

Analysis of the Criticism and Defense of Feminism in Social Discourse: A Case of Patriarchal Protection in Sports

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Análisis de la crítica y defensa del feminismo en el discurso social: un caso de protección patriarcal en el deporte

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Abstract

The social discourse against feminism has become broader and more explicit. This is generating a controversy that is taking shape in various spheres. Our research shows this controversy by analyzing comments made on digital versions of newspapers about a gift awarded to female squash players at a tournament in the north of Spain in 2019, which included a vibrator, an electric foot file, and hair removal wax. From forty headlines in Spanish, Latin-American and British newspapers, the obtained data set were 1,279 comments. Using a thematic analysis, the comments were classified in six subthemes: gender, offense, politics, patriarchal sexuality, context, and sponsor. The subthemes were grouped in three themes: new misogyny, sexist

outrage and corporate advocacy. Two conflicting discourses, both based on two opposite men/women, equality/discrimination, show the social and political conflict in Spanish society. However, the sponsoring company is not questioned. Gender appears as a performative act whose reproduction maintains a tense relationship between what is presented as two different images of women: real/normal versus feminist. Results indicate that the comments reflect deep-rooted attitudes about gender and power, using ambivalent sexism and anti-feminist rhetoric to maintain the status quo, and how corporate sponsorship is presented as a justification mechanism. The debate focuses on the social discourse that pits the feminist model against the patriarchal one, understood as an epistemological stance. From the so-called new misogyny, which presents men as discriminated against, a false parallelism is used that misrepresents the concept of equality, accepts a pre-discursive order on women's sexuality and neoliberalism through the defence of the corporate market.

Keywords: women; patriarchy; neosexism; feminism; modern misogyny; social discourse; equality; thematic analysis; sportswomen.

Resumen

El discurso social contra el feminismo se ha hecho más amplio y explícito. Esto está generando una polémica que se plasma en diversos ámbitos. Nuestra investigación muestra esta polémica analizando los comentarios realizados en las versiones digitales de los periódicos sobre un regalo otorgado a las jugadoras de squash en un torneo celebrado en el norte de España en 2019, que incluía un vibrador, una lima eléctrica para los pies y cera depilatoria. A partir de cuarenta titulares de periódicos españoles, latinoamericanos y británicos, el conjunto de datos obtenido fue de 1.279 comentarios. Mediante un análisis temático, los comentarios se clasificaron en seis subtemas: género, ofensa, política, sexualidad, contexto y patrocinador. Los subtemas se agruparon en tres temas: nueva misoginia, indignación sexista y defensa corporativa. Dos discursos enfrentados, ambos basados en dos opuestos hombre/mujer, igualdad/discriminación, muestran el conflicto social y político de la sociedad española. Sin embargo, no se cuestiona a la empresa patrocinadora. El género aparece como un acto performativo cuya reproducción mantiene una relación tensa entre lo que se presenta como dos imágenes diferentes de la mujer: real/normal versus feminista. Los resultados indican que los comentarios reflejan actitudes muy arraigadas sobre el género y el poder, utilizando un sexismo ambivalente y una retórica antifeminista para mantener el statu quo, y cómo el patrocinio empresarial se presenta como un mecanismo de justificación. El debate se centra en el discurso social que opone el modelo feminista al patriarcal. Desde la llamada nueva misoginia, que presenta a los hombres como discriminados, se utiliza un falso paralelismo que tergiversa el concepto de igualdad, acepta un orden prediscursivo sobre la sexualidad de las mujeres y el neoliberalismo a través de la defensa del mercado corporativo.

Palabras clave: mujeres; patriarcado; neosexismo; feminismo; misoginia moderna; discurso social; igualdad; análisis temático; mujeres deportistas.

1. INTRODUCTION

As any other social activity, sports are structured by gender and constitute a strongly male dominated system. It is clear that women's and men's sports receive different treatment by the media, organizations, and audiences (Pfister, 2010). The relevance of sexual differences has led to the increase in feminist studies since the 1980s (Bruce, 2016; Connell, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Thorpe et al., 2017), highlighting the patriarchal character of sports, and the centrality of the sexuality of women in sport as a devaluation strategy (Burton, 2015). Hargreaves and Vertinsky (2007) evidenced the relevance of the connection between body, sexuality and oppression. Precisely, one of the most frequent images of women athletes is one that presents their body in a highly sexualized manner (Wannenbergh, 2011), something that has been appreciated, for example, in the study of marketing campaigns (McVey & Harrison, 2019) and in journalist narratives (Cooky et al., 2013) about sporting events. For some authors, this might be so due to the fact that, even nowadays, the image of sportswomen is viewed with a male perspective (Sherwood et al., 2016). As Sáinz de Baranda (2013) points out, when we refer to women in sport, both in text and in images or photographs, what is most promoted is everything that is related to, as the author says, 'feminine attributes': women are presented as decorative archetypes or as objects of desire. Obviously, focusing on the body of sportswomen is particularly appropriate when analysing how gender is installed in sport. But the strategies of sexualization are very varied, and all of them serve to trivialize female athletes (Cranmer et al., 2014). Beyond clothes, body positions and journalistic language, the sexualization could be used to analyse how it is interpreted by the population and what meaning they give to it, how people and audiences interpret it.

Based on the above research history and background, this study analyses comments generated about a gift set given to female winners of a squash championship, which included three items: a vibrator, an electric foot file

and hair removal wax. What is the meaning and response that this present generates in the audience? Our analysis was driven mainly by two research questions: a) what kinds of explanations/justifications are used when people comment on this gift? b) what type of attitudes were expressed?

1.1. Gender and Sexualization of female athletes

Despite the increase in the number of women engaged in sports, be it amateur or elite, their presence remains controversial. This is due to the fact that women continue to be linked to the concept of *femininity*, which is a way of not altering the gender order (Lenskyj, 1994, as cited in Román-San-Miguel & Núñez Domínguez, 2016), defend traditional roles and thus support anti-feminism. Besides, femininity might be viewed as a central factor to what we understand as heterosexual attractiveness, a code name for heterosexuality. In fact, women's participation in sports is controlled through their attire and a need to present a «heterosexist» image (Griffin, 1998), which is adjusted to the traditional appearance of femininity. So, even with the passage of time and more than a century later, heterosexuality is still a normative mechanism (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009, as cited in Román-San-Miguel & Núñez Domínguez, 2016).

Radical feminists, understood as a branch within the feminist movement that argues that the root cause of social inequality is patriarchy, defined as the system of male oppression of women (Millet, 2017), consider sexuality to be another area of men's domination over women, that is why several previous studies have set their focus on analyzing the overly sexualized presentation of female athletes (Daniels & Wartena, 2011). Existing research by Kim and Sagas (2014) showed how women in sports are sexually objectified in such images, as if they were fashion models, which means disregarding and diminishing their athletic identity. Thus, sexuality is one of the organizing principles in women's sports, and the perceptions of heterosexuality can clarify the ways in which female athletes are considered. Similarly, Darwin and Sagas (2017) found evidence of the prevalence of these sexualized representations of female athletes. These sexist images minimize the relationship between a woman's body and her athletic abilities; they shift attention away from their achievement, effort, and capacity. According to

Krane et al. (2004), it is clear that sportswomen who conform to societal expectations of femininity (i.e., embody hegemonic femininity) are granted privilege and power that are not afforded to female athletes perceived as masculine. While female athletes who successfully perform femininity gain social status and privilege, those deemed masculine are often labelled as social outcasts (Blinde & Taub, 1992) and face discrimination (Krane, 1997). Feminine women in sport enjoy advantages such as favourable media coverage, admiration from fans, and sponsorship opportunities (Kolnes, 1995; Krane, 2001; Pirinen, 1997).

Clearly, these mechanisms tend to reinforce the traditional female stereotypes, whether we are referring to athletes or not. Studies such as that conducted by Davis (2001) have identified two types of sexualization. One was considered harmless and non-objectifying, based on and motivated by the actual sporting activity. The second, on the other hand, is in fact objectifying since it focuses on particular body parts and poses with sexual undertones. While Davis connects the first type of sexualization to sexuality, the second is linked to sexualization. Taking this differentiation into consideration, any object related to a particular part of the body should be considered to be sexualizing. Therefore, how could a vibrator or a hair removal kit be considered an appropriate prize in a sports competition? How do people interpret it? What is the meaning they give it?

Sexualization is a domain that favors control and repression over women, not only because of its reductionism, but also because women's sexuality is highly influenced by the perspective of heterosexual men: sexual attractiveness is connected with the male gaze (a term coined by Laura Mulvey in 1975) and their conceptions of physical beauty. Of course, references to sexuality can also be viewed as a way of exploration, of obtaining pleasure and well-being. Some post-feminist tendencies combine this sexual attractiveness with self-assurance and self-assertiveness or empowerment. In addition, this is something in line with the new feminist generation (post-feminism) that aims to place emphasis on the autonomy and agency to women (Gill, 2008). An important element of the new social discourse post-feminist is that it is framed through a narrative of playfulness, freedom and, above all, choice (Anderson, 2015). In this way, we could be thinking about a new subject, about a new sexualized representation of heterosexually agentic

women. In fact, it is undeniable that the models of the female body are changing (Riley et al., 2022). This change comes to reinforce the idea that gender is a performative practice which reasserts heteronormativity (Butler, 1993). Heteronormativity refers to the fact that *real* men and women are considered heterosexual. According to Butler (1990), in a «heterosexual matrix» bodies are always interwoven into patriarchal discourses on sexuality, which substantially influence women's body construction. Women are often prized for their beauty and passivity, as objects of male sexual desire. This objectification implies that men focus primarily on a woman's sexual function when exposed to sexually objectified portrayals of female subjects. (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This increased focus on the body and on physical appearance could then imply that men lose sight of the personal and individual qualities of the sexually objectified target, therefore seeing them (women) as lesser human beings. This emphasis on women's bodies takes on the appearance of *progressivism* when the feminist sexual revolution is linked to the feminist sexual revolution. However, it is a sexist display of women's bodies based on the myth of free choice, which stems from a patriarchal model (De Miguel, 2015).

Our starting point is that gender relationships are not static but constantly evolving. Assuming that gender is inherently interactional, and that we can do, undo or re-do it (Oldham et al., 2017), all activity, events or behavior can also be analyzed in terms of this interactive criteria. Moreover, when individuals explain or make sense of an event, this action allows us to understand their position on certain issues or their stance on a controversial topic of debate (Billig, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the explanations and interpretations gathered from comments posted by online newspaper readers about the prize awarded to the female winners of a squash competition in Spain in 2019 and its relationship to the current confrontation in Spanish society between feminism and modern misogyny (Anderson, 2015).

2. METHOD

A thematic analysis was used to identify relevant patterns on the data set. This allows us to distinguish between semantic fields and how sentences

are used to construct meaning. We used the six phases of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Adopting a feminist approach, we first place more attention on semantic meaning, in order to identify the themes. Next, we investigate the relationships established between the themes and the degree of favorability that each one showed.

The analyzed comments come from 40 newspaper headlines. In line with the criteria of the qualitative studies, we included all those who covered the news item in the three days it appeared in the press and generated a post. Of them (see appendix I), three allude only to the controversy without specifically naming the objects that were given away, 37 mention the vibrator, and 19 of them also include the hair removal kit in the headline.

2.1. Procedure and data

The news item was published on May 20, 2019. One researcher collected data for this study from May 20, 2019 to May 22, 2019. We collected the headlines from both leading national and local newspapers. Additionally, among the selected newspapers, we find the Spanish sports newspaper *Marca*, which has the largest national audience.

A total of 40 headlines, from Spanish, Latin-American and British newspapers, were collected. Posted comments were collected on the three days following the publication of the headlines. The data set was 1,279 posts as comments to headlines. The considered data items were each individual post of the data set. Each data item was linked to the newspaper, grouped in a database and numbered to preserve the identity of the person commenting. In many cases, an avatar was used and, in others, the poster's real name. This undoubtedly hinders the performance of a reliable analysis of whether the comment was originally posted by a man or by a woman. In some cases, the comment appears to be an example of online trolling. This aspect and its consequences are not analyzed in this study.

2.2. Analysis

The analysis process involved two stages. The first stage entailed the development of a codebook based on the semantic meaning of keywords by means

of an inductive approach. In order to do so, each researcher involved in this study read the comments. In the second stage, we carried out a code grouping, relating the keywords with the sentence in which they appeared. This allowed us to articulate and refine the initial codebook, as well as to identify subthemes and themes. As a guideline for the formation of our subthemes, we used the textual devices identified in Meyers (1997) feminist discourse analysis of newspaper coverage of women. Meyers (1997) outlined textual devices that allow the meaning conveyed in stories to appear “commonsensical — that is, to reveal society’s predominant assumptions, values, myths, and stereotypes” (p. 13). Meyers argues that it is in the micro-level of news discourse that underlying meanings and ideologies can be ascertained through the use of certain devices. These devices include the concealment of ideas and facts that do not support dominant assumptions, over-completeness, vagueness, presuppositions, positive self-presentation, and negative other-presentation, which marginalizes individuals who represent challenges to the dominant ideology.

We closely read and paid particular attention to the assumptions regarding each post. After the individual coding, we collaborated in the creation of subthemes. We discarded those that did not resonate with all group members, and further refined common themes to incorporate the understanding of all researchers. Since our analysis is based on the semantic content of the comment, and is not concerned with the fine detail of the writing, there was little point in transcribing features.

With reference to the language we used, the analytical work was carried out in Spanish, although the material collected was later translated into English. This is the language we have chosen to present the results for the present study.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Subthemes identified

We first describe subthemes created from the collected data set. We then present the final themes, which allow for the summarizing and organizing of the comments’ content and show how these themes relate to each other in order to maintain two political and ideological positions. Given that in

Spanish both pronouns and adjectives have masculine and feminine forms, we incorporate this differentiation in brackets. Each comment is referenced by a headline number and followed by a comment number.

GENDER (OPPOSITE, BINARY)

This theme includes two social categories: women and men. Both categories are referred to by different words: she — woman, women, they (*ellas*) // he — man, men, they (*ellos*), male. As a dichotomy, binary and opposite, non-binary sex-gender realities are not named. This theme functions as an interpretative category enabling participants to do three things: a) to bring men into the situation b) structure their position as a speaker, c) criticize women and feminism. Besides, men appear in most comments only referred to by pronoun or noun:

- H1. 4. *I feel ashamed as a man.*
- H4.26. *Nothing for them.*
- H5. 54. *And no gifts for the men!!*
- H14.61. *They did not give a prize to the boys (males).*

Women are often referred to by using adjectives:

- H1.2. [...] *Modern and feminist women.*
- H3.2. [...] *Independent women, active woman, empowered woman.*
- H4.7. *No mature woman would be offended by that.*
- H6. 450; H28. 1. *Little modern women.*
- H12. 11. *They are pretending to be offended.*
- H23.5. *Offended puritans.*

This process of adjectivization allows and produces some consequences. Firstly, creates subtypes, and generates contrasts and differences that activate hidden or unnamed categories of women. In contrast, the image of a passive, dependent, traditional, unempowered, non-feminist woman is brought to this (con)text. In all cases, this heterogeneity is used negatively: it just serves to point out the unjustified or exaggerated complaint about the gift. As it is known, subtyping maintains and reinforces stereotypes — it serves to maintain stereotypes, as inconsistent information is mentally represented separately and thus does not challenge the stereotype (Richards & Hewstone, 2001). Another reason for these gender subcategories is to understand their

role in maintaining the *status quo* (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Nevertheless, the terms used to describe men are the same with a unique global categorization. The absence of subtyping presents them as a unitary and homogeneous category, in which all members are equal. Secondly, it allows critic feminism through irony and the use of the concepts that articulate it. This action is characteristic of the new form to express misogyny. The logic behind most comments is that this *modern women* should not be offended by receiving a vibrator as a gift. Following sexual liberation, clearly referencing feminism, all women should accept it as a normal present.

In addition, the characterization of these two groups was made around gender stereotypes by, for example, stating that men are less *sensitive* than women:

H6.15. *Women are offended by everything.*

H6. 241. [...] *They (women) are repressed.*

This implies that they (men) are not repressed and who are not offended. These comments show one of the two types of sexism identified in the theory of ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996): a hostile sexism, which manifests his domineering and hostile views towards women.

OFFENSE (OPPOSITE, BINARY)

This subtheme is articulated around the meaning attached to the additional prize. It is also constructed from two different points of view related to presence/absence. While one regarding the presence as offensive towards women, the other considering the absence a manifestation of discrimination towards men. The following comments were made:

H1.1 *It is outrageous and pathetic.*

H6.40; H10.9; H14.52 *It is an insult and a shame.*

H6.125 *It is humiliating, patriarchal. Completely unfortunate.*

H11.2 *Twisted, perverse, childish, macho petty, stingy, patriarchal.*

H39.1. *Really unacceptable, [...] completely offensive. Entirely buries the phenomenal merit of female athletes*

The focus of this point is the relationship between the gift (object) and sports women (subject). The axis of indignation in this case is built around patriarchal sexuality.

Other comments consider discrimination against men, since they (sportmen) received no additional gift. The justification of discrimination in this case is built around the absence of gifts for men. Again, we could identify the other factor of hostile sexism: competitive difference.

H4.21. *They [boys] are discriminated against as they did not receive anything extra.*

H6.144. *They are the ones being discriminated against (men).*

H23.20. *It is unfair to them.*

These expressions of complaint are common in the discourse against feminism, which is now accused of attempting to discriminate against men in favour of women. To justify their alleged discrimination they rely on absence, although no post indicates that they might receive it. The same pack or another one? Thus, discrimination is focused on the quantity of things received and not on the relationship between what is received and who receives it. This false parallelism of men being discriminated against is often expressed through humor and jokes. This strategy is generally a way to express or manage some taboos, or inappropriate sentences socially considered as immoral, racist, or sexist. For example, rudeness is regularly a matter of laughter. People may be outraged by social infractions, but they can also laugh at certain episodes, and take pleasure in something inappropriate being said. This pleasure derived from observing a social infraction is a sign of a desire to break the social codes of politeness that restrain social actors (Billig, 2009).

Some examples of this play can be appreciated in sentences such as:

H1.4. H14.61. *Nothing for them [men].*

H3.4;H3.7. *I'm confused!! Is the discrimination that only some of the sports-women were given a gift and not all?*

H4.28. *Sexist discrimination toward men.*

H5.55. *Positive discrimination toward men.*

H12.19. *Scandalous discrimination against men.*

POLITICS (OPPOSITE/BINARY)

The majority of comments in this subtheme involves an attack on feminism, on officials and on left-wing parties, and it also criticizes the director of

the Asturian Women's Institute for demanding the resignation of the club directors. This woman is a member of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE, by its acronym in Spanish). Comments were as follows:

- H4.9. [...] *Purple shirts bring us to dictatorship.*
- H4.23. *Bring back the Female Inquisition.*
- H6.146. *We see this type of feminism every day.*
- H6.171. *Spanish left wants to divide us, the left divides.*
- H6. 271. [...] *This is a form of selling gender ideology.*
- H6.316. *The inquisition tells us what is good or bad.*
- H12.52. *New feminism.*
- H27.1. *Irrational feminist.– lefty feminism.*

In addition, other types of comments exonerate the right-wing:

- H5.106. *Luckily it is not from a Popular Party government.*

Furthermore, given that it is also perceived as discrimination towards men, there should be a public organism that defends the rights of men:

- H4.27. *I'm going to set up the Institute of Men now!!*

This subtheme, which exemplifies the ideological backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1991, 2009), reproduces the discourse of the new extreme right parties in Spain, whose members consider equality laws for women inadequate, arguing that they are in fact against men. These comments state the loss of the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995).

On the other hand, a small number of comments view the action as sexist and advocate for increased education, and believe institutions should safeguard against complaints:

- H1.1. *They must demand responsibilities.*
- H1.3. *How much is still to be done!*
- H5.37; H5.44; H.6.131; H38. 2. *It seems insulting.*
- H12.9. *Lack of education.*

PATRIARCHAL SEXUALITY (OPPOSITION/BINARY)

This subtheme includes comments focusing on the sexual aspect of the gift: its functionality, size and widespread use. Body and sexuality are here perfectly interconnected in a matrix, where the body and the physical practice

of sex are perceived mostly from a heterosexual conception that is part of the social imaginary. Different types of sexual toys are named, both for women and men, reenacting again the duality of the bodies and their different ways of obtaining pleasure. In addition to the identification of the heterosexual imaginary, we also find a model of coitus-centric. It is assumed that men need a vagina and women need a penis in order to develop their sexuality (or to achieve pleasure). The reference to complementarity of the body is also obvious:

H4.6. *6 If it had been a competition between guys and they had been given inflatable dolls as gifts, there would have been some laughs and nothing else.*

This comment highlights the gender of the sex toy (inflatable dolls), implying a heterosexual model and objectifying the woman:

H4.27. [...] *there are vibrator penises for women and also vibrator vaginas for men,*

H5.30. *Don't those who gave the awards know that just as there are vibrating penises for women use, there are also vibrating vaginas to be used by men?*

This recalls the image of penetration between a man and a woman. This comment makes other sexual practices invisible:

H5.97. *A canned vagina for them [men])*

H6.193. *But could they choose the size of vibrator or not?*

H6.302. *For them inflatable dolls or vibrating vaginas.*

H28.1. *It is inappropriate as you do not know what size she feels more comfortable with*

In these previous comments, the function of this theme is not merely declarative: it is another way of denying a sexist action. The trivialization of the offence appears by resorting to sarcasm: the size they want or wish for. Likewise, size is a constant reference in the traditional model of masculinity that informs us more about their fears than women's satisfaction.

In addition, a consideration about false morality, prudery and sanctimoniousness appears in some comments in order to criticize people who have perceived the vibrator as a sexist gift:

H4.4.– *But, is the Vibrator forbidden or dangerous??*

H5.55. *So much time laughing at the priests because they said that masturbating was a sin and covering sexuality with obscurantism, and now the progressives come with the same.*

H23.3. *But, are people who use sex toys depraved?*

Again, in this subtheme, as in the previous ones, there is an explicit critique of feminism, which appears in sentences where feminism and empowerment are the subject. For example:

H6.190. *A dildo is precisely the feminist symbol par excellence, [...] a sign of rejection of the oppressive heteropatriarchal white phallus.*

H6.76. *But feminists give free courses (paid for with taxes) on how to live female sexuality alone as that apparently empowers them.*

H5.65. *Nobody complains when feminist groups offer courses on masturbation.*

H3.2. *That is the destiny of an empowered woman: a vibrator.*

H6.125. *But a vibrator empowers...*

H5.19. *Is it not progressive and empowering to give women an instrument of self-satisfaction?*

H20.2. *They still complain even after receiving prizes that empower them...*

These comments exemplify the new patriarchal rhetoric, which self-servingly misrepresents the concept of empowerment in order to defuse it. It thus conforms to the neoliberal individualist model and distances it from its political meaning (Lagarde, 2014).

Finally, the vibrator is related to happiness and men's supposed concern for women's welfare:

H3.10. *Well, even if men worry about their (the women's) happiness, they complain, they are never satisfied with anything.*

H5.89. *Can a woman not give herself joy?*

In the latter two sentences we could appreciate a form of benevolent sexism, often expressed, as in this case, in appearing to care for and protect women. In particular, these posts would be an example of so-called protective paternalism (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

CONTEX (OPPOSITION/BINARY)

This subtheme is organized around the public/private difference. That dichotomy allows accepting the vibrator as a private gift (only girls party/bridal shower party) but not appropriate in a public context (gift in sports):

H14.35. [...] *It is not sexist to see it (a plastic penis) in a group of young people at a bachelorette party.*

H23.18. *Your friends at a bridal shower party can give it to you.*

H4.16. *It is not the best gift in these circumstances. Women use vibrators, it is very normal, the problem is the context.*

H5.17. *They receive them at bachelorette parties.*

T35.1. *This gift is out of place.*

T5. 105. *I don't see bad intentions. Just unfortunate!!*

T6.6. *No sense of timing or context [...] It could be a joke among friends!!*

T6.69. *It is not a bad gift in a private context.*

T6.209. *It is sexist because of the context.*

In this way, the public sphere (political) is separated from the personal (private). This differentiation, characteristic of feminist denunciation of discrimination against women, functions here as an attenuator of the critique. It thus shifts the focus to an isolated object in a way that removes the sportswomen from the discourse/debate and allows the critique to be deactivated.

SPONSOR (UNITARY)

This subtheme deals with sponsors and contains a justification for the gift. The explanation given is that if the sponsoring company happened to be Durex (a world famous brand of condoms and lubricants), this type of gift would be totally normal. Accepting advertising from a sponsor means the company is protected from allegations of sexism:

HT4.4. *If the sponsor were Durex, what would you expect?*

H5.64. *If the sponsor were Durex it wouldn't be amiss.*

H12.35. *If the sponsor were Durex, what would you receive?*

H14.5. *What would the company give you?*

H14.58. *Chosen for the sake of it yes, wrong. Provided by the sponsor, well, okay.*

H33.1. *Sponsors market their products.*

H.21.4. *What's wrong with sponsoring an event?*

H34.13. *If the sponsor were Durex, it is what it is.*

H34.25. *They have received a gift by sponsors.*

Oddly enough, almost all comments made reference to the vibrator, with only one referring to the wax kit (which belonged to another brand).

H5.16. *Laser hair removal wouldn't have been better, would it?*

This theme is the only one expressed as unitary and there is no controversy or accusation against the company. As Nancy Fraser (2015) has pointed out, the hegemony of neoliberalism, together with its acceptance of liberal feminism, fosters popular acceptance of any kind of enterprise, entrepreneurship or economic activity, regardless of any other criteria than the market.

These subthemes can be grouped into three themes: new misogyny, sexist outrage and corporate advocacy. The first of these is an exponent of the anti-feminism incorporated by extreme right-wing political groups that present men as the new victims of equality policies and feminism. The argumentative strategies identified by the theory of ambivalent sexism converge in this theme. The factors of hostile sexism and benevolent sexism have been identified in the different comments. Another strategy used was alter and distort the meaning of feminist theoretical conceptualisation in favour of a clear disqualifying intention.

The second theme includes defense of feminist postulates, mention of the offensive meaning of the award, appeals to the need for education, and expressions of indignation at the fact. It should be noted that none of the comments used the word feminist to criticize the prize.

Finally, we identify another theme, corporate advocacy, in which the company is exonerated by justifying its sponsorship. Furthermore, the public/private distinction is included in this theme since it works as a mechanism to reduce the negative assessment of the vibrator and the company.

4. DISCUSSION

The presence of women in sports still generates controversy. One of the most debated aspects has traditionally been related to the sexualization of athletes (Hargreaves & Anderson, 2014). This study set out to investigate the different interpretations of a prize awarded to the female winners of a squash tournament. Awarding a vibrator and a wax kit is, regardless of your judgment, a performative practice which places women athletes under the male dominated athletic patriarchy of sports. The process of performing gender requires the individual actors to constantly update and reproduce it. However, this performing gender is not only solitary but collaboratively accomplished. It can thus be suggested that the aforementioned prize makes

these women be seen as sex objects and not as athletes. According to the objectification theory, by awarding this prize, we assume that the observer's perspective is prioritizing the body and specifically refers to two actions: one of an aesthetic nature and the other of a sexual nature. The squash team disappears; the group activity is, therefore, hidden, — what is perceived is a body which is rewarded with an aesthetic element (depilatory kit) and a sexual one (vibrator) which updates the patriarchal feminization. As other studies have shown (Kleinman, 2007), it is common for women to receive discriminatory behavior in a male context, which tells them they are primarily women. In this case the message is that they may be good athletes, but they are women first of all. In sports, the winners raise a trophy or wear a medal. How could a vibrator or a depilatory kit possibly be hanging around the neck?

In order to identify the interpretations given to this prize, we analyzed the comments generated from readers reacting to the newspaper headlines. Our analysis allows, throughout this example, to identify the ideological reaction to feminism as it is elaborated, and to show how social discourse is today organized around the issue of women's equality. As Faludi (1991, 2009) has written, the war against women and the accusation that feminism promotes gender hatred have become more virulent in recent decades. Denying discrimination against women and mocking feminism have become frequent rhetorical strategies of the far right. The opposite position, in defense of women's rights, appears with less diversity of arguments and lacking the aggression expressed by the first.

These contradictory interpretations reflect the polarization of the current Spanish society around gender equality and feminism. Although the government, and most political parties, defend themselves, the far right and certain social sectors openly criticize the feminist agenda and equality policies. What was identified by researchers such as Gill (2008) as the discourse of empowerment within the neoliberal model of the subject, is used by those who do not criticize the award. The new liberalism needs to present itself as progressive and thus neutralise its regressive essence (Fraser, 2015), capitalist, individualist, which is why it does not hesitate to adopt the idea of (individual) empowerment as the correct way to accept meritocracy.

Special attention should be paid to the use of *false parallels* in the positions of new misogyny. These statements draw erroneous analogies between the experiences of the oppressed group and the advantaged group (Johnson, 2014). False parallels are a usual way of allowing the reinforcement of inequality. When someone says that men and women are both oppressed, they render the history of oppression invisible and erase current inequalities. As Johnson (2014) states, false parallels allow people to think of themselves as fair and, at the same time, maintain privileges and sexist practices. A number of comments were elaborated by following this strategy. Moreover, the statement that men are also suffering or losing rights, shifts attention away from patriarchy and women, and redirects the focus towards men in an emotional way, which reinforces male centeredness in the discourse. In this process, men are portrayed as victims of prejudice, which, on the surface, seems comparable to the sexism directed at women. Like many such false parallels, this ignores the fact that anti-female and anti-male prejudices have different social bases and create very different consequences (Johnson, 2014). This bias or error is now a common-sensical process that justifies the devaluation of women (Lorber, 1994), which is currently being used as a political argument by a particular far-right political party in Spain.

As Bruce (2016) has pointed out, compulsory heterosexuality and sexualization are persistent rules in the analysis of sportswomen. Faced with these norms that show sexism in sport, other strategies rise up to deny it. For instance, the denial of the extent of the problem or the rationalization of women's inequality, which results from their own choices and from the belief that they are not part of the problem (Rhode, 1997). In our data set we find these three strategies used by new misogyny. For example, the term *rights* was used in a specific rhetorical sense. In fact, men's rights are used as a rhetorical cover for male entitlement (Arendell, 1992). When used by the privileged, this may be a ploy to maintain privilege itself. This rhetoric also authorizes men to feel anger, an acceptable masculine emotion. Their anger is legitimate, even heroic, as they fight against non-perceived injustice. The argument used by feminism is now brandished by those who deny sexism: it is unfair to men.

According to Fine (1988), the suppression of women's sexuality echoes a general oppression of girls and is connected to the control exerted by the new

patriarchy. Can the award be considered a way of recognizing the sexuality of women? As Tolman (2002) said, sexual desire is connected to sexual agency. Therefore, is this gift a way of recognizing the agency of women, their desire, pleasure and masturbation? Or, is it actually a way of signifying that athletes are women? In some sense could this gift break the female passivity stereotype? Could it be considered a sexist way to once again reduce women to just a body? The tendency towards sexualizing women in sports can sometimes be interpreted as a way of denying lesbianism. According to Krane (2018), for a long time, women's soccer carried with it the aura of homosexuality. Precisely, as a consequence of the perceived association of women's soccer with lesbianism in its early years, players now engage in a very deliberate process of heterosexual identity management that emphasizes their femininity and disassociates them from the aura of lesbianism. Thus, they would receive opportunities to have sponsors. As a result, the patriarchal mandate is assumed and imposed by women themselves. In any case, this focus on the body is nothing more than a manifestation of what Puleo (2005) calls the patriarchy of consent. The sexualization of contemporary culture has in part been enabled by a neoliberal rhetoric of agency, choice and self-determination, which within sexuality discourses has produced an *up for it* femininity, a sexually savvy and active woman who can participate appropriately in consumer practices (Attwood, 2006). In this sense, the concept of empowerment used by new misogyny obeys this neoliberal conception (Riley et al., 2022).

It is also interesting to note that only one sub-theme is non-binary: the *sponsor*. What could this mean? Given the relevance of the opposite-pairs in the subthemes, we will use some conceptualizations by Derrida (1982) to analyze them. In the opposite pairs, one appears as a center, force, and presence that is usually what we first name/write, while the second receives less attention. Deconstruction proceeds then to identify what justifies opposition. *Sponsor* subtheme is not presented as binary. This can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it is not a center, and therefore does not define a marginal, or, secondly, it can be interpreted as *unspeakable*. In this case, we could assimilate it to the *parergon*, which is defined as an accessory, something that appears as an exterior detail which, however, reveals something important in the text. If the deconstructive task wants to identify the unspeakable,

could we find it in the sponsor theme? In that sense, it would be a form of *differance*. First, as it differs in otherness, it does not have a margin. Could we think of it as an authentic, unquestionable presence? Second, as it defers debate, it avoids or even cancels discussion.

Although sexism has been criticized in different advertising campaigns around the world, why do they not criticize the use that organizers make of Durex products? Advocacy company is now sacrosanct, and unquestionable. Neoliberalism has found in liberal feminism an ally (Fraser, 2015) allowing it to reject women's inequality and sexism as long as they accept meritocratic individualism and shopping as a sign of empowerment, achievement.

In conclusion, this analysis highlights the social debate around women's equality and against feminist objectives. It is likely that some implicit elements of this controversy will be incorporated into the new social agenda, with the dangers it poses to women: the fight against discrimination targeting men, advocated by some political parties, and the political acceptance of a framework in which whoever provides the funding remains on the sidelines and out of the controversy.

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APPENDIX I. HEADLINES AND NEWSPAPERS

N.º	Headlines	Newspaper
1	A vibrator, the sexist gift to the squash champions of Asturias https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20190520/462368762815/vibrador-sexista-regalo-squash-asturias.html	La Vanguardia
2	The winners of the Asturias squash championship receive a vibrator as a prize https://www.elconfidencial.com/deportes/otros-deportes/2019-05-20/campeonato-squash-asturias-premio-vibrador_2011522/	El Confidencial
3	A vibrator, the gift that squash champions have received https://www.elperiodico.com/es/sociedad/20190520/asturias-campeonas-squash-vibrador-7464530	El Periódico
4	Scandal for awarding vibrators to four squash winners in Asturias https://www.elcomercio.es/asturias/regalan-vibradores-ganadoras-squash-asturias-20190521001623-ntvo.html	El Comercio
5	The gift of a vibrator to the winners of the Asturias Squash Championship leads the Principality to take action https://www.elcomercio.es/asturias/ganadoras-campeonato-squash-20190520132903-nt.html	El Comercio
6	Awarded with a vibrator and depilatory wax https://elpais.com/sociedad/2019/05/20/actualidad/1558376473_024784.html	El País
7	A trophy and a vibrator: these are the prizes that the winners of the Asturias Squash Championship received https://www.lavozdeasturias.es/noticia/asturias/2019/05/20/trofeo-vibrador-premios-ganadoras-campeonato-squash-asturias/00031558353710401916774.htm	La Voz de Asturias

N.º	Headlines	Newspaper
8	Controversial gift to the Squash champions of Asturias: A waxing set and a vibrator! https://www.mundodeportivo.com/otros-deportes/20190520/462370429696/un-set-de-depilacion-y-un-vibrador-para-las-campeonas-de-asturias-de-squash.html	Mundo Deportivo
9	The winners of the Asturias Squash Championship receive a vibrator as a prize https://www.abc.es/sociedad/abci-ganadoras-campeonato-squash-asturias-reciben-como-premio-vibrador-201905201454_noticia.html	ABC
10	A vibrator and depilatory bands, the prizes for the squash champions of Asturias https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/vibrador-depilatorias-premios-campeonas-Asturias_0_901160813.html	Eldiario.es
11	A vibrator as a «gift» for the winners of the Asturias Squash Championship 2019 https://diario16.com/un-vibrador-como-regalo-para-las-ganadoras-del-campeonato-de-asturias-de-squash-2019/	Diario16
12	The most sexist and shameful prize in sport: a vibrator and a waxing kit https://www.marca.com/otros-deportes/2019/05/20/5ce2d43dca4741f13b8b462a.html	Marca
13	Controversy over the gift of a vibrator to the winners of a Squash tournament in Oviedo https://www.elcorreo.com/deporte-femenino/otros-deportes/regalo-vibrador-ganadoras-20190520163105-nt.html	El Correo
14	A vibrator and a waxing kit as a prize for the squash champions of Asturias https://www.elmundo.es/deportes/mas-deporte/2019/05/20/5ce30090fc6c83285a8b46ae.html	El Mundo
15	A vibrator, the award received by the winners of the Asturias Squash Championship https://www.lespanol.com/deportes/otros-deportes/20190520/vibrador-premio-recibieron-ganadoras-campeonato-squash-asturias/399960702_0.html	El Español

N.º	Headlines	Newspaper
16	So many years of training and effort to earn a vibrator? https://www.lavozdegalicia.es/noticia/sociedad/2019/05/22/tantos-anos-entrenamiento-esfuerzo-ganar-vibrador/0003_201905G22P25991.htm	La Voz de Galicia
17	A vibrator and a waxing set, gifts for the squash champions of Asturias https://www.republica.com/2019/05/20/vibrador-squash-sexismo/	República
18	Three directors of the Squash Federation of Asturias resign after «rewarding» four championship winners with vibrators https://www.infolibre.es/noticias/politica/2019/05/21/dimiten_tres_directivos_federacion_squash_asturias_tras_premiar_con_vibradores_cuatro_ganadoras_campeonato_95178_1012.html	Info Libre
19	Rein censors the delivery of vibrators as a prize to squash players https://www.heraldo.es/noticias/nacional/2019/05/23/rienda-censura-la-entrega-de-vibradores-como-premio-a-jugadoras-de-squash-1316513.html	Heraldo
20	The winners of the Asturias Squash Championship outraged because they were awarded a vibrator and depilatory wax https://www.mibrujula.com/ganadoras-campeonato-asturias-squash-premiadas-vibrador-cera-depilatoria/	Mi Brújula
21	A vibrator, the controversial first prize in a women's squash championship https://www.bbc.com/mundo/deportes-48350520	BBC
22	«Sexist and out of place»: Squash championship winners received depilatory wax and vibrators as prizes https://www.eldesconcierto.cl/2019/05/23/sexista-y-fuera-de-lugar-ganadoras-de-campeonato-de-squash-recibieron-cera-depilatoria-y-vibradores-como-premio/	El Desconcierto
23	The squash club that gave dildos to players apologizes and considers its possible dissolution https://www.elcomercio.es/asturias/club-squash-regalo-vibradores-20190521124051-nt.html	El Comercio

N.º	Headlines	Newspaper
24	The men received trophies: Squash champions were awarded with a vibrator and depilatory wax https://www.cnnchile.com/mundo/los-hombres-recibieron-trofeos-campeonas-de-squash-fueron-premiadas-con-un-vibrador-y-cera-depilatoria_20190522/	CNN Chile
25	A women's tournament delivers vibrators to the champions https://www.lavanguardia.com/deportes/otros-deportes/20190523/462424341803/csd-vibradores-squash.html	La Vanguardia
26	Women received a vibrator and depilatory creams as a prize https://www.pronto.com.ar/articulo/famosos/mujeres-recibieron-premio-vibrador-crema-depilatoria/20190522101801324748.html	Pronto
27	Outrajeus! Squash Champions are «awarded» with vibrator and depilator https://www.crhoy.com/deportes/indignante-premian-con-vibradores-y-crema-depiladora-a-campeonas-de-squash/	CrHoy
28	Gifts for women https://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/noticia/opinion/2019/06/10/agasallos-mulleres/0003_201906G10P12994.htm	La Voz de Galicia
29	The controversial first prize in a women's squash championship in Spain https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/mundo/el-polemico-primer-premio-en-un-campeonato-femenino-de-squash-en-espana	El Universal
30	Spanish government pronounces after awarding vibrators as prizes to squash champions http://gerente.com/cl/new-rss/gobierno-espanol-se-pronuncia-tras-entrega-de-vibradores-como-premio-a-campeonas-de-squash/	Gerente

CAROLINA VÁZQUEZ RODRÍGUEZ, CARMEN MARTÍNEZ MARTÍNEZ, INÉS HERÁS, MAITE
MARTÍN-ARAGÓN GELABERT & M.^a CARMEN TEROL CANTERO
Analysis of the Criticism and Defense of Feminism in Social Discourse:
A Case of Patriarchal Protection in Sports

N.º	Headlines	Newspaper
31	Controversy over gifts in a squash championship: a waxing set and a vibrator https://www.ultimahora.es/deportes/otros-deportes/2019/05/20/1081477/polemica-por-regalos-campeonato-squash-set-depilacion-vibrador.html	Última Hora
32	Not to believe: they awarded a vibrator and epilators to squash champions https://www.lacuarta.com/deportes/noticia/campeonas-de-squash-vibrador/369265/	La Cuarta
33	The prize for the squash champions in Asturias: erotic toys and a waxing set https://www.libertaddigital.com/deportes/mas-deporte/2019-05-20/el-premio-a-las-campeonas-de-squash-en-asturias-juguetes-eroticos-y-un-set-de-depilacion-1276638726/	Libertad Digital
34	The squash club that awarded women with vibrators studies dissolving after the scandal https://www.elcomercio.es/asturias/club-squash-premio-jugadoras-vibradores-pide-perdon-estudia-disolucion-20190522001957-ntvo.html#comments	El Comercio
35	Unusual: Squash championship winners receive prizes for dildos, epilators and electric files https://www.theclinic.cl/2019/05/22/insolito-ganadoras-de-campeonato-de-squash-reciben-de-premio-consoladores-depiladores-y-limas-electricas/	The Clinic
36	A vibrator and a waxing kit, prizes for women for winning a squash championship https://www.larazon.es/sociedad/un-vibrador-y-un-kit-de-depilacion-premios-para-mujeres-por-ganar-un-campeonato-de-squash-LH23423594#disqus_thread	La Razón
37	Squash championship winners were awarded a vibrator and depilatory wax https://www.elspectador.com/noticias/actualidad/ganadoras-de-campeonato-de-squash-fueron-premiadas-con-un-vibrador-y-cera-depilatoria-articulo-861792	El Espectador

N.º	Headlines	Newspaper
38	Squash champions came out and «rewarded» them with a vibrator and depilatory wax https://www.lanueva.com/nota/2019-5-21-14-24-0-salieron-campeonas-de-squash-y-las-premiaron-con-un-vibrador-y-cera-depilatoria	La Nueva
39	Awarded with a trophy and a vibrator https://www.pagina12.com.ar/195427-premiadas-con-un-trofeo-y-un-vibrador	Página 12
40	They won a squash tournament and received a vibrator, depilatory wax and a kit for corns https://noticias.caracol.com/deportes/ganaron-torneo-de-squash-y-de-premio-recibieron-un-vibrador-cera-depilatoria-y-kit-para-callos	Noticias Caracol