Introduction

The clásico is the renowned term used to describe the matches between the Real Madrid CF and the FC Barcelona football teams. Although the origins of the rivalry date back more than 100 years, it is now, due basically to the economic repercussion and global impact of the clubs involved, that the clásico has gained unprecedented media attention. Both teams rank in the top two in total fans worldwide, 57.8m for FC Barcelona and 31.3m for Real Madrid CF (Sport+Markt, 2010), and gross income, 450€m for Real Madrid and 479€m for Barcelona (Deloitte, 2012). The intensity of this media coverage is particularly notable in Spain, where football is the most popular sport, and the rivalry between Barcelona and Real Madrid has evolved into a cornerstone of the news agenda (González Ramallal, 2004; Isasi Varela, 2006).

However, apart from the emotion and uncertainty derived from their games – with anything between two and five matches a year – the attraction of the Real Madrid-Barcelona (RMD-FCB) rivalry lies beyond the realm of the mere sporting competition and is based upon the mediated discourse around it, fuelled by a 24/7 news cycle. The news pieces do not stand alone but are contained in larger narratives, whose purpose when it comes to sports journalism is not to give a conciliatory account of the events but to ‘emphasize the elements of crisis and contradiction’ (Moragas, 1992:15) and the ‘production of difference’ (Rowe, 2003:282). In other words, by highlighting the elements of rupture and ignoring the common ground, the journalistic discourse constructs the relationship between these two teams as the tale of a conflict. The aim of this article is to understand how this RMD-FCB mediated conflict is constructed in the Spanish online newspapers.

Conflict narratives in sport

War has been persistently a frame of reference utilized by sports journalism to make sense of the game (Maguire and Poulton, 1999; Maguire, Poulton and Possamai, 1999a; Maguire, Poulton and Possamai, 1999b). Burkhard, following the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), situates the war-metaphor as ‘the most central metaphor’ (Burkhard, 2006:61) in sports competitions. Research on the mediation of football in Africa (Chapanga, 2004:69) and Europe (Nordin, 2008:113) have highlighted the
pivotal nature of the ‘football=war’ metaphor to journalistic discourses on the game. As a consequence of this tendency towards warmongering, a significant part of the research on media sport has focused on the narratives of conflict.

Narratives of conflict in mediated sport are invariably constructed around themes of gender (Billings and Eastman, 2002; Cronan and Scott, 2008; Daddario, 1997; Douglas and Carless, 2009; Hardin and Whiteside, 2009; Mclachlan, 2009), race and ethnicity (Birrell, 1989; Sterkenburg, Knoppers and De Leeuw, 2010) and, most commonly, nationhood (Rowe, 2003). As David Rowe notes, ‘media sport events generate contest narrative forms that are perfectly suited to articulations of nation’ (2003:286) and there is little surprise that the investigation on sport conflict narratives have primarily focused on international competitions between nation-states, particularly in global sports events such as the Olympic Games (Dyreson, 2010; Hilvoorde, Elling and Stokvis, 2010; Knight, Macneill and Donnelly, 2005; Puijk, 2000; Real, 1989) and the FIFA World Cups (Alabarces, Tomlinson and Young, Crolley and Hand, 2006; 2001; Vincent et al., 2010).

Less academic research has focused on local and regional sports conflicts, and where football rivalries have been investigated (De Biasi and Lanfranchi, 1997; Magazine and Martínez, 2009) the framework of national struggle has been ‘inherited’ as the inception of every conflict. More nuanced work, which also frames conflict around ‘ethno-religious’ conflicts, such as the ‘Old Firm’ conflict between the supporters of the two Glasgow clubs Rangers and Celtic (Bradley, 1998), have moved beyond a strictly national frame, but this work is a rare exception.

In Spain, despite the fact that the national identity framework has been repeatedly employed in order to explain the role of FCB and RMD in Spanish football (Ball, 2001; García Matilla, 2001; Leon Solís, 2003; Llopis Goig, 2008; Shobe, 2008; Xifra, 2008), the approach has always been sociological rather than discursive, that is, the alleged effects this identity framework could impose on the journalistic construction of the RMD-FCB rivalry have been assumed as a logical corollary but not proved by data.
One of the few works relating to this discursive construction of the clásico is the content analysis proposed by Isasi Varela, who examined the news frame in two broadsheet newspapers – El País and La Vanguardia – from 1996 to 2004, only to point out that ‘the thematic frame in journalistic discourse on the clásico is basically sportive and to a lesser extent, social’ (Isasi Varela, 2006: 168), defining the minor social frames as ‘social expectation’ and ‘identity rivalry’ (2006:169). If we broaden the picture to include literary journalism, the national perspective gathers momentum as the hegemonic frame to understand the RMD-FCB confrontation. Literary journalists have depicted the match as a clash between two nationalities, and more generically, between two ways of understanding politics. Thus, we can observe that ‘since the beginning, Madrid and Barcelona were the standard-bearers of the two forms of government distribution: centralism vs. federalism’ (Relaño, 2012:42), a thought based on the assumption made by Vázquez Montalbán by portraying the clásico as ‘a unique duel that summarizes the spiritual archaeologies of the Spanish nation’ (2006:159). The RMD is perceived as the representative of the Spanish identity while the FCB stands for the Catalan identity (Benítez, 2011:41).

The rivalry dates back to 1902, when the two teams met for the first time, and since then the clásico has become the ultimate expression of the Spanish football passion. They both accumulate 53 La Liga championships altogether, while they remain the only two Spanish clubs to ever won the European Champions League. Due to Spanish demographical structure, the two main cities, Barcelona and Madrid, excel by far in population and importance the rest of the cities in the country, ensuring them in comparison a more advantageous socioeconomic context.

For a century, controversy has surrounded the teams’ relationship. As mentioned above, at the Spanish Civil War, RMD was believed to support the Franco’s Regime – although this assumption is extremely contested nowadays (Relaño, 2012). FCB’s president at the time, the republican Josep Sunyol, was assassinated by Franco’s troops in Madrid. This episode still lives on in the memory of several FCB fans. Their sporting rivalry has innumerable chapters. The great Argentinean player Di Stefano was supposed to play for FCB but RMD made a final movement that attracted the footballer and irritated the archenemy FCB. The same happened with Kubala, only this time the other way around. In the last decades, Luis
Figo, the beloved FCB forward, turned sides in an unexpected multimillion Euro operation that turn Figo into the most hated man in Barcelona.

In recent years, as the two teams have increased their gap with other squads, the Spanish football has evolved into a head-to-head fight for the supremacy. In particular, since the arrival of Josep Guardiola in 2008 to FCB, and Cristiano Ronaldo and Jose Mourinho to RMD in 2009 and 2010, respectively, the clásico has gather momentum. Simultaneously, the Spanish national football is living its most glorious Belle Epoque, with almost every of its most prominent footballers playing for RMD or FCB. FCB’s playing style, seed of Spain national team’s playbook, is considered to be offensive, spectator–friendly, focusing on the passing game and ball possession, and favouring small-sized but extremely virtuous footballers. RMD, on the contrary, has abandoned the glow of the early 2000s – with players such as Figo, Zidane or Roberto Carlos – and, particularly since the arrival of Mourinho, has become a more conservative and straight forward football squad. In summary, a vast amount of talent and ambition, memory and grudge, both in the field and the bench, is assembled every time these two teams play against each other: an ideal environment for dispute and conflict.

The FCB itself on its website affirms that the club is “the most representative sporting institution in the country [meaning Catalonia] and one of its best ambassadors”. Both the team and the supporters dramatize the nation-club link by means of a war cry: ‘Visca el Barça i visca Catalunya [Long live Barça and Catalonia]’. Hence, the clash with RMD has been presented as ‘a game of identity and otherness’ (Salvador, 2004:64), a game where the ‘Catalanness’ and the ‘Spanishness’ are situated at the very epicentre of the conflict. Vázquez Montalbán pointed out that ‘the significance of FC Barcelona is a consequence of the historical misfortunes of Catalonia since the 17th century, in a never-ending civil war, armed or metaphorical, against Spain’ (2006:64). Consequently, Salvador proposes the military metaphor of the Cold War (2004:1) to make sense of the dispute between the two teams, wherein each of them is enrolled in a discursive battle seeking for symbolic hegemony.

**Beyond the national identity conflict**
The national identity conflict in football seemed to be in crisis due to the commodification and internationalization processes that took place in the European leagues during the last decade of the 20th century, especially since the Bosman ruling was adopted in 1995 (Llopis Goig, 2009). The local disputes were diluted within a context of extensive influx of foreign players. In addition to this, the ‘transnationalization’ of club competitions, along with its culmination with the creation in 1992 of the UEFA Champions League, has led research to switch focus to the post-national sphere of football (Alabarces, 2007; King, 2003), a sphere where the changes precipitated by the globalization process question the notions of identity, nation state limits and group belonging (Llopis Goig, 2009:10).

How might we reconfigure the notion of conflict beyond the national frame? Moreover, how might the construction of conflict be articulated in both the media and sport? Garry Whannel coined the term ‘vortextuality’ in order to explain how contemporary, celebrity-driven sports media operates:

… I developed the concept of vortextuality while analysing the media frenzy around the wedding of David Beckham and Victoria Adams, the death of Princess Diana, and the verdict announcement in the Michael Jackson trial, but it is also applicable to major sport events. The context for the effect was established by the combined impact of the erosion of the public-private distinction, the declining powers of regulation and censorship, and the growth of celebrity culture, combined with the expansion of the media and the increase in the speed of circulation (Whannel, 2009:210)

Whannel focuses on the interplay of sport and ‘celebrity culture’ (Whannel, 2002, 2009, 2010) as a mechanism to understand the dynamics of sports journalism. Thus, the individualisation and personalisation mechanisms embedded in the day-to-day sports journalistic practice could motivate the “progressive retreat from the nationalistic matrix” (Llopis Goig, 2009:10) of the conflict and promote sport narratives populated by a few popular media stars. The role of the sport stars and managers in the narratives, unlike its social echo and global celebrity status (Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Rojek, 2006; Wagg, 2007), has been mostly overlooked by researchers. It is arguable, however, that this individualization might play an increasing role in the media construction of storytelling, one of its most
visible features being the sheer volume of quotes pervading the sports columns. Boyle has noted the importance of what he terms ‘quote culture’ in contemporary sports journalism, and cites an interview with *The Guardian* media columnist Roy Greenslade to illustrate the point:

… Reporting is no longer enough, things are shown in television. Every match report now had to be about what the manager thought of the game […], and you see the growth of quotes, which is part of the process of conflict, as often these quotes are not liked…

(Boyle, 2006:42)

Quotation allows journalists to personalize the discourse and works as a conflict generator in sports journalism. One of the consequences of these ‘celebrity culture’ and subsequent ‘quote culture’ when it comes to conflict narratives is the individualized attribution of responsibility in team sports. The media event construction prior to the game consisting in narratives played by a few competitors enables the ‘post-mortem journalism’ to sanction, that is, to blame or to reward (Douglas, 1992), in the same individualized fashion. Consequently, victory and defeat will create narratives characterised by heroes and villains, respectively (Gardiner, 2006:16). As John Vincent has noted: “In the era of celebrity-driven sports journalism in which the commercial pressure to sell more newspapers seems to stimulate more controversial narratives, a ‘build-them-up then knock-them-down’ cycle has been a notable feature…” (Vincent et al., 2010:209).

In other words, pre-game narrative constructions and the match result, combine to shape the post-game narratives in order to knock-down previously built-up characters who did not live up to their expectations. Hence, previous narratives are followed up to construct stories of defeat or triumph. According to Knight (2005), the media implements two opposing approaches to failure: on the one hand, reports produce a cognitive orientation that accentuates the lesson learning value of the defeat and recognizes the skills of the rival; on the other hand, reports create a normative orientation, where the emphasis is on the guilt attribution and the lack of commitment of the players (Knight et al., 2005:26).
Methodological considerations

The aim of the investigation is to understand how the narratives of conflict between RMD vs. FCB are constructed in Spanish online newspapers. To fulfil the research objective, a case study was selected: a *clásico* match\(^1\). The sample was composed by the website edition of 4 major Spanish newspapers. Mundodeportivo.com and marca.com as sports newspapers, and lavanguardia.com and elpais.com as broadsheets. In selecting this sample the authors balanced four different factors:

1) The balanced between the dailies: territory, format (broadsheet and sport-based) and orientation. Two Madrid-based and two Barcelona-based newspapers were selected. In each territory, one of them was a broadsheet daily while the other was sport-based. Furthermore, a balance in the orientation was sought for; given no major Madrid-based newspaper is openly and officially RMD-friendly – although this fact contradicts the public perception –, in the selection of Barcelona-based newspapers we tried to avoid too obvious FCB-friendly dailies in order to balance the sample results. This is why, among other reasons, sport-based dailies such as Sport or broadsheets like ElPunt/Avui have been excluded from the corpus.

2) The historical and social value of the newspapers in Catalonia and in Spain as a whole. La Vanguardia is arguably the most relevant newspaper in Catalonia. Founded in 1881, it has played a major role in the media development of the Catalan identity. Mundo Deportivo belongs to the same parent company, Grupo Godó. Founded in 1906 as a weekly publication, it is considered the second oldest still active sports newspapers in Europe after La Gazzetta dello Sport. Marca is the most read newspaper in Spain (broadsheets included) and has been pivotal since 1938 in the development of the sport in the country. Finally, El País is probably the most renowned Spanish-written quality newspaper worldwide.

3) The readership and paid circulation of the press editions. Given some of the dailies’ digital editions such as elpais.com or mundodeportivo.com do not provide audience data to the Spanish internet media circulation controller, the OJD interactive, we relied upon the press edition’s available information. According to the OJD press, from January to December 2011 every one of the four selected publications was the most sold daily of its kind\(^2\) (OJD, 2012). In addition to this, the readership figures, audited by
EGM from February 2011 to November 2011 nationwide, supported the convenience of the chosen sample (EGM, 2012).

4) The possibility of grounding the findings in previous research over the same sample. As mentioned before, our closest reference is that of Isasi Varela (2006) wherein La Vanguardia and El País were examined in order to determine the most recurrent actors and themes in the clásico. Drawing on his research, the selection of these two dailies would allow us to compare and contextualize our findings.

For 35 days we took the scrolling screen captures of the selected websites homepages, twice a day, from November 16, 24 days prior to the game, until December 20, 10 days afterwards. The total amount of ‘front pages’ examined was 280.

A two-step methodological framework was applied. The first phase consisted in counting the number of news items in every front page and among them identifying the ones regarding the clásico. In phase 2, a qualitative analysis was carried out within the previously selected clásico news items. The authors followed a coding process where headlines and sub-headlines (that is, the visible part without further clicking) were examined in order to identify a maximum of 3 main characters of each story, and a maximum of 2 themes. It was also noted whether a quotation was present. Drawing on Whannel’s ‘celebrity culture’ (2002, 2009, 2010) and Boyle’s ‘quote culture’ (2006) we aim to focus our analysis on the main characters of the stories, the ones who repeatedly appear as protagonist in the selected narratives. This focus also applies to the opponents or enemies. We are inclined to define conflict narratives as the narratives where both an actor and his opponent are present. Hence, the conflict construction is thereby defined by protagonist-enemy interactions.

To answer the research question the data was split in two parts: the 25 previous days were utilized to elaborate on the conflict construction while the 10 days after the match helped to measure the impact of the outcome in the media conflict. The coding procedures have been employed on a similar work on English Newspapers’ narratives about the English football team in the 2006 World Cup (Vincent et al., 2010). More precisely, in the layered coding process known as open coding/axial coding (2010:203). The
open coding serves to organize raw document data into workable items for analysis. These items were selected according to the focus of the research, the themes identified in the literature review and the preliminary findings in the data (Neuman, 2003).

In addition to this, an axial coding was conducted, wherein the identified items in the open coding were structured and grouped into larger units of significance (Creswell, 2003; Strauss and Corvin, 1999). This process interprets news items as narratives. Comprehensive stories underlying several headlines are analysed in terms of the settings, protagonists, recurring characters and themes found. We understand a narrative as ‘a specific form of representation, one that accentuates the sequential or syntagmatic nature of meaning’ (Bruner, 1987 as cited in Knight et al., 2005:29), in accordance to the standpoint of Elinor Ochs that describes the narratives as the device that differentiates ‘a list of events from a history of events or a story of events’ (Ochs, 1997:193), turning the unconnected events into tales that make sense to the reader.

**Findings**

*Overview and sample limitations*

Quantitative analysis identified in the whole sample (n=11,034) a total amount of 709 news items categorized as 'clásico news'. Figure 1 shows the evolution of the clásico news over the 35 days period in the 4 examined websites.

*(Figure 1 about here)*

The figure shows how the clásico played on December 10, 2011 gained media attention at least 25 days prior to the game. Followed up by an increasing media interest, the curve describes a sudden fall right after the game, keeping its presence in the agenda though. The RMD-FCB media saliency has been previously under examination. In the period from 1996 to 2004 El País and La Vanguardia broadsheets were studied, obtaining as a result, that the average days the clásico was able to maintain its attention in
the agenda was between 7 and 9, while the space devoted to it in these broadsheets varied from 2.55% (El País) to 2.19% (La Vanguardia) (Isasi Varela, 2006:64). We can assert, however, that the current media attention to this rivalry in the online editions has escalated to at least 35 days and the space devoted has reached the 5.6% (elpais.com) and the 8.3% (lavanguardia.com). Media interest was higher in Barcelona-based newspapers than in Madrid-based ones, both in broadsheet and sporting. Thus, elpais.com and marca.com’s contribution to the corpus was fixed at 7.4% and 37.3%, respectively, while Barcelona’s lavanguardia.com and mundodeportivo.com’s contribution stepped up to a 13.2% and 41.8%, respectively.

We are afraid this trend, as previously seen by Isasi Varela (2006:69), implies a limitation to the representativity of the selected sample, as FCB-biased information is presumed to be more salient. Subsequently, a larger number of FCB news items are expected. As a whole, the causes for these facts are not easy to seek. Although partly provoked by the greater attention toward FCB in Barcelona-based media, an overall 3 FCB to 1 RMD news ratio, it remains unexplained, however, the greater attention elpais.com devotes to FCB and the almost equal attention to both teams devoted by marca.com, supposedly RMD-biased.

Over 100 individual characters were codified in the clásico news during the 35 days period. Quantitatively speaking, 87% of news items were starred by at least one individual character, while 13% contained collective or undetermined characters. In accordance with these results, the headlines in which quotations were incorporated added up to the 39%. Two out of three characters, individual or collective, were football players and managers currently employed. In spite of the big number of characters identified, the majority of them were concentrated in only 4 actors: the managers and the most popular footballers starred 41% of the news items.

José Mourinho, former manager of Porto, Chelsea and Inter Milan, is two times UEFA Champions League (UCL) winner, and one of the most reputed football coaches in Europe for over a decade. RMD made him a multimillion Euro offer to join the team in 2010. Josep Guardiola, two times UCL champion as well, has made a great impact in elite football since he was promoted from FCB B team. In an
unexpected move, FCB management decided to give an opportunity to the inexperienced Guardiola, who has succeeded since in positioning FCB as arguably the best football team in the world. Guardiola was born near Barcelona and his public appearances speaking Catalan language in conjunction with his declared Catalanist feelings has made him a perfect ambassador of FCB’s identity and Catalan territory. Both managers are considered to be among the best coaches in the planet.

As to the players, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi are presumably at this moment the two main contenders for the throne of the best player in the world. RMD bought Ronaldo from Manchester United in 2009 after paying a record fee of 96M€. Messi, on the other hand, moved to Barcelona with his family when he was 13, and is therefore widely perceived by FCB supporters as a home grown player. These four actors became the most salient characters of the news agenda during the examined period.

The axial coding allowed the authors to connect these four main actors with the themes identified in the open coding process. By means of inductive reasoning, more abstract categories were formed, enabling news items to transform into longer narratives. To address the research question about the conflict construction, coding was intended to locate the conflict element, namely, the enemy against which every narrative was constructed upon. Being so, conflict narratives were reduced to the story of a battle between an actor and its opponent. Inside and outside opponents were identified. Outside opponents were: the rival club/institution, the rival team and the media. Regarding the inside opponents we could find: the player himself, his own team, and his own club/institution.

*The conflict construction: the 25 days prior to the game*

Three stages were differentiated concerning the conflict construction of the four main actors. Stage 1 was the conflict production. Starting on November 16th, an incipient conflict generation can be seen. The most notable feature at this point was the lack of a direct conflict, that is to say, a third actor alien to the confrontation between the protagonists always entered the stage to ignite the flame, so to speak. The two managers were early confronted in this stage. “Javier Clemente [football manager]: ‘I am more into Mourinho than Guardiola’” (mundodeportivo.com, 18-11-11).
In this stage quotations came chiefly from within the opposite club “Johan Cruyff [former FCB manager and player]: ‘I know who will be a good replace for Guardiola and that is not Mourinho’”. Anyhow, as the matchday approached, the media promoted the inside conflict wherein characters were confronted against their own institutions: “Zlatan Ibrahimovic [former FCB player]: ‘The Bernabéu will be it for the philosopher [meaning Guardiola]’” (elpais.com, 06-12-11), “Ramón Calderón [former RMD president]: ‘Mourinho treats RMD as if it was a mediocre team’” (marca.com, 09-12-11). Similarly to the managers’ conflict, the main players’ narratives correlate with the Stage 1 construction. Sports journalism avoided the direct clash between the two players and continued to construct the struggle by means of third parties. Alien actors came into play. “Coppola [Maradona’s former agent]: ‘Messi is infinitely better than Ronaldo’” (mundodeportivo.com, 23-11-11), “Guti [RMD former player]: ‘Messi or Ronaldo? Messi, no doubt!’” (marca.com, 29-11-11), or “Messi is worth more than Ronaldo. A marketing report…” (mundodeportivo.com, 26-11-11).

All in all, Stage 1 of the conflict production in sports journalism’s discourse showed a leaning towards quotations. In Stage 2, however, quotes lost momentum and the confrontation between the actors developed into a more direct phase. Needless to say, the volume of news increased steadily as the match got closer. This second phase can be followed up until the kick-off and is distinguished from Stage 1 because of its straightforward and open conflict approach. No third parties were required as the media directly confronted the main actors with their opponents. Although the number of narratives starred by Guardiola and Mourinho were rather similar, the Portuguese manager was mostly the recipient of the conflict narratives.

This cannot come as a surprise given Mourinho is a controversial character and alleged arrogant — i.e. calling himself ‘the special one’ — unlike Guardiola, whose public persona communicates politeness and political correctness. In addition to his polemic nature, Mourinho also has a background as FCB’s assistant manager — and translator, often the argument employed by FCB supporters to make fun of Mourinho — in the late 1990s. In short, four main opponents of Mourinho were observed in the days preceding the game:

2) The media, angered by Mourinho’s refusal to address the press, criticized RMD’s manager. “Mourinho. Barcelona, no comment” (marca.com, 01-12-11), “Mourinho keeps silence before the clásico” (marca.com, 09-12-11), “Mourinho shies away from tension. The Portuguese avoids the press…” (lavanguardia.com, 09-12-11), “From Mourinho to mute [Mudinho in the original]. The manager decided not to address the media…” (mundodeportivo.com, 10-12-11).

3) His own team, as the first inside opponent, challenged Mourinho’s authority, while the media reflected the internal struggle. “Ozil off the starting line-up? A row between the German and Mou…” (lavanguardia.com, 08-12-11), “Casillas [RMD’s goalkeeper], a captain with honour. The goalkeeper stood up to Mourinho…” (elpais.com, 10-12-11).

4) His own club, and in particular its supporters, played the biggest opposing role in the narratives, “Fans don’t like Mourinho’s trivote [three midfield stoppers]” (marca.com, 09-12-11), reaping what they sowed days before in an attempt to portray Mourinho as a conservative strategist unwilling to face bravely the grand FCB, “Operation armoring” (marca.com, 29-11-11), “Mourinho’s game. The coach tries to make the players understand that sometimes defending comes first” (elpais.com, 09-12-11).

Matchday and the day before showed an increased in media attention on Mourinho as conflict generator. Memory came in handy so past incidents involving Mourinho could be interpreted as part of a tale in which media could foresee the next chapters. “The 17 matches and its 17 controversies. Mourinho’s history with FCB…” (elpais.com, 10-12-11), “Mou, your finger is guidance to us” (marca.com, 10-12-11) referring to an incident involving Mourinho happened a few months ago in which he put his finger in the
eye of FCB’s assistant manager Tito Vilanova, or “Mourinho and the sprinkler activation trick” (marca.com, 09-12-11), remembering a foul play that took place the previous season.

Stage 2 for the main star players occurred the same way as to managers. Each footballer became the outside opponent of the rival player as the clash derived frontal. “Cristiano shows confidence while Messi disturbance, according to a study…” (lavanguardia.com, 07-12-11), “Messi and Ronaldo to settle universal battle” (mundodeportivo.com, 10-12-11). Similarly to what happened with the managers, memory, this time in the form of statistics, played the role of conflict generator. “Messi equals Ronaldo to 16 goals” (mundodeportivo.com, 30-11-11), “Messi catches Ronaldo with 17 goals before the visit to Madrid” (lavanguardia.com, 08-12-11).

*The outcome as conflict generator: the 10 days after the game*

Stage 3 of the conflict construction, located in the post-game reflected a dissimilar evolution in RMD and FCB main characters. Contrary to the coverage before the game where both teams performed similarly in terms of news agenda, the defeat of RMD attracted way more media attention after the game (as we can see in Figure 2) while FCB’s protagonists faced a continuing interest decrease as narrative’s actors. FCB’s manager was turned into a hero after the match. Media depicted Guardiola with a triumphant discourse of moral superiority. “Guardiola: ‘This is who we are’” (elpais.com, 11-12-11), “Guardiola’s Barça, lord and master in Bernabéu” (lavanguardia.com, 11-12-11), “Guardiola: ‘I must admit the strength and ambition of my players’” (mundodeportivo.com, 11-12-11), “Guardiola: ‘I thought it would be harder” (marca.com, 11-12-11).

(Figure 2 around here)

Notwithstanding this initial media notoriety, FCB and Guardiola’s narratives as well as Messi’s vanished from media agenda as soon as December 12, two days after the match. Instead, the focus changed sides to the defeated team with RMD’s manager at the epicenter of it. Mourinho conducted a self-exoneration strategy while media promoted a blaming frame. The manager alluded to luck and the referee as the two
most important external factors that caused the failure. “Mourinho pissed at Borbalán for the Messi affair” (marca.com, 11-12-11), “Mourinho: ‘it was all about luck’” (lavanguardia.com, 11-12-11), “Mourinho: ‘Luck makes the difference’” (marca.com, 11-12-11). The media nevertheless unanimously put the blame on him and constructed conflict narratives wherein an individualized actor, Mourinho, shall turned out the antihero of his own story. Inside conflict was promoted due to the players’ lack of faith in their manager, “Players think Mourinho’s strategy is not enough to...” (elpais.com, 12-12-11) as they denounced Mourinho’s blame diversion attempt on his own players “Ozil [RMD player], the scapegoat” (lavanguardia.com, 15-12-11). Likewise the inside conflict impregnated the institution/manager relationship, “Florentino [RMD president] disappointed with Mourinho’s defensive attitude” (mundodeportivo.com, 15-12-11).

This argument about the manager’s lack of courage was precisely the spark that ignited the fans/manager conflict promoted by the media encouraging online participation “Is Mourinho the one to blame?” (marca.com, 13-12-11). It is important to note nonetheless that the main inside enemy was an inner enemy, namely Mourinho himself. The manager’s depiction as incapable of prevailing over FCB’s mastermind Guardiola was utilized by the media to emphasize Mourinho’s inability to live up to fans expectations “Guardiola’s courage, Mourinho’s passivity” (lavanguardia.com, 11-12-11), “Inferiority complex” (marca.com, 12-12-11), “mental block” (mundodeportivo.com, 12-12-11), “Mourinho’s funnel” (elpais.com, 13-12-11), “Mourinho cannot wake up from his nightmare [Pepsadilla in the original]”.

When it came to main players, Messi and Ronaldo evolved in a very similar way as their managers. The centre of attention was redirected to Ronaldo once the post-game news coverage of Messi’s ‘heroification’ lost momentum. Some differences were observed in the mediated narratives though. In marca.com the player/fans inside conflict was privileged “Ronaldo gets an F from supporters” (marca.com, 11-12-11) but it was somehow sweetened by player/own team consensus “Casillas: ‘Ronaldo is our meal ticket’” (marca.com, 11-12-11), and by player/own institution consensus “Sanchís [RMD former player]: We can’t blame Cristiano for everything” (marca.com, 13-12-11). This narrative was not abandoned until Ronaldo’s next match in which he was supposed to ‘make it up’ to the fans by a great
performance. As a matter of fact, a few days later, after scoring three goals the player stated: ‘Now they can shut up’” (marca.com, 18-12-11).

In mundodeportivo.com on the other hand, the focus was placed on the inner conflict of the player and its inability to rise to the challenge and prevail over Messi. Nouns such as humiliation, obsession, anxiety and frustration came up in media discourse: “Leo Messi humiliates Ronaldo once again” (mundodeportivo.com, 11-12-11), “The RMD is looking for psychologist […] Ronaldo, obsessed with Messi, incarnates the frustration and anxiety…” (mundodeportivo.com, 12-12-11). In elpais.com this controversial construction was historically framed and expressed a continued narrative of failure “Cristiano, who did nothing of significance, exposes his usual limitations” (elpais.com, 11-12-11), “Cristiano, as happened in Manchester, small-time player in big days” (elpais.com, 11-12-11).

**Discussion**

In general, despite the fact that the RMD-FCB rivalry was often conceptualized in terms of war conflict (Chapanga, 2004; Nordin, 2008) as we can see in expressions such as “assault on Bernabéu” (mundodeportivo.com, 10/12/11), “new tactic battle” (mundodeportivo.com, 10/12/11), or “loaded arms” (lavanguardia.com, 10/12/11), this conceptualization however did not relate to the national identity clash. No news was codified under this theme plus no references were found in relation to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), Spanish or Catalan History and Spanish state administration. Even though the ‘national identity conflict between Spain and Catalonia framework’ to examine the meaning of the clásico is a widely assumed corollary in the literature (e.g., León Solís, 2003; Relaño 2012) we must conclude, as the results suggest, that the Spanish online newspapers do not manufacture an identity-oriented discourse; but that is not to say in the least, that this identity conflict does not exist or that is not somehow implicit in the news. What we just try to pinpoint is that despite its evidenced influence from the sociological or anthropological standpoint (Shore 2008; Xifra 2008), one could argue that this influence does not correlate in the journalistic discourse in online media in Spain. In fact, on the contrary, conflict construction was essentially based on a few individuals, namely the main players and team managers (Whannel, 2002).
The construction was *discoursivized* in three stages. In Stage 1, the production stage, another chapter of the 110 years-old *clásico* conflict was brought into attention. Arguably ‘quote culture’ (Boyle, 2006) was utilized in order to create the illusory perception that media joined a pre-existing conflict, not manufactured by them. This way, quotes are valid to simulate externally generated controversy as words are always ‘alien to the media’ produced. In this sense the witness-certified conflict kick-off further develops the Cold War metaphor (Salvador, 2004) in which direct confrontation is transformed into a third-person generated quote clash occurring in a neutral field. Once the RMD-FCB controversy emerged, Stage 2 of the play came into focus. Narratives in this phase were created so that they could be followed up onto the Stage 3 after the game. Similarly, as in the Aristotelian three-act structure, Stage 2 events are left unfinished only to be later reintroduced in Stage 3. It is noteworthy that not every narrative thread was later reintroduced in Stage 3 but some of them were lost as the match itself did not *actualize* those narratives (e.g. media proposed conflict narratives about Guardiola-Piqué [FCB player] relationship but the match development in conjunction with the favourable outcome did not feed this narrative thread). However, it is worth noting that, as mentioned by Alabarces the defeat in itself did not generate any new dominant theme within the media discourse (2001:561).

In Stage 3 data revealed an overwhelming focus on failure narratives (Knight et al., 2005) in comparison with success narratives. The antihero construction (Gardiner, 2006) prevailed over the hero in accordance with the ‘crisis and contradiction emphasis’ narratives (Moragas, 1992:15) that characterize the sports journalism; albeit major differences were observed in the guilt orientation as RMD antihero manager suffered a normative-oriented blaming process and depicted as incapable and uncommitted, while Cristiano Ronaldo suffered a mixed approach, wherein normative-oriented elements such as inability to match expectations were combined with cognitive-oriented elements of ambition to heal and faith in next game recovery.

*Result limitations and implications*
Sport journalism cannot be separated from the social context that gives birth to it. A neutral sample of Spanish newspapers covering the clásico rivalry is virtually impossible to obtain, as media-community bonds are strong in such a national interest phenomenon. One might argue that the inclusion of separatist Catalanian websites such as ElPunt/Avui could have led to more identity–conflict–oriented results. However, in the event of this assumption were true, we consider these dailies lack representativity and impact – as they reach a small amount of readers – in order to assess the validity of the findings countrywide.

At any rate, the authors believe and tried to express in this article that despite the distinct framing approaches between the selected websites, altogether the results found here are representative and significant of the clásico coverage in Spanish online sports journalism as a whole. The aim of this research was not to point out the different coverage among the dailies but to seek for common narrative structures shared by every media. This should allow us to produce generalized knowledge about the clásico news in Spain so it can be traced back to its core methodology and apply elsewhere in the future to new football confrontations.

The synchronic selected sample, albeit always evolving in time, only covers a single football match. We can just hypothesize what effect a different outcome would have had in news coverage, say, a FCB defeat, or a referee’s controversial decision. The authors perceive nevertheless that the clásico played on 10 December 2011 was one of the least conflictive clashes of the recent past, which in a way, permitted us to closely examine the task of sports journalism and their way to create ex novo a discursive conflict that reality refused to provide.

In relation to the exclusion of the articles in length and the selection of a sample composed entirely of headlines and sub-headlines, we assume certain limitations as we keep out of the research the themes developed through the text as well as the significance of the images and illustrations. However, considering the extent of the sample, over 11,000 units, and the precise definition of the items of interest in the content, we might presume that all those items – namely the actors, the themes, and the presence of
the regional-national identity conflict – have not been overlooked and that no major variation would occur if we were to expand the sample or include the full articles.

Conclusion

Embedded in a global era, modern football has undergone deep changes in the last two decades, as pointed out by infinite scholars, due to its internationalization and commodification that transformed it into a mass consumption good. These dynamics have affected the way football clubs construct their identity values and have hastened the abandonment of the so-called “nationalistic matrix” (Llopis Goig, 2009:10) in favour of a post-national liquid identity (Alabarces, 2001). This trend jointly with the Bosman ruling enforced in the mid-90s provoked a massive arrival of foreign players to major leagues and somehow diluted the media attention towards the ‘national question’.

The RMD and FCB case is noteworthy because while literature insistently keeps framing it on the grounds of national identity clash, media’s interest, as our results suggest, neglects this frame and promotes a frame that lays emphasis on the clash between the main individual characters. Clásico coverage is thus consequent to the ‘celebrity culture’ perspective (Whannel, 2002, 2009, 2010) that characterizes the sports journalistic praxis in the new century. This individualization process, we argue, is reinforced by the ‘quote culture’ observed by Boyle (2006:42) that stresses the notoriety of a few actors to the detriment of collectiveness. We must agree with Moragas (1992) and Rowe (2003) that contradiction, difference and crisis are pivotal elements in sport journalism discourse, prior to the game but particularly afterwards. In a nutshell, ‘celebrity culture’, plus ‘quote culture’, plus the emphasis in contradictory elements, altogether produce narratives that place parenthesis on the individualized culpability in the context of failure. On top of that, these failure narratives saturate the media agenda favouring the role of the villain over the victorious hero.

Scientific research on football and cultural identity faces new challenges. Until now, the key to understanding sporting rivalries was located in the social context this rivalry flourished and feeds. Albeit those are areas definitely not to be abandoned, we believe the rapid transformation of the media, and its
major role in conflict construction, makes it inevitable that research focuses on the particularities of news production practices rather than the features or background of the content they deliver. Moreover, conflict narratives in sport so far have centred on gender, race and nation (Billings and Eastman, 2002:352), hence placing the controversy roots outside the sport *per se*, that is, turning sport into the recipient wherein pre-existing social conflicts are reflected but mainly not generated. Although we completely agree with the latter, the collected data seems to suggest that, as far as sports journalism is concerned, the sport-based resources are enough for controversy generation, considering sport is competition and therefore conflict, and consequently the necessary ingredients to manufacture it are provided.

**Notes**

1 The analysed clásico match belonged to the first leg of Spanish football league played in the Santiago Bernabéu stadium in Madrid on December 10 2011. RMD was leading the table with 3 points over FCB, in second position. The head-to-head results in the last 10 games showed 6 FCB victories, 3 ties and 1 RMD victory, despite the general perception at the time was that the RMD was closing up the gap between the two teams. The FCB was undefeated in Santiago Bernabéu since 2008. The match ended up in a 1-3 victory for FCB.


3 EGM. Readership (February-November 2011). Marca: 2,960,000 daily readers (next of its kind, As: 1,470,000). El País: 1,915,000 (El Mundo: 1,234,000). Mundo Deportivo: 719,000 (Sport: 710,000). La Vanguardia: 849,000 (El Periódico de Catalunya: 731,000).

4 The website, contrary to the press edition, is subject to updates all day long. In order to determine the adequate number of screen captures a day to avoid repetition, a 3-day random sub-sample was selected. Two captures were examined each day, one at 10am and the other at 9pm, to assess the rate of repetition of the news. It was observed that within the sub-sample (n=92) only 14% of the news items were maintained from dawn to dusk. So we decided for a twice a day screen capture that allowed us to have a small rate of repetition while guarantying no news were lost.

5 The club or institution involves every person in connection with it, except the people belonging to team category. The team involves every player or coach currently employed by the club. Thus, former players, former coaches, and staff members such as club presidents or ex-presidents are included in club/institution category.

6 Josep Guardiola resigned as FCB coach at the end of 2011-2012 season and went on sabbatical due to exhaustion while Mourinho continues as RMD manager.
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**Figure 1.** *Clásico* News coverage evolution in analysed media from 16 November to 20 December, 2011
Figure 2. Main actors’ news coverage evolution in analysed media from 11 to 20 December 2011.