimation while limiting sustained interrogation of institutional inequalities.

Although stylistic and tonal differences between journalistic fields were evident, these distinctions did not fundamentally alter the underlying configuration of visibility. Women players were symbolically integrated into national narratives and evaluated through professionalised criteria, yet structural asymmetries in investment, governance and historical marginalisation remained largely unarticulated. The convergence observed across distinct editorial domains suggests not discursive uniformity, but the presence of shared silences that appear to delimit the field of legitimate critique. In doing so, it demonstrates how media visibility functions as a structured field of intelligibility that normalises recognition while narrowing the space for articulating structural inequality.

The Portuguese case illustrates the ambivalent nature of media visibility in women's sport. Moments of international consecration may expand recognition and reconfigure symbolic belonging, yet they can simultaneously stabilise existing power relations by absorbing novelty into established narrative frameworks. Understanding visibility as a regime rather than as a quantitative increase in attention enables a more nuanced assessment of how media representation participates in both the reproduction and potential transformation of gendered hierarchies in contemporary sport.

This study presents limitations related to the scope of the corpus, restricted to a defined set of newspapers and a specific number of articles, which constrains the generalisability of the identified discursive patterns, as well as to its focus on a single event, albeit one of high symbolic density. We recommend that future research explore the visual and multimodal dimensions of media coverage, further deepening the analysis of hierarchies of visibility within the news space.

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