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MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF SPORTS IN DAILY NEWSPAPERS IN SERBIA

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Abstract: In pursuit of higher readership and viewership, the media devotes particular attention to sports content, aligning with audience expectations. In doing so, they significantly contribute to the promotion and popularization of sports—not only among sports enthusiasts but also among advertisers and the general public. This paper examines the way daily newspapers in Serbia cover sports, with a particular focus on the representation of less popular sports and women's sports. The research aims to determine the extent to which the media contributes to the unequal representation of sports in their coverage. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative content analysis across nine daily newspapers: Politika, Večernje novosti, Danas, Blic, Nova, Alo, Informer, Kurir, and Srpski telegraf. The results indicate a dominant presence of football, basketball, and men's sports overall, while women's sports and less popular disciplines are significantly underrepresented.

Keywords: sport, media, daily newspapers, women's sport, journalism

Media in Sport

Sports content has become an almost indispensable component of most mainstream media outlets worldwide. Media organizations have dedicated editorial teams that focus exclusively on sports coverage. Daily newspapers often include sports sections, and major television networks regularly broadcast large-scale sporting events. The relationship between sport and the media spans centuries. Various sources identify different historical origins of sports journalism, ranging from the 15th century—when the word "sport" was first mentioned in published articles (English, 2018: 2)—to the

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18th century, when sports journalism began to emerge as a distinct field (English, 2018: 2; Beck and Bosshart, 2003: 6).

The influence of mass media has turned the sport into a “global phenomenon” (Dziubiński, Jankowski, Lenartowicz, et al., 2012: 287), and accordingly, a large body of academic literature and research has been dedicated to this domain. The popularity of sport, in line with audience expectations, has steadily increased over the years. This trend has been further accelerated by the development of new technologies, resulting in a “noticeable increase in demand” (Schultz and Arke, 2016: 6).

Numerous studies have confirmed the public's interest in sports content in the media. For example, a 1978 study found that sports ranked second in terms of the percentage of time readers spent on daily newspaper content—17 percent—right after “hard news,” which accounted for 40 percent of readers' time (Weaver and Mauro, 1978, as cited in Wanta, 2006: 117).

According to academic research on the relationship between sports and media, it is widely acknowledged that sports have become “more than just a game and athletic competition” (Penezić, 2020: 546) and that mass media are “crucial for the advancement of any sporting activity” (Gulam, 2016, as cited in Carvalho and Fazenda, 2018: 1981). Consequently, various theories of sports mediatization have emerged, recognizing that sport is one of the “most popular and most productive media events” (Milenković and Milenković, 2022a: 1232). Some scholars, however, argue that the process is reciprocal, with “media being sportized” (Rowe, 2009: 544).

Researchers also highlight the link between sports content and commercial interests, pointing to the commodification of the sport–media relationship. Sports content is described as “attractive merchandise” (Dziubiński, Jankowski, Lenartowicz, et al., 2012: 287), with media outlets following audience expectations “in the race for profit” (Penezić and Selenić, 2025: 58). As James Potter explains, while the public shows significant interest in sports, “to increase revenue flow, it was necessary to increase the number of sports fans each year” (Potter, 2011: 487).

Beyond factual reporting and live broadcasts, sports journalism has, in recent years, increasingly leaned toward “infotainment,” combining information with entertainment. As a result, journalists “must be aware of the trend toward celebrity-oriented reporting” (Schultz and Arke, 2016: 11). Many scholars emphasize that mass media today play a significant role in creating sports stars or superstars—idols and champions alike (Penezić, 2020; Ilić and Sobek, 2014; Planinić and Ljubičić, 2020).

Turning to audiences, one study on Croatian media found that readers are most interested in “stories highlighting the success of athletes, clubs, or national teams” (Lacković, Pavić & Tkalec, 2023: 66). This is somewhat intuitive, considering that sports

consumption is often tied to “national sentiment” (Dugalić, 2018: 57). Nevertheless, a cursory look at media content reveals that coverage is heavily skewed toward popular and team sports, while many other sports are frequently neglected. This pattern, too, is linked to audience interest—and, by extension, to commercial factors.

A 2023 Gallup survey conducted in the United States found that 41 percent of respondents identified football as their favorite sport to follow (Gallup, 2023). Basketball ranked second with 10 percent, followed by baseball at 9 percent. Similar patterns are observable in other countries, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Football is often referred to as “the most important unimportant thing in the world” and is considered a “social phenomenon” (Carvalho and Fazenda, 2018: 1980–1981). It is also the sport that is “most popular and most prominently represented in media coverage” (Milenković and Milenković, 2022a: 1248), with mass media playing a central role in transforming it into “a top-tier entertainment show” (Milenković and Milenković, 2022b: 216).

Millions of people around the world watch football broadcasts, elevating football players to celebrity status and making them some of the highest-paid athletes globally. As a result, football has become “significantly more expensive” (Milenković and Milenković, 2022a: 1234) and is often considered “the most profitable media product” (Milenković and Milenković, 2022b: 205).

Football holds a prominent position in newspapers and prime-time TV slots, which contributes to its “central place in the lives of a large number of people worldwide” (Bajić, 2023: 90). Some researchers argue that this prominence is reinforced by the “active interaction between the game and the audience” (Carvalho and Fazenda, 2018: 1982), prompting many media outlets to develop “audience engagement strategies” (Cleland, 2011: 20).

Another topic frequently debated in academic, media and sports circles is the under-representation of women’s sports in media coverage. In addition to insufficient presence, scholars often criticize the way female athletes are portrayed. Critics argue that media content tends to emphasize “traditional female roles and 'acceptable' sports for women, such as gymnastics, tennis, swimming, and diving” (Wanta, 2006: 113).

In their study, theorists Daniel Beck and Louis Bosshart observe that male athletes are generally portrayed as athletic and physically powerful, whereas female athletes are depicted in terms of “beauty, physical attractiveness, and desirability, with particular emphasis on their bodies” (Beck and Bosshart, 2003: 16).

The often-used argument that “the media simply provide the public with what it wants (i.e., men’s sports)” (Carlisle Duncan, 2003: 252) has been rejected by researchers such as Margaret Carlisle Duncan as unfounded and inadequate.

Sports Coverage in the Serbian Media

Research findings vary regarding the level of audience engagement with sports content in Serbian print and online media. The Digital News Report (2022) indicates that 44% of the audience is interested in sports news but that sports rank seventh among topics of interest—after local news, international affairs, politics, health, the economy, and entertainment news (Kleut, Ninković Slavnić, Ilić, et al., 2022: 15). In contrast, data from the Center for Media Professionalization and Media Literacy (CEPROM, 2023) show that sports are the most followed content among online media users, with 38.1% of respondents expressing primary interest in this category, followed by society, economy, and politics (Nedeljković, 2023).

As for specific sports, football receives the most media coverage in Serbia—“regardless of the actual results achieved by Serbian footballers” (Milenković and Milenković, 2022a: 1233). This trend began as early as the late 19th century when *Večernje novosti* reported on the first football match played in Belgrade in 1896 (Milenković and Milenković, 2022b: 232).

The issue of sports representation in domestic media was addressed decades ago by Professor Sergije Lukač, founder of the Journalism Department at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade. He noted that sports journalists primarily focus on commercial sports, “chasing record-breaking sensations, while amateur and smaller sports are completely sidelined” (Petrović and Penezić, 2023: 151).

An analysis of front pages in Serbian daily newspapers from 2018 revealed that this trend persists, with football dominating coverage, followed by tennis, volleyball, and, to a much lesser extent, basketball and wrestling (Bajić and Petrović, 2019: 32).

Similar findings have been reported in studies on electronic media, particularly television programming. In 2017, regulatory authorities analyzed 18 TV channels and nearly 200 hours of programming across six countries², with Serbia’s Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM) among the participants. Football emerged as the most frequently broadcast sport across all surveyed regions (MNRA, 2017: 33).

Data specific to Serbia confirmed football’s dominance in televised sports news, with a total of 288 football-related stories. Basketball followed with 186, then tennis with 160, futsal with 46, athletics with 22, and both water polo and volleyball with 20 each. Sports such as handball, skiing, Formula 1, fencing, and others were mentioned fewer than 20 times (MNRA, 2017: 19).

This level of media coverage aligns with the popularity of sports among Serbian citizens. According to a 2025 survey by Ipsos Strategic Marketing, football remains the most popular sport in Serbia, named by 37% of respondents, followed by basketball (33%) and tennis (13%) (RTS, 2025).

² The research included Spain, Croatia, Morocco, Portugal, Serbia, and France.

The cultural significance of football in Serbia is perhaps best captured by theorists Vesna Milenković and Dejan Milenković, who wrote that “great victories are celebrated, while great defeats are mourned” (Milenković and Milenković, 2022a: 1233), noting that, unfortunately, defeats have been more frequent. In contrast, basketball—which “belongs to the group of most successful sports in Serbia, especially when it comes to national teams” (Penezić and Selenić, 2025: 131)—receives far less media attention than football.

Domestic research on the visibility of women’s sports in the media echoes global findings. Again referencing Sergije Lukač, he had long ago highlighted the “unequal position of women in sport compared to men” (Petrović and Penezić, 2023: 151).

According to the aforementioned report by media regulatory bodies on televised sports content, 82.86% of sports news was devoted to men’s sports, while only 17.14% covered women’s sports (MNRA, 2017: 14). Regarding live broadcasts, men’s sports accounted for 84% of all air time, compared to 16% for women’s events (MNRA, 2017: 29).

A 2023 study by the sports association “Women Sport Society” addressed the same issue and found that 76.2% of airtime in electronic media was devoted to men’s sports, compared to only 23.8% for women’s sports (Pančić, 2023).

This lack of visibility extends beyond sports. Studies indicate that women are generally underrepresented in Serbian media. The Who Makes the News, Serbia – National Report from 2020 found that women accounted for only “20% of the people who were talked about, written about, or shown in newspapers, on television, on radio, and in digital news” (WACC, 2021: 11).

Methodology

The subject of this research is the representation of sports in the context of nationally distributed daily newspapers. The analysis included nine newspapers—Politika, Danas, Informer, Alo, Srpski telegraf, Nova, Blic, Kurir, and Večernje novosti—covering the period from April 7 to June 1, 2025. A constructed week sample design was applied, whereby a different day was analyzed in each week to ensure representation across all days of the week, from Monday to Sunday. The only exception was the week in which Thursday fell on May 1 (a national holiday), when newspapers were not published. The analyzed dates included Monday, April 7; Tuesday, April 15; Wednesday, April 23; Thursday, May 8; Friday, May 16; Saturday, May 24; and Sunday, June 1. Newspapers that publish weekend double issues, such as Danas, Nova, and Informer, were analyzed in the final week using the content from the Saturday, May 31 issue, which was also available for sale on June 1.

The constructed week sample was chosen to avoid bias from the overrepresentation of particular sports that may have been prominent during specific events and which could receive disproportionate media attention over multiple days in a given week.

The research employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the representation of sports in media coverage, including the presence of men's and women's sports, as well as the appearance of sports stories on newspaper front pages.

One of the primary objectives of this study is to identify reporting trends in sports journalism and to highlight potential inequalities in the coverage of specific sports, as well as women's sports, in the media.

Research Findings: Daily Newspapers in Serbia

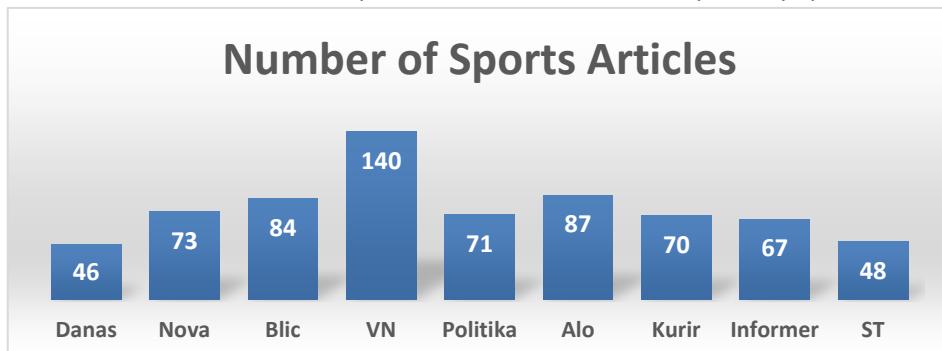
Representation of Sports

This study examined nine daily newspapers in Serbia—Politika, Danas, Večernje novosti, Blic, Kurir, Nova, Informer, Alo, and Srpski telegraf—over a seven-day period, from April 7 to June 1, 2025. All nine newspapers include dedicated sports sections, typically located on the final pages of each issue.

On average, the sports sections comprised two to three pages per issue. The only paper with a special sports supplement was Večernje novosti, which published an eight-page sports insert on Thursday, May 8. During the research period, the nine newspapers published a total of 686 articles related to sports.

Večernje novosti featured the highest number of sports articles—140 in seven editions. It was followed by Alo with 87, Blic with 84, Nova with 73, Politika with 71, Kurir with 70, and Informer with 67. The lowest numbers were recorded in Srpski telegraf and Danas, with 48 and 46 articles, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of Sports Articles in Serbian Daily Newspapers



Regarding the representation of specific sports, the findings support previous global and national research indicating that football dominates sports coverage. Out of the 686 total articles, football accounted for 264, or 38.5%. It was followed by basketball, which appeared in 238 articles or 34.7% of the total.

Interestingly, basketball received more coverage than football in five of the nine newspapers—Danas, Nova, Blic, Politika, and Kurir—but the overall cumulative count favored football.

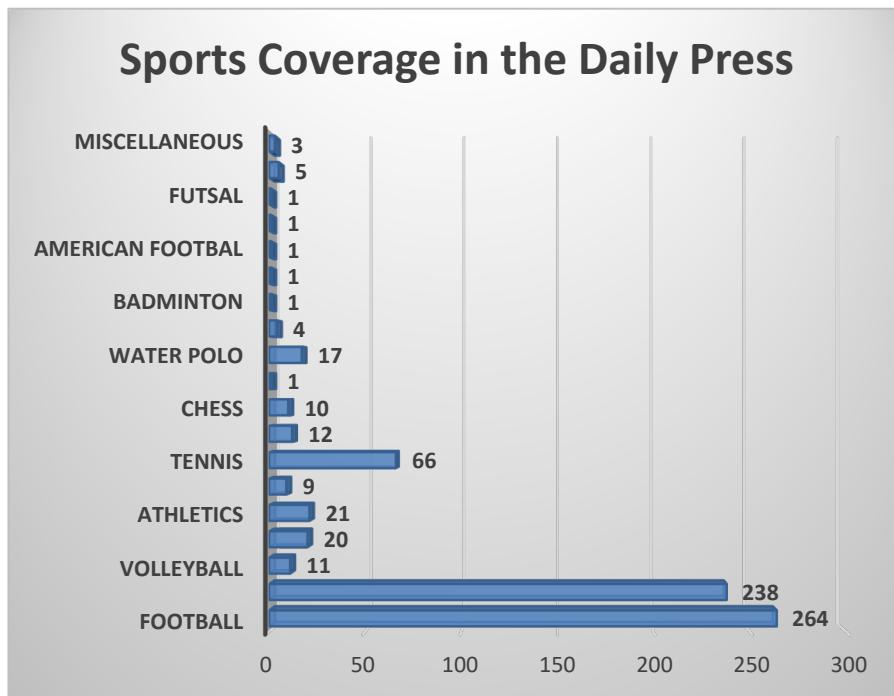
Tennis followed with 66 articles, making up 9.6% of the total. All other sports received less than half the media attention compared to the top two. Athletics accounted for 3.06% of the articles, handball for 2.9%, water polo for 2.5%, Formula 1 for 1.75%, volleyball for 1.6%, and chess for 1.46%.

Other sports that appeared sporadically in the analyzed period included martial arts, hockey, rowing, badminton, skiing, American football, gymnastics, and futsal. Collectively, these disciplines accounted for less than 4% of total sports coverage (Table 2).

It is worth noting that basketball and tennis received increased attention from Serbian sports journalists during this period, primarily due to the international success and record-breaking achievements of Serbian athletes Nikola Jokić (NBA) and Novak Djokovic (tennis).

Athletics, on the other hand, received greater coverage than usual, mainly due to the Belgrade Marathon—one of the country's most significant sporting events in that discipline—and the performance of prominent Serbian track and field athlete Angelina Topić.

Table 2. Representation of Sports in Serbian Daily Newspapers



During the research period, five articles were categorized as “mixed,” referring to reports on sporting events that featured multiple disciplines, such as the Olympic Games, school sports competitions, and similar formats.

In addition, three articles categorized as “miscellaneous” reported on general investments in sports in Serbia and the activities of the Ministry of Sport.

Sports on Front Pages

During the seven observed days and across 63 front pages, a total of 16 sports-related news items appeared on the front pages of daily newspapers in Serbia. Proportionally, every fourth front page featured a headline from the field of sports. The only two newspapers that did not highlight sports topics on their front pages were Danas and Nova.

On four of the 16 front pages mentioning sports, the news about the “Belgrade Marathon” was featured on April 7, 2025. This event, already mentioned in the text as the most prominent manifestation of its kind in Serbia, received prominent coverage in the newspapers Blic, Večernje novosti, Alo, and Politika — the latter being the only front page to feature a sports-related headline.

Two front pages, both from Blic, were dedicated to Serbia’s best tennis player and one of the greatest players in the history of the sport, Novak Djokovic. Additionally, Večernje novosti promoted their special sports supplement, “Sport,” which was published in the same issue.

Among other notable headlines is “Nikola at Bogdan,” highlighted by Alo as a preview of an NBA game featuring basketball players Nikola Jokić and Bogdan Bogdanović. Furthermore, Informer featured two headlines: one reporting a statement from Bogdan Bogdanović expressing confidence that Nikola Jokić will participate in the upcoming EuroBasket, and another announcing that “Bukari is back at Zvezda.”

The remaining six headlines were less directly related to sports events but concerned athletes themselves. Three of these six fall into the category of “crime news,” two of which appeared on the front pages of Srpski Telegraf and Alo, titled “Karlik maimed a man” and “Karlik nearly killed a man,” respectively. Both newspapers reported sensationalistically on a fight at a nightclub in which Partizan basketball player Karlik Jones allegedly smashed a bottle over another participant’s head.

Similarly, on May 24, Srpski Telegraf ran a front-page headline: “Survived bombs in Israel, died in his homeland,” providing an extensive report on the death of basketball player Marko Andrić Brka from Sremska Mitrovica, who died in a traffic accident.

Kurir dedicated its only two sports front pages to news that “Ronaldinho sent a message to Vučić: See you!” announcing his planned visit to Serbia for the opening of

the EXPO 2027 exhibition and to the news that “Jarić refused to sell his Miami villa to Beyoncé and Jay-Z.”

On May 24, Alo published a life story on its front page titled “Teacher worthy of a medal” about Nikolina Gajić, who has won 150 prestigious boxing medals and teaches at the “Dr Archibald Reiss” school in Belgrade.

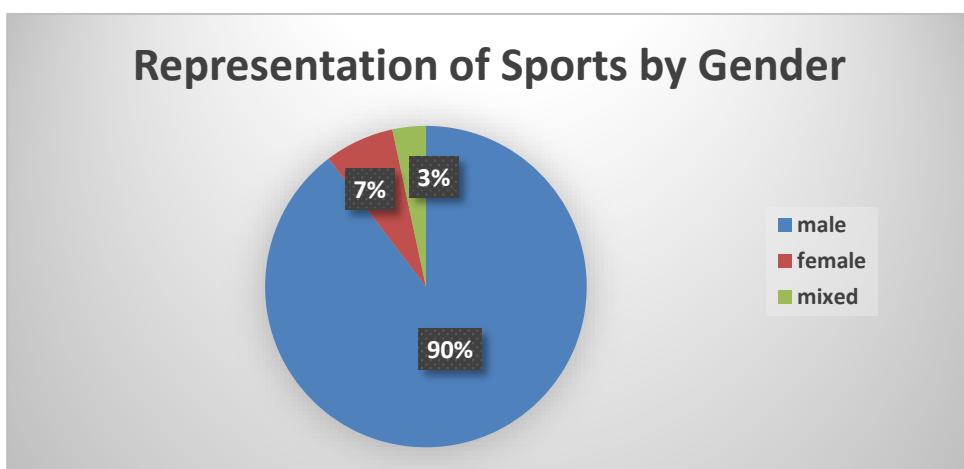
Women's vs. Men's Sport

One segment of this research focused on the disparity in coverage between men's and women's sports. The results reveal a significant imbalance between the two, a phenomenon highlighted by numerous media and sports journalism scholars and researchers. Specifically, during the study period, 90% of the content in the nine Serbian newspapers analyzed was dedicated to men's sports, while only 7% was devoted to women's sports, and 3% of the coverage was classified as “mixed” (Table 3).

The “mixed” category includes news about events featuring both female and male participants, such as the Olympic Games, marathons with both men's and women's competitions, as well as tennis and chess tournaments and school sports events. There were also reports, for example, on the latest world ranking positions of male and female tennis players. Notably, Kurir was the only one of the nine newspapers that did not publish a single piece about women's sports.

Women were most prominently represented in athletics coverage during the analyzed period, with the highest number of articles across all nine newspapers—totaling ten, among which six concerned Serbian athlete Angelina Topić and two featured Ivana Španović.

Table 3. Representation of Sports by Gender in Serbian Daily Press



Following athletics, women's handball received nine mentions, mainly due to news about the Serbian national team qualifying for the World Championship, as well as reports in two newspapers on the passing of handball player Vesna Abutović Tomajek.

Women's volleyball was mentioned six times, while women's tennis appeared seven times—four of which concerned former Serbian tennis player Ana Ivanović, focusing exclusively on her private life rather than her sports career. One article featured photographs of her in a swimsuit during a vacation under the headline "Mauritius as a Remedy for Sadness: Ana's Smile from Ear to Ear."

Four articles covered women's football, three covered women's basketball, and three featured chess—specifically, all three articles concerned Serbian player Teodora Injac, who won the European Championship. Women in skiing and "miscellaneous" categories each had two mentions, and there was one mention each for gymnastics and boxing.

Sports journalists in the daily press also covered women who were not athletes, a category included in this study under "miscellaneous." One article focused on a footballer's girlfriend, Miss Argentina, a model and singer; the newspaper Alo noted, "Forget football and matches, the Atlético defender is now known as Aldana Maset's boyfriend." The article's headline read "Faust's Miss Sweeter than Any Trophy," accompanied by photos of the woman in a swimsuit.

Another article in the "miscellaneous" category concerned a sports TV presenter, mentioning that she posted "provocative gym photos" with the headline "Diletta Left Breathless," focusing primarily on the presenter's aesthetic appearance.

Conclusion

Does the audience truly demand coverage of certain sports in the media, or do journalists, through their reporting, continually amplify the number of supporters for specific sports segments? Is sport mediated, or are the media "sporitized"? These are among the fundamental questions that academic and professional circles have been raising for years while studying the relationship between mass media and sports. The prevailing view is that both are true—sports and media are so closely intertwined that they exert significant mutual influence. Media gain readership, while certain sports gain popularity and commercial value.

Global and domestic research on the representation and popularity of sports indicates the overwhelming dominance of football in sports journalism. This was confirmed by the results of the present study, which found that nine daily

newspapers in Serbia (Politika, Danas, Blic, Večernje novosti, Nova, Kurir, Alo, Informer, and Srpski Telegraf) reported on football most extensively, accounting for 38.5% of all sports-related media coverage. Basketball closely followed with 34.7%, mainly due to the performances and achievements of Serbian NBA player Nikola Jokić.

The successes of domestic athletes have naturally influenced the coverage of tennis and athletics in the sports sections of Serbian daily newspapers, considering the careers of tennis player Novak Djokovic and athlete Angelina Topić. All other sports were statistically far less represented than football and basketball, with no apparent justification.

Similarly, women's sports receive significantly less coverage in daily newspapers compared to men's sports. The percentage ratio stands at 90% to 7% in favor of men's sports. Women are most prominently featured in athletics, tennis, volleyball, and handball—the latter mainly due to the Serbian national team qualifying for the World Championship during the study period.

The global tendencies in the portrayal of women in sports journalism are also evident in Serbian media included in this study. Examples include articles about former tennis player Ana Ivanović that focus on her private life, some of which emphasize her physical appearance through swimsuit photographs. The emphasis on female figures rather than their sporting achievements is also apparent in texts covering a footballer's partner or a sports presenter working out in the gym.

A clear trend of sensationalism and tabloidization of sport was observed, particularly evident in the selection of stories somewhat related to sport that appeared on the front pages of daily newspapers. Athletes are often portrayed sensationalistically in a crime-reporting style, with headlines focusing on fights, tragedies, or topics such as the sale of Marko Jarić's villa or Ronaldinho's visit to Serbia for the EXPO 2027 exhibition opening.

Has sport in the media become "more than a game," as cited by one theorist in the first part of this study? Judging by the reports in Serbian daily newspapers, the answer is undoubtedly yes. The unjustified and insufficiently substantiated disparity in the representation of minor sports and women's sports in newspapers has once again been demonstrated. These sports attract less sponsor

interest compared to football (men's), which is sensationalized and spectacularized on a global scale and, consequently, is more attractive to the media.

Journalists must be aware of their significant influence on public opinion and recognize that the media image of topics and fields they report on depends substantially on their editorial and reporting choices.

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