

Gender Disparities in the Finnish Tabloid Iltalehti's FIFA World Cup Reporting:  
A Comparative Study of Men's and Women's Tournaments

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## **Abstract**

The underrepresentation or unfair portrayal of women in sports has been an issue since women started participating in sports. From Ancient Greece, where concerns were raised about the aesthetics of women engaging in sports, to the European Championships of 2009, where women were ranked based on appearance, women have fought for appreciation, acknowledgment, and recognition for their athletic achievements. This thesis examines how the Finnish news site Iltalehti covered the Women's 2023 World Cup compared to the Men's 2022 World Cup reporting, identifying any gendered disparities, underlying ideologies, and patterns of inequality. To do this, articles will be analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess differences in their quantity and content. With the use of discourse analysis, this thesis will explore how these articles contribute to the perseverance of dominant hegemonic masculinity in the field of sports, as well as how they reinforce gendered stereotypes within football.

The findings recognize how Iltalehti provides space and recognition for women's football while also taking a stance against gender inequality. Importantly, Iltalehti avoids resorting to the oversexualization, infantilization, and trivialization of women athletes, which are common findings in related research. However, significant disparities between the coverage of the two tournaments were found, indicating that Iltalehti does place greater emphasis on men's game, their athletic abilities, and the overall greatness of male football. Despite participating in the rightful discussion of gender inequality in football, Iltalehti lacks concrete actions to narrow the gap between genders by neglecting to treat the two tournaments equally. This perpetuates the issue of media's underrepresentation and further reinforces the perception of women's football as less interesting, therefore contributing to the larger societal issue of harmful gendered stereotypes.

## Tiivistelmä

Naisten vähäinen tai epäreilu edustus urheilumediassa on ollut ongelma siitä lähtien, kun naiset alkoivat kilpailla urheilussa. Jo antiikin Kreikassa heräsi huoli naisten urheilun esteettisyydestä, ja tämä sama ilmiö jatkui vuoden 2009 jalkapallon Euroopan mestaruuskisoissa, missä naisia arvosteltiin ulkonäkönsä perusteella. Naiset ovat siis joutuneet taistelemaan saadakseen arvostusta, tunnustusta sekä huomiota urheilullisten saavutustensa ansiosta jo tuhansien vuosien ajan. Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee, miten suomalainen aikakauslehti Iltalehti raportoi naisten vuoden 2023 jalkapallon maailmanmestaruuskisoista verrattuna miesten vuoden 2022 maailmanmestaruuskisoihin, tunnistuen sukupuoleen perustuvia eroavaisuuksia, piileviä ideologioita sekä epätasa-arvon merkkejä. Tätä varten artikkeleita analysoidaan käyttäen kvantitatiivista sekä kvalitatiivista tutkimusmenetelmää määrällisten ja laadullisten eroavaisuuksien havainnoimiseksi. Diskurssianalyysin avulla selvitetään miten artikkelit edistävät hegemonista maskuliinisuutta urheilussa ja vahvistavat sukupuolellisia stereotypioita jalkapallossa.

Tutkimustulokset tunnistavat, kuinka Iltalehti antaa naisten jalkapalloseuralle tilaa ja tunnustusta, samalla ottaen kantaa sukupuolten väliseen epätasa-arvoon. On tärkeää, että Iltalehti välttää naisten yliseksualisointia, etunimellä puhuttelua sekä vähättelyä, jotka ovat tyypillisiä löydöksiä vastaavissa tutkimuksissa. Selkeitä eroavaisuuksia turnausten raportoinnissa siitä huolimatta havaittiin, osoittaen kuinka Iltalehti asettaa suuremman painoarvon miesten jalkapalloseuralle, miesten suorituksille, sekä yleisesti miesjalkapallon merkitykselle. Vaikka Iltalehti osallistuu keskusteluun sukupuolten välisestä epätasa-arvosta, se ei kuitenkaan käytä paljon konkreettisia keinoja kaventaakseen sukupuolten välillä olevaa kuilua kohtelemalla turnauksia yhdenvertaisesti. Tämä ylläpitää ongelmaa naisten vähäisestä edustuksesta mediassa sekä edistää ennakkoluuloja, jotka pitävät naisten jalkapalloa vähemmän kiinnostavana, vahvistaen näin suurempaa sosiaalista ongelmaa sukupuoleen perustuvista stereotypioista.

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## **1 Introduction**

“Mass media is a powerful factor which influences our beliefs, attitudes, and the values we have of ourselves and others as well as the world surrounding us” (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998, p. 589). Media hold significant power with its ability to construct meaning, mirror societal values, and actively shape whose stories and voices are heard (Antunovic & Bartoluci, 2023). Media’s influence extends to societal issues, including the perpetuation of gender stereotypes by upholding and contributing to attitudes that can control the minds of readers (Van Dijk, 1995). In the field of sports reporting, this usually translates to male dominance and lack of gender diversity, an occurrence even in a country such as Finland, renowned for its high rank in terms of gender equality (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019).

With this power comes possibilities. While media has the potential to perpetuate gender inequality in the field of sports, it also has the ability to initiate change and address the age-old underrepresentation of women in sports. A study by Cooky et al. (2013) observed that the coverage of women’s sports has been declining, suggesting a lack of significant change in future reporting unless big systematic changes are implemented within organizations and mass media. Given that the underrepresentation of women is often measured in comparison to the “overrepresentation” of men, this thesis will also look into the ways in which the reporting of the 2023 Women’s World Cup differs from the 2022 Men’s World Cup (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 207). Due to Finland’s high rank in gender equality, this study will be conducted in a Finnish setting as the results will provide a starting point, offering insight into the issue’s scale.

This thesis aims to identify and analyze the possible differences in reporting men’s and women’s FIFA World Cups on the Finnish news site Iltalehti. It also seeks to identify disparities in the amounts dedicated to both tournaments and the theme distribution within the reporting. Additionally, the study will examine the qualitative variations in articles by focusing on tone creation, language usage, and any underlying gender stereotypical assumptions or biases. By focusing on these qualitative and quantitative elements, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the tournaments’ reporting on Iltalehti, highlighting any differences in gender representation.

## 2 Background

This section will offer an overview of the development of women's sports from ancient Greece to a more modern state while also examining the challenges and developments in the media coverage of women's sports throughout the years. In addition, a few words are said about the current state of women's football on a global scale and within Finland. Based on this background information, this thesis will analyze the current state of representation of women in football-related media.

### 2.1 *Women's sport*

Women have climbed the ladder of equality in the field of sport for centuries. Women have fought for equal rights in the masculine field in terms of media coverage and participation rates, pay differentials, training conditions and facilities, professionalism, leadership opportunities, and stereotypes (Rowe & Silva, 2023; Schailée et al., 2021). The first records of women participating in sports trace back to ancient Greece, but the opportunities remained very limited due to medical, aesthetic, and social rationales concerned about women's reproductive health, the unattractiveness of women participating in sports, and the loss of femininity (Schultz, 2018).

The fight for gender equality took a massive stride when, in 1972, a pivotal amendment for gender equality, Title IX, was suggested to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting any exclusion from education programs or activities that receive federal funding based on the participants' sex, contributing to a dramatic increase in the participation of girls and women in sport (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). After the legislation, the amount of high school female athletes went up from 7% to 41% between 1971 and 2011, while the amount of female college athletes reached 45% of the total amount of college athletes (Vadhera, 2018). Furthermore, in 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women to promote women's rights and equality on a global scale (OHCHR, n.d.). However, despite these legislations and efforts towards a more gender-equal society, it was not until the 2020 Tokyo Olympics that the first gender-equal Olympic Games were achieved with 48,8% female participation (IOC, 2020).

The gendered differences between sports are still evident in many aspects of sports, including distance lengths, the number of sets per game, equipment weight, and uniforms (Schultz, 2018). These regulations easily reinforce the idea of women as "inferior" and incapable of performing the same way as men and raise questions about the necessity of these gendered distinctions,

fuelling the debate of “sex segregation” (Schultz, 2018, p. 68). Whether these distinctions promote or hinder the status of women’s sports, persistent stereotypes in sports still exist, causing certain sports to be classified and perceived as more feminine and masculine and, therefore, influencing people’s participation and reinforcing these gender stereotypes further (Cooky & Messner, 2018; Schultz, 2018). Despite the increasing amount of female athletes, these stereotypes, restricted possibilities, systematic challenges, lack of equipment, and political or cultural backgrounds continue to impact women’s engagement in sports today (Cooky, 2018, p. 260; Cooky et al., 2016; Shultz, 2018).

Despite these challenges, women’s sports are noticeably shifting towards better recognition and acknowledgment as a result of growing interest and popularity. The viewership of women’s sports has been increasing for the past years with the expansion of women’s leagues and tournaments (Rowe & Silva, 2023). In the UK alone, the viewership of women’s sports increased from 19 million to 43 million within a decade (Rowe & Silva, 2023). Similarly, in the US, the viewership of the WNBA 2023 season increased by 21% from the previous year (WNBA, 2023). Additionally, in particular interest to this thesis, the on-site attendance of FIFA Women’s World Cup’s first round grew by 29% compared to the previous tournament in 2019 (FIFA, 2023).

## **2.2 *Media coverage on women’s sports***

The lack of media coverage for women’s sports remains a significant challenge and fails to align with the growth in women’s participation and viewership numbers. As an example of this, the female representation in the 1990s on Sports Illustrated was not only limited but devalued and overly sexualized athletes, diminishing the role of women in the field of sports (Lumpkin, 2009, as cited in Schmidt, 2016). During this time, Lumpkin (2009) researched that only 9,7% of coverage was dedicated to women on Sports Illustrated while the remaining 89,9% remained reserved for men (Cooky et al., 2013). In 1982, a study proved how sports have been conditioned into “hegemonic masculinity,” a concept that recognizes men as the “dominant cultural force that exercises control over others” (Connell, 1987, as cited in Schmidt, 2016, p. 277). This concept focuses on masculinity and traits typically associated with it, such as power, authority, and aggression (Connell, 1987). In addition to magazine coverage, a study investigating the television coverage of women between 1989 and 2004 resulted in only 5 to 9

percent of airtime on evening sports news and highlights on ESPN's SportsCenter (Cooky et al., 2013).

Contrary to the expected increase of media coverage in response to the growing numbers of women's sports, the media has proved not to follow this trend. Cooky et al. (2013) revealed that the television coverage of women's sports has actually dropped from the previous 9% to less than 2% on the SportsCenter in 2009, while the display of women on Sports Illustrated covers during the first century of the 2000s had dropped nearly 8 percent from 1990s (Weber & Carini, 2013, as cited in Fink, 2015). This trend has persisted in recent years, as a more recent study indicates that women's sports are framed "in the light of women," whereas men's equivalent events are viewed "in the light of the event" (Aull & Brown, 2013, p. 50). Moving from the 1990s to the 21st century, the New York Times, for example, has not increased the amount of media coverage given to women in the total amount of sports articles (Schmidt, 2016). Moreover, there is evidence that women's sports are still primarily centered only around major sporting events, with reporting being temporary and selective towards events and countries where success is more likely (Antunovic & Bartoluci, 2023; Rowe & Silva, 2023).

The inequality in sports coverage extends from mere quantity to the quality of the topics, themes, and approaches to women's news. Fink (2015) identifies common practices in female sports reporting that contribute to the derogatory representation of women athletes in the media. Gender marking enhances the male-dominated construction of the field by placing men's events and tournaments as the norm and women as only an addition signified by the addition of "women's" in the tournament's title (Messner et al., 1993, as cited in Fink, 2015). Infantilization involves referring to women as girls or by their first name, a reoccurring phenomenon in women's sports (Messner et al., 1993; Wensing & Bruce, 2003, as cited in Fink, 2015). The approach to women and male athletes also differs in the linguistic choices that prefer to highlight the strength and hard work of men while discussing the weakness and luck of women (Messner et al., 1993, as cited in Fink, 2015). Fink (2015) also points out studies examining the production styles of women's sports, which have resulted in portraying women's sports as less exciting with, for example, graphics and camera angles.

While these points raise concern about the current state and future of women's sports, these studies also raise awareness and promote a need for change. As another positive notion, a study has shown that sports program students from Generation Z (people born between 1997-2012) have recognized the male dominance in the field of sports and acknowledged the unequal media coverage between men and women in the quantity and quality of female athletes (Schailleé et



al., 2021). While this demonstrates the ingrained gender inequality in sports, it also offers hope as new generations are aware of this issue and, therefore, have the potential to enact change in the future.

### **2.3 *Women's football***

After bans and sanctions for participating in football, women's football has significantly grown in participation numbers and increased in media attention and popularity (Coche, 2022; FIFA, 2019). However, acknowledged even by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), women's football is "in need of a fundamental change" (FIFA, 2019, p. 4). While much progress has already been made since women were not allowed to participate in football, "years of institutional neglect and lack of investment" have kept the sport from developing and growing (p. 4). As a response, FIFA's Women's Football Strategy was launched in 2018 to increase women's participation numbers, develop the game's commercial value, and improve the foundations for more female participation and opportunities (FIFA, 2019). The strategy aims to achieve this by developing and growing the game, improving visibility, including more women in leadership positions, and educating, inspiring, and empowering women and girls through football (FIFA, 2019).

Since the 1999 World Cup, women's football has attracted viewers and media rapidly but still does not match the attention of men's football (Coche, 2022). The common misconception is that low media coverage of women's football results from people not viewing women's football as interesting as men's. Women's sports have been studied to suffer from gender bias and unfair comparison to men, which not only undervalues women's sport but fails to recognize women and their "uniqueness" (Micelotta et al., 2018, p. 120). However, a study by Gomez-Gonzalez et al. (2024) found that the study participants did not, in fact, rate men's football significantly higher than women's once gender information was hidden. Another study finding was that once participants knew who they were watching, men's videos received higher ratings, confirming that the stereotypes and gender biases are still very prominent regarding women's football (Gomez-Gonzalez et al., 2024). This finding repeals the misconception of women's football being less interesting and lacking quality, and therefore does not justify the lack of media representation.

In Finland, the popularity of women's football has followed the trend of the rest of the world, as there has been an increase in the amount of girls and women participating in the sport (Yle,

2022). According to Yleisradio (YLE), in 2018 and 2019, the Football Association of Finland made significant changes to improve female football status (Yle, 2022). In 2021, they decided to start supporting clubs further in their pursuit of growing participation numbers, strengthening structures and processes, and improving the coaching of girls' teams (Palloliitto, 2021). However, despite these recent initiatives, the success of women's football in Finland began long before this. Already in 2005, the Finnish national team advanced to European Championships, and afterwards hosted the European Championships in 2009. Despite this achievement, local media paid little attention to the pre-advertisement of the tournament (Turtiainen, 2010). Turtiainen (2010) also explains how, in Finland, media representation of female athletes has in the past been given based on athletes' feminine characteristics. For example, the achievements of Laura Österberg were highlighted in the light of her motherhood in both printed media and television broadcasts, while the appearance of many other Finnish players was a significant topic during the tournament (Turtiainen, 2010). Furthermore, as the Finnish team was eliminated from the tournament, the media's interest towards Finland and other teams vanished, reflecting on the lack of visibility for women's football even in Finland (Turtiainen, 2010).

Women's football and the media coverage it receives has improved since this, with the 2023 World Cup being described as "the biggest tournament women's football had ever seen," serving as "a pivotal moment for women's football," and leaving "transformational legacy for football" (Kelly, 2023; Pragnell, 2023; Lawson, 2023). The point of this study is to examine how the Finnish tabloid *Iltalehti* contributed to this said legacy, whether the reporting of women's football has improved since the 2009 European Championships, and how the Finnish media treats this historical event in comparison to men's tournament the year before.

### **3 Materials and Method**

This section will first introduce the theoretical framework of this thesis, discourse analysis, and explore the theory through the definition provided by Stephanie Taylor (2013). Next, the chosen magazine for the analysis, *Iltalehti*, will be discussed while highlighting its relevance and significance as a data source in this study. Furthermore, the article selection process for the analysis will be explained to provide insights into the data gathering.

#### **3.1 Discourse Analysis**

This study will employ discourse analysis to analyze the news articles in the online newspaper *Iltalehti*. The analysis aims to examine language and identify how it constructs meaning and contributes to more significant social phenomena and differences (Taylor, 2013). According to Taylor's definition, discourse analytic research "tend to converge particularly around the study of difference and inequality and the workings of power in society" (p. 2). With discourse analysis, this thesis will study how language contributes to the constructions of society and its norms by analyzing the structure, elements, and linguistic expressions of language in these articles.

Taylor (2013) discusses multiple concerns of discourse analysis, one of which aligns particularly well with the focus of this thesis. Language has the ability to construct meaning that can further contribute to the way society is built and how it establishes power relations (p. 10). The concept of "hegemonic masculinity," introduced in section 2.2, relates to the use of discourse analysis in the way it can study how language is used to create and uphold systems that create dominance over a particular group, in this instance, men. This "knowledge which have become accepted as truth" has been the focus point in studies of women's sport in the past and will be analysed in the context of Finnish news media in this thesis (p. 19).

It is common for discourse studies to be linked with various research contexts, two of which Taylor presents as prejudice and gender. Taylor (2013) discusses how discourse analysis can be used to examine how a group can be excluded, categorized, and valued, all of which are topics that have been points of interest in studies regarding women's sports and its media coverage. It is this gendered point of view that this thesis will investigate, aiming to find possible ways in which the chosen research materials exclude and frame women in sports. This study will draw upon previously discussed research, as discourse studies are inherently situated "within tradition of ongoing research" (Taylor, 2023, p. 50). This paper will therefore add to these prior studies and bring another point of view to the issue in a new, Finnish, context.

### **3.2 *Iltalehti***

This thesis will focus on the Finnish tabloid newspaper, *Iltalehti*, one of Finland's most-read online news sites. According to statistics from 2023, *Iltalehti* reaches nearly three million readers every week, offering its audience news about local and international matters, entertainment, and sports with its own sections also for health, cars, and money, among others (KTM, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the readership of *Iltalehti* reached over three million, making the newspaper an important topic for research with its significant influence on the reading habits of the Finnish population (*Iltalehti*, 2021). Despite its popularity, *Iltalehti* is not considered the most trustworthy news site in a survey conducted by Yle, in which tabloids such as *Iltalehti* received a rating of 5,7 out of 10 (Yle, 2021). As a site for the most trustworthy news, the participants voted Yleisradio as number one, suggesting that *Iltalehti* attracts its readers for reasons other than its reliability, such as easily readable, entertaining content. Regardless of the reason for *Iltalehti*'s popularity, the site inevitably plays a significant role in how Finnish people receive, view, and adopt attitudes toward its topics, which makes studying how the site reports women's football important.

The reason to choose *Iltalehti* as a point of study is enhanced by a study by Hovden and von der Lippe (2019), which discusses how, in such commercial newspapers, the need for profit is a significant contributor to the style of the content, such as headlines and pictures. This can be expected to play a role in the results of this study, given that a notable difference between a commercial media outlet and a state-owned site was detected in the Norwegian media that the study examined (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019). While this may not provide the complete picture of the media coverage in Finland, *Iltalehti*'s popularity as one of the most-read newspapers in the country gives it power and responsibility regarding how Finnish media contributes to the issue and solution of equality in sports coverage.

### **3.3 *Articles***

This thesis will concentrate on the sports section of the magazine, more specifically, football news. This study will look into how *Iltalehti* reported the men's FIFA World Cup in 2022 and the women's FIFA World Cup in 2023, analyzing the media coverage of both tournaments and highlighting any disparities in the reporting of these competitions. During the men's tournament, held from the 20th of November to the 18th of December, *Iltalehti* published 356 articles in total. However, out of this amount, 78 news articles have been removed, all of which

discussed or criticized the World Cup host, Qatar, as this issue does not fit the interest of this thesis. This leaves a scope of 278 articles focused purely on the sport. During the women's tournament that was held from the 20th of July to the 20th of August, Iltalehti published 70 articles.

These volumes have further been divided into 16 categories based on their themes. To begin the analysis, the study will first look at the quantitative differences between the articles, focusing on the proportions and well as distribution between themes. This quantitative analysis will provide intel on the amounts of articles given to women in comparison to men, when looking at the exact same events, and reveal what topics have received most coverage. For a closer, qualitative analysis, articles have been chosen from the most covered categories to distinguish any linguistic choices, framing, and narratives that contribute to a distinction between men's and women's articles. Focusing on these elements, it is possible to map the state of female representation on the field of sports in Finnish news media, as well as gain insight about the standing of women amidst men.

Figure 1. Themes of the Articles

<b>Theme</b>
Match Coverage
Player Profiles
Fans and Spectators
Celebrities and Former Players
Politics
Injuries and Health
Behavioural Critique
Finland
Relationships and Family
Internal issues
Coaches
Social Media
History
Appearance
Gender Equity
Equipment

Appendix A will present more detailed descriptions of each category.

## **4 Findings**

This section has been divided into two distinct sections: quantitative and qualitative analyses, as both have been implemented in the analysis of the research materials. The quantitative section solely focuses on the amounts of articles and presents the distribution across the 16 categories. The qualitative section focuses on the content of the articles within three of the main categories, providing a more nuanced analysis of the narratives and language choices in the articles.

### ***4.1 Quantitative Differences***

First, the amounts of articles will be discussed alongside the distribution of themes between the two tournaments. This aims to provide an understanding of how *Ilta-lehti* gives space to the Women's World Cup compared to the Men's World Cup and how the emphasis on different themes is distributed between tournaments. Table 2 illustrates the total number of articles during the periods of both tournaments. Articles concerning both men and women followed similar thematic patterns and have therefore been included in the same categories to provide a comprehensible demonstration of their distribution between tournaments. While the number of articles is also of interest to this study, percentages have been included in response to the significant differences in the total amounts. With this more accurate representation of the proportional distribution of themes, it is possible to conduct a more detailed analysis of the thematic emphasis and differences between the coverage of men's and women's tournaments.

Figure 2. Thematic Distribution

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>%</b>
Match Coverage	66	23,7%	27	38,6%
Players	61	21,9%	11	15,7%
Fans and Spectators	41	14,7%	3	4,4%
Celebrities and Former Players	22	7,9%	1	1,4%
Politics	19	6,8%	5	7,1%
Injuries and Health	15	5,4%	3	4,3%
Behavioural Critique	11	4%	2	2,9%
Finland	11	4%	4	5,7%
Relationships and Family	10	3,6%	1	1,4%
Internal issues	7	2,5%	3	4,3%
Coaches	5	1,8%	0	0
Social Media	4	1,4%	3	4,3%
History	3	1,1%	0	0
Appearance	1	0,4%	0	0
Gender Equity	1	0,4%	6	8,6%
Equipment	1	0,4%	1	1,4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### 4.1.1 Amounts

The most notable result when comparing the tournaments is the total amount of the articles. The amount of articles covering men's tournaments is over four times bigger than women's, even with articles discussing the World Cup host, Qatar, removed from the corpus. Both World Cups consisted of 32 nations and 64 matches and ran approximately for a month. Other than the women's tournament running two days longer than the men's, there are no significant differences in the logistics of both tournaments that would explain the differences in the



amounts. It is also important to note that during the Women's World Cup, Iltalehti published 228 articles related to football. Of these articles, two were about women but did not relate to the World Cup, resulting in 157 articles that discussed men's football in one way or another. This means only 31% of football articles during the women's World Cup discussed the tournament itself. These amounts correspond with the results of many previous studies where the coverage of women's sports has remained significantly lesser or insignificant than men's (Antunovic & Bartoluci, 2023; Aull & Brown, 2013; Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019; Schmidt, 2016).

It is evident the articles regarding men's tournaments spread wider between themes, while women's articles have a few focus groups that take most of the coverage. After articles about Match Details and individual players, 47% of women's articles are left for other topics. The same amount for men after the first two themes is 54%, meaning more space has been given to various themes regarding men's tournament. For example, there are no articles about women's coaches that relate to the issue of lack of female representation in leadership positions in the field of football (FIFA, 2019; Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019; Schailleé et al., 2021; Vadhera, 2018). Out of the 32 teams, 11 women serve as head coaches (Quaile, 2023). While the number of articles about men's coaches is relatively small as well, these female coaches did not receive even this recognition, even though their proportional contribution would have suggested otherwise. In addition, despite the long history of women's sports and football discussed in this thesis, no articles were written to match the history category. In contrast, during the men's tournament, this topic was covered by, for example, introducing every WC winner since 1930 (7).

Despite the lower amount of coverage dedicated to women, there are several themes in which women take up a significantly larger proportion than men. These include Match Coverage, Finland, Internal Issues, Social Media, and Gender Equity. Notably, Match Coverage receives considerably more attention than men, as men's articles receive more versatile topics. During men's tournament, match coverage and articles discussing individual players receive nearly equal amount of coverage, while there is a larger gap between these themes during women's tournament. After these two categories, the remainder of women's articles consist only of a few articles. Therefore, it becomes even more important to note the proportional amounts of these themes in relation to the total coverage. For example, even though the number of articles discussing gender equity is six, it covers nearly 9% of the entire coverage. Once politics are

included in this amount, the number rises to 15,7%, which is the same as articles about the players.

#### *4.1.2 Distribution of Themes*

The focus on gender equity in women's articles suggests that *Iltalehti* is aware of the imbalance in men's and women's sports, even though the actions to narrow the gap are left slim. Furthermore, as mentioned, once combined with articles discussing politics, the total amount takes second place in the most covered themes. While acknowledging these topics is important, and they also need visibility in the media, it can also be seen as diverting space and attention from highlighting the actual athletic achievements of teams and players by using this already limited space to discuss the lack of representation instead of trying to represent female athletes. Unless a balance is found, this can further reinforce the previously discussed negative perceptions by overlooking women's game, performances, and triumphs by stressing focus on the issue of inequality.

While women hold the larger percentage of match coverage, men's articles focus more on individual player profiles. This indicates that *Iltalehti* could value articles about male players almost in balance with the game itself, whereas female athletes and their performance are considered less important or interesting. This could further stem from the preconception that male players are often considered more interesting and, therefore, gain more readership than articles about women, making them more profitable for magazines (Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019). While it is initially a positive thing that so much of the coverage for women has been focused on the game instead of, for example, personal life or appearance (Fink, 2015), there is potential for more space to be given to bringing forward the talent of individual players. This would help decrease women being considered "second-tier" in the light of men, a perception related to gender imprinting, demonstrating how deeply masculine hegemony affects how women's sport is viewed as less athletically skilled (Micelotta, 2018, as cited in Gomez-Gonzalez et al., 2024, p. 48).

The biggest proportional difference within a theme between the two tournaments is in the articles regarding Fans and Spectators, with a difference of over 10%. While the growing numbers in the viewership of women's sports have been discussed in this thesis, this amount does not correspond to the number of articles written about the viewership of the Women's World Cup. During the 2023 tournament, the number of on-site spectators in the 2019

tournament was surpassed by 27%, and the 2015 tournament by 534% (FIFA, 2023). In addition, in China, the viewership for a match between China and England was the highest anywhere in the world, and the USA reached the highest number of fans to watch a group-stage match in history (FIFA, 2023). Despite these historical numbers, articles about fans and spectators remained at three, while the fans of men's tournament made it into articles 41 times. While it cannot be alleged solely based on these numbers that they affect the way in which Finnish people react to women's football, it has been argued in a wider context that media coverage has a significant role in the attitudes towards women's sport (Coche, 2022). More positive reporting on these types of historical numbers could have the potential to influence the attitudes of people and fight the stereotypes, prejudice, and negative perceptions of women's football being less exciting and lower quality (Gomez-Gonzalez et al., 2024; Hovden & von der Lippe, 2019).

## **4.2 *Qualitative Differences***

Even more important than the number of articles between men's and women's tournaments is the content within these articles. Next, the substance of the most reported themes will be analyzed more closely to examine further the differences between the World Cup reporting beyond sheer numbers. For a comparative analysis, articles have been chosen from both tournaments, covering themes of match coverage, player profiles, politics, and gender equality. The aim is to recognize how language is used to create a specific tone and how societal norms, assumptions, or biases are created and included in these articles or headlines. Also, the narratives or portrayals of events, teams, and players will be examined and compared.

### **4.2.1 *Match Coverage***

When examining the articles included in the match coverage category, the first notable difference between the two tournaments is the type of the articles. Men's articles include nine "perspective" pieces and two "comment" pieces that dwell deeper into the topic from a more analytical point of view. The articles discuss the playing styles and difficulties of teams, lineup choices, laws of the game, and pre-game analyses. These articles bring up topics, analyses, and discussion beyond the game as the writers explore topics from different perspectives and possibilities, broadening the reporting beyond the mere statistics and game occurrences and providing further background information. For example, one article criticizes the poor performance of Germany in the past two World Cups but at the same time highlights the success

of Japan, while another article discusses the wrong decision of a referee in a match between Uruguay and Portugal and the difficult interpretations of the sport's rules (10,13).

The amount of perspective or comment pieces in the women's tournament is one. This article discusses the tie between the USA and the Netherlands in the opening match of both teams and how it proves the vulnerability of the front-runner, the USA (17). As itself, the article is a well-crafted piece that provides background information on the long-standing dominance of the US team in women's football but also the importance of the draw as it proved the team is not unbeatable. However, the fact that this article remains the only piece discussing any of the tournament's matches with this analytical and curious perspective raises concerns about the attention given to the women's tournament. Yet again, these types of articles could have served as a space to bring attention to the high quality of women's football, the surprising possibilities, and the massive leaps the sport continues taking.

This is not the only disparity when it comes to the overall content of the articles, as out of men's articles, 21 were reported live on Iltalehti. The same amount for women is, yet again, one. The only game reported live on the site is the women's final, while men's matches have been reported live since the group stage. Instead, women's articles mainly provide short updates of the most important games' end results, such as quarterfinals and semi-finals, as well as unexpected end results of matches. Germany disappointed many with their performance in both men's and women's tournaments, as the teams were knocked out already in the group stage despite high expectations for the multiple World Cup and European Champion title holders. However, the elimination of the women's team was covered in one nine-sentence article, while a similar event of men was discussed in four articles, each at least twice the length of women's (4,5,13,24,26). This demonstrates how disproportionate attention is given to women's football in comparison to men's, contributing to the prevailing state of women's football.

As another demonstration of the disparities between men's and women's tournaments, live coverage articles from both finals have been compared and analyzed. At first glance, the articles share very similar headlines with emphasis on the excitement of the matches with terms like *huima* (astonishing) and *uskomaton* (unbelievable) in the title, but while men's article's subtitle continues describing the World Cup final as *ikimuistoinen* (unforgettable), women's article simply mentions how Spain won the women's World Cup in football (2,23). In addition, throughout the updates, women's full names are used in the articles 49 times despite having been mentioned already before in the article. The mentions of men's full names are only 15, and after mentioning the full names of players once, full names are not used anymore.

There are also significant differences in the tone of reporting between finals. Before the reporting on the match itself begins, men's articles start by explaining the standing situation of the battle for the Golden Boot (best goal scorer) and the players competing for it. In contrast, the women's article only mentions how there have been 163 goals in the tournaments, which "naturally is a record on this level" (2). This is a very questionable comment that would unlikely been made about men's tournament. Furthermore, in the pre-game comments, the men's article highlights how the winner gets to "dominate the football world" and is awarded a place among the "immortal teams of football," as well as receiving 42 million dollars (23). No similar emphasis is brought to the achievements of women, only how the tournament has "brought forward the message of the joy of women's football" (2).

Men's article also uses a lot of colloquial expressions, such as "oijoi, ohhoh, no niin, huhhuh" as well as abbreviations like "keltsu, lopputurnauserkka, vitonen, minsa" (23). The use of these in men's articles could suggest that men's football is considered more exciting and, therefore, is reported through more engaging writing for the reader. Such expressions are not used during the women's final, but a more formal language is used, lacking the same excitement given to the men's final. This opposition begins at the first update that opens the finals by describing how the men will "go head-to-head on the chilled turf of the stadium" while prior to the women's final, "the stadium is full and everything is ready for the thrilling final match" (2,23). This lack of enthusiasm and descriptive language could also be seen as reflecting the writer's underlying attitude towards women's football that transmits through the language and tone created, affecting the reception of the readers.

#### 4.2.2 *Players*

When examining the articles discussing individual players, the topics of both tournaments vary from game-related articles to personal life. The articles cover topics from behavior on and off the field, game performances, and life before stardom. However, there are a few significant differences in the headlining of these articles, as eyeing the headlines of men's articles, the reader does not have to guess what the article will be about. For example, the headlines "Did you notice? World Cup teenage superstar plays with open shoelaces – the reason is awkward" and "A wonderful moment after World Cup bronze match – legend revealed a big decision" despite their ambiguity, give the reader an idea what the article will be about (6,8). In contrast, headlines such as "Sports star inspired by the love moment of turtles – Why do they scream

like that?";" Swedish player Lina Hurtig has a peculiar tattoo idea," and" The scorer of the World Cup-golden goal lifted her shirt, audience is astonished – Now we know why" do not straight away tell that the articles will discuss how Alexandra Popp's became a veterinarian, how Sweden advanced to the quarterfinals with a penalty kick that went only a millimeter over the goal line, or how after the winning goal of the final Olga Carmona paid tribute to a friend's recently died mother (11,12,27).

The same trend from match coverage continues in this category as well, as four articles written about men are perspective pieces that discuss the excellence of Lionel Messi, the greatness of the sport and the emotions it evokes, and the impact and significance of Cristiano Ronaldo within football (9,14,15,16). On top of these, the articles in this category discuss the benching of great players, new upcoming stars, and the strong emotional reactions of players. Similar topics among women's articles discuss the benching of the world's best female footballer, future stars, and Amanda Ilestedt's winning goal in the quarterfinals. However, through a closer look at the articles, the disparities between articles that seem to resemble each other at first glance emerge.

Linda Caicedo and Cody Gakpo are players that Iltalehti named sensations (18,25). Gakpo," one of the hottest players of the tournament," is described as a versatile player and compared to Toto Schillaci and James Rodriguez, who have succeeded in World Cups in the past (25). The article continues to highlight Gakpo's abilities by describing his performance in a match that secured the Netherlands' place in the round of 16, and it also highlights his performance in his club PSV. The article cites the coach of Netherlands and Gakpo's coach of his junior years, bringing more attention to the potential and upswing of Gakpo. The article about Linda Caicedo, while at first glance resembles Gakpo's article, takes a significantly different approach. The article begins by describing Caicedo's goal against Germany, followed by an explanation of how she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at fifteen (18). After this, the article describes how the match ended in the loss of Germany after Manuela Vanegas' winning goal.

While there is a clear, conscious difference in the approach to a similar event, the article could have seized the opportunity to highlight the performance of Caicedo or Vanegas, not the failure of Germany. In the prevailing underdog position of women, this type of attention is much needed and would have been welcome in an opportunity to highlight the achievements of said footballers. In the article about Gakpo, the player is brought forward from the team, while Caicedo is buried amidst the team.

A similar situation was offered to Iltalehti as Sweden won Japan in the quarterfinals with Amand Ilestedt's 2-1 goal. At that time, the defender was competing for the tournament's Golden Boot, which is mentioned in the article right before attention was drawn from this achievement to the "ugliest goal of WC history" (19). This was not a comment made by Iltalehti but by a Norwegian football expert, but it was reinforced by the Finnish tabloid as it is "hard to argue against it" (19). In another article, the world's best footballer, Alexia Putellas, is rumored to be excluded from Spain's lineup in the final (20). In the article, Putellas is complimented for her superior sense of the game and passing skills but does not discuss her abilities as a player further. This is a large contrast to Lionel Messi, for example, who is raved about in two specific articles dedicated solely to him, where he is compared to Diego Maradona, told to be carrying the entire Argentina team, and praised for his actions in the tournament that will be written in history (15,16). There is no similar player within female footballers who received similar treatment even close to Messi. Not even Marta Vieira da Silva, "one of if not the greatest women's player of all time," and one of the key players who have paved the way for women's football (Lynch, 2023). Despite the Brazilian team's disqualification in the early stages, Marta is not discussed by Iltalehti, even though it is safe to argue that Messi in a similar situation would have been written about.

#### 4.2.3 *Politics*

Both articles discuss politics and gender equality in large amounts. The difference, however, is that men's tournament focuses more on politics while women's take a stronger stand on gender equality. Men's articles discuss the governmental states of several countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Iran, as well as conflicts between countries like Serbia and Kosovo, as well as South Korea and North Korea. Women's articles do not speak on such issues. However, in terms of gender equality, men's articles only include a piece on the first-ever woman refereeing men's World Cup match, while women's articles tackle the topic discussing women's football's lack of development on a global scale, Gianni Infantino's speech on how women should "keep pushing the door of equality," and the symbolic value of Spain winning the WC-title (3,21,22,28).

With these criticisms, it is worth noting how, at the beginning of the 2023 tournament, Iltalehti discusses how the state of women's football has gone forward but how its global development has not "brought it equally into the spotlight" (21). The article describes the negative news

reported on the tournament threshold, which highlights the poor position of women and women's football. The article also brings out a former national team player, Essi Sainio, who talks about the significant influence of the tournament. As one of the last articles about the tournament, Iltalehti brings the issue up again while highlighting the impact of Spain's tournament win (22). Iltalehti compliments FIFA on how the tournament brought equality forward and how the "joyous message of women's football has never been this powerful and widespread" while room for improvement still remains (22). The article also highlights the internal struggles and issues that the Spanish team overcame, as well as the words of encouragement from the Queen of Spain. As the achievement of the Spanish team was rightfully discussed, at the same time, the spotlight was quickly stolen by the President of the Spanish Football Federation, who celebrated the victory by kissing Jennifer Hermoso, an act that sparked a scandal that somewhat contaminated the end of the historic tournament. The cruel irony of the situation does not go past anyone, as after celebrating the tournament as a milestone in women's football, the hard-earned recognition is diminished by an act overshadowing what so many have worked for.

Another instance where equality was sought globally, but the effort fell short was when the President of FIFA gave a speech on how women should keep fighting for equality and aim to change the opinions of women as it is, at the end of the day, "in the hands of women" (3). Infantino's suggestions could be seen to have been internalized by Iltalehti, as they have clearly taken women's tournament as a platform to try and bring the position of women forward. While this is a step in the right direction, the historical World Cup of 2023 tournament could have been used to celebrate the achievements, performances, and actions of female athletes more similarly to men's. This platform was now used to mainly discuss the issue between men and women, and the space for the sport itself in articles about matches and players lacked much effort to bring forward the suppressed.

#### *4.2.4 Headlines*

The headlines of tabloid articles strongly dictate whether the article will be clicked open. This means they have to be attention-grabbing in the limited word count. Within these headlines in match coverage and players' profiles, 26% of the men's articles used some negative language, which can be roughly translated to words such as excruciating moment, depress, in trouble, great farce, on the brink of the abyss, the perfect blowout, crushed, catastrophe, crisis, most



hated team, a recipe for disaster, brawl, and miscarriage of justice. The same number for negative-toned language in women's articles is only 20,5%, including wording such as embarrassing fail, total catastrophe, humiliated, mistakes backfire, and crushing victory. Positive language in the headlines takes up around 30% of men's articles, with word choices of amazing goal, sizzling hot, tasty classic, epic World Cup bombshell, incredible thriller, incredible World Cup jackpot, spectacular drama, wonderful show, sensational, and heroic feat. For women, the percentage is over 43%, and these positive language choices include wonderful gestures, hero goalkeeper, World Cup sensation, congratulations, top match, superstar, fierce drama, and fairytale. In addition to the language choices, men's articles use players' names in the title of 49 articles, whereas the names of women athletes are mentioned once.

## 5 Discussion

This thesis's interest was to analyze not so much the grammatical structure of the language used but the differences within these articles and how that is linked to larger social phenomena. Taylor (2013) claims that language is "inseparable from its social context," which is what this thesis has aimed to prove (p. 2). The point was to analyze how the world view of "hegemonic masculinity" is apparent in the reporting of the two football World Cups and how that contributes to the way the public builds their understanding and attitudes towards women's football (Connell, 1991). This "global dominance of men over women" is embedded and expressed in mass media and culture, which is why this thesis has looked into the ways in which this is represented in a Finnish context (Connell, 1991, p. 183). The aim was to analyze if there were clear distinctions between the reporting of the two World Cups and whether there was an indication of the imbalanced power dynamics between the representation of men and women in the context of football.

The drastic differences between the number of articles prove Iltalehti's claim about the lack of development in the field of women's football. However, while the magazine recognizes the inequality of the game, it focuses on FIFA, the actions of the FIFA president, and the impact of the 2023 tournament on women's football. While these points are valid and contribute to the issue, Iltalehti fails to discuss or act against the major contributor to the unequal treatment of women, the lack of media representation. This trend was studied during the 2019 World Cup by Coche (2022), in which similar results were found, with men's World Cup taking up most of the coverage, while women's tournament was not even the main topic covered during the time of the tournament. The 31% of Iltalehti articles reserved for the Women's 2023 World Cup out of the total amount of football news explains how the magazine, despite its interest in the issue, also contributes to it.

The use of negative-toned words in the headlines of men's articles contributes to the preconception of men being stronger and more fit to receive criticism, while women's articles prefer more positive-toned language, reinforcing the perception of the fragility of women (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998). This only further reinforces the gendered stereotypes that Iltalehti hopes to fight against. It is also worth noting that this strengthens the inequality of genders and enforces gender stereotypes both ways, not only with concern to women, as this resilience and strength associated with masculinity harms men as well. Furthermore, the use of only male players in the headlines reinforces the claim that the "narrow and restricted portrayal of people...causes individuals to develop a world view that is consistent with these portrayals,"

shifting the blame from the lack of interest on women's football to the lack of media representation (Rowe & Silva, 2023; Schmidt, 2016, p. 277).

As important it is that Iltalehti does take part in the discussion on gender equality and believes in the importance of narrowing the gap between men and women, the importance of media representation has slipped past them. While raising awareness on the issue is essential for change, the actions to achieve this lie not only on administrative and governmental levels but on accessible and everyday levels. This means more space needs to be given to articles discussing women, more recognition must be given to their athleticism and achievements, and more female players should be introduced to the public. Small actions are what make a bigger change, which is why it is crucial for it to begin with media, ensuring that women's sports become a part of general, broader discussion and are not viewed as an exception to the status quo.

## 6 Conclusion

Media can construct and strengthen gender differences by influencing the way we see, believe, and approach the world, which is why studying these embedded structures of society in sports media is important so they can begin to be challenged (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998). While immense progress has happened since the reporting of the European Championships of 2009 and the reporting of Iltalehti does not focus on the common tactics of female sports reporting introduced by Fink (2015), such as othering, trivialization, infantilizing, and focus on femininity, deficiencies were still present. While Iltalehti does take part in the discussion about gender inequality and therefore does bring the state of women's football forward, the disparities to the reporting of men's tournament still largely persist. In the words of Iltalehti, the lifetime of today's junior players might not be enough to reach total gender equality (22). This means there is still much work to be done, and the work needs to begin now widely at the entire media landscape, dialogue need to be brought to the mainstream, and the current status quo and hidden prejudice, assumptions, and norms harmful for women's football must be challenged.

However, while there is room for improvement in the reporting of women's football, it is important to note that Iltalehti only serves as one outlet for reporting in Finland. As discussed earlier, Iltalehti is a commercial media outlet and therefore differs in the reporting compared to other platforms, such as state-owned, magazines. This, therefore, does not define the representation of women's football in all Finnish media and cannot be generalized. However, given Iltalehti's immense popularity and impact, this thesis's results remain important. The quantitative and qualitative findings presented in this thesis could therefore work as a starting point for further actions to narrow the gap between genders.

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## **Appendix A. Categories**

Match profiles include articles about match referees, previews and match preparations, minute-by-minute updates, post-match analyses, schedules, and team analyses. Player profiles include discussion about individual players in different contexts, while Fans include articles about the on-site spectators and fans in their home countries. Celebrities and Former Players refer to articles discussing celebrities or former players and any statements they have made about the tournament, teams, or players. Politics include comments from political figures, discussion on FIFA politics, international disputes, and COVID-19. Injuries and Health cover any injuries or illnesses during the tournament. Behavioural Critique includes any criticism teams or players have received from the public and media. Finland category encompasses articles related to Finland or Finnish people, and Relationships and Family focus on the families or relationships of the players. Internal Issues address problems and team dynamics within a team or its players. Coaches involve articles on the comments or behaviour of team coaches. Social media covers articles discussing players' social media activity. History includes any background information on the tournaments or the sport. Appearance includes comments on players' physical appearance, and gender equity discusses the issue of gender equality in sports. Lastly, Equipment includes articles about players' equipment or gear used during the tournament.