

Review

UDK: 795:339.138(497.11)

659.113.3:795

Received: 14.4.2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58984/smb2501131d>

Revised: 5.5.2025

Accepted: 11.6.2025

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MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF ESPORTS CULTURE IN SERBIA

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Abstract: Through a mixed-methods approach, this paper aims to research the representation of esports culture in Serbian media, specifically focusing on three news sites: Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub. Esports were insufficiently represented through Serbian media, making up less than 0.1% of all sports-related articles in 2023. Sport Klub had the most esports content, while Republika had the least. Nova and Republika had mostly reported on the Serbian esports scene, while Sport Klub had focused on the international. However, there were more articles about the international esports scene. Popular video games League of Legends and Counter-Strike 2 had received the most media attention (90%), while other esports had an insignificant number of articles (8%). The final 2% were articles that were not related to esports. This research highlights the need for improvement of media reporting on esports, as well as the necessity of a multi-layered journalistic approach towards this growing industry.

Keywords: esports, journalism, electronic media, video games

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Introduction

Electronic sports, or esports for short represent a significant “contemporary socio-technical phenomenon” (Werder, 2022), where the world of video games is not perceived just as an everyday activity with the goal of leisure or pastime, but as a niche that enables the expression of competitive spirit through different means of participation, be it passive (through fandom, cheering or watching competitions), or active (from participating in local tournaments to the possibility of obtaining a professional career). Marelić and Vukušić (2019) emphasize that playing any video game does not imply an esports activity, but that every type of esports activity represents playing video games. They also point out that the definition of esports as “playing video games in a competitive manner” is oversimplified, since each video game has specifics that differentiate it from others (Marelić & Vukušić, 2019). In the next example, the similarities and differences between two very popular esports video games will be discussed, including League of Legends (LOL) and Defense of the Ancients 2 (Dota 2), which belong to the same video game genre, known as a MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena). Even if the games are similar in terms of genre, design, and arena layout, as well as characters that have certain powers and uses in strategy (called champions in LOL, or heroes in Dota 2), they differ in “mechanics”, as stated by Adams (2014), Marelić and Vukušić (2019), that is, a set of rules and elements that these two games possess, as well as the different ways these games present world-building to other players. Stories in video games that lean towards esports accomplishments do not have to be necessarily detailed, as the games are designed on the principle of repetition so that players can hone their skills and knowledge through continuous playing (Marelić & Vukušić, 2019). Esports are in a specific position regarding their conceptual definition, in the context of specific characteristics comparable or similar to existing sports (De-Santis & Morales Morante, 2023). On the one hand, video games with esports elements tend towards individuality and diversity, enabling players to have unique experiences that do not have to be comparable with other sports. Even when it comes to video games of the same genre, if a player masters one game, it does not mean that they will be successful in mastering other games of the same genre. On the other hand, there are video games that are not just similar to popular and physically demanding sports, but are actively trying to simulate that experience through the use of computers and scenes (Adams, 2014), as can be seen with popular video game franchises such as NBA2K, FIFA or eFootball Pro Evolution Soccer (formerly known as just Pro Evolution Soccer or PES).

In contemporary sports environments, competitions are of exceptional importance, both in classic sports and in modern ones. Kuljić and Koković (2011) claim that the

value of sports tournaments can be valued based on the achievements of athletes and the tournament itself, which, in turn, can be translated to modern sports interpretations. Although video games have become quite popular because of the gaming industry, competitions in video games are not a novelty of the 21st century – they have existed for half a century. One of the first esports competitions was organized for the video game *Spacewar!* in 1972, where Stanford University students were invited to participate and possibly win the grand prize – a one-year subscription to *Rolling Stone* magazine (Vega Ramirez & Gonzalez Carrion, 2023). Even if the *Spacewar!* competition was initially used as a science experiment, it soon became the backbone toward a higher goal – to popularize video games. Sega, a recognized and well-respected Japanese company in this industry, sponsored a couple of local video game tournaments in the '70s of the last century to promote their products and strengthen the consumption of video games in the country (Borowy & Jin, 2013). However, the massification of these competitions is a potential that has not yet been noticed. Jin (2021) notes that the turning point for esports was precisely mass viewership, which not only included big competitions but also mass media, as well as other channels and emitters, to better recognize the aforementioned potential. Even if the public influence of these events is usually marginalized, the esports industry does depend on the audience, which helps it further develop (Jin, 2021). Just a couple of years later, that is, in 1978, one of the biggest video game tournaments in the '70s was held, with 10.000 participants, in the then popular and now cult video game *Space Invaders*, created by Tomohiro Nishikado (Vega Ramirez & Gonzalez Carrion, 2023). One of the novelties of the time was the existence of persistent high scores, which was not a factor for previous video games. Achieving great interest in this activity allowed competitions of this type to be established as frequent and normalized events for future generations. Jin (2021) emphasizes that even if the '70s and '80s served as a time where these competitions served as prototypes, the esports that we know now were popularized in South Korea only during the '90s of the last century. The South Korean government recognized the economic and cultural impact and importance of esports, which is why they formed the Korean eSports Association in the year 2000 to promote and regulate these events in the future (Padua, 2021). In the 21st century, after the recognition of esports' potential, these competitions have become globalized, with a prize pool of well over 40 million dollars, as was seen on *Dota 2*'s tournament *The International* in 2021 (Michael, 2021). On the other hand, viewership is only rising, which can be proven by the data from *LOL*'s tournament *Worlds Championship* in 2019, which had over 44 million concurrent viewers, while also having a record-breaking 100 million viewers on the final match for that same year (Webb, 2019).

De-Santis and Morante (2023) explain the significance of the audience in the context of esports, emphasizing that it has transformed the perception and consumption of different products, while at the same time, encouraging the desire to participate in said tournaments. Brown, Billings, Murphy, and Puesan (2018) point out that esports fans show a greater commitment and desire to interact with esports content than fans in other sports domains, and that they, as consumers of content, become one of the key actors in the growing esports industry. One of the main characteristics of sports, that is, the desire to win and achieve high levels of play simultaneously, motivates the e-athletes and the audience (De-Santis & Morales Morante, 2023). In the context of media consumption, where esports are usually presented through live streaming services, interactivity is shown as a key factor in achieving the loyalty of the audience towards a certain media, keeping them motivated to further consume content (Huang, Kim, & Ko, 2013). Even if Ward and Harmon (2019) claim that esports could have evolved without live streaming platforms such as Twitch, they still state that these services have contributed to the faster development and popularization of this industry, having introduced numerous technological innovations to further shape the modern communication sphere itself.

Perreault and Perreault (2021) emphasize that even if playing video games is not of interest to traditional media and journalists, media content about the esports industry is usually centered around business news. As esports become a bigger market, the media is expected to broaden the journalistic approach, not only focusing on the business aspects but also on social and cultural implications, as well as the impact of esports on technological development and entertainment (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). Liu, Shang, and Zheng (2021) confirm these claims by stating that new media are not adequately used to promote esports. For the audience to be informed sufficiently about the modern aspects of esports, be it readers or viewers, the presentation of esports needs to be comprehensive and multi-faceted.

Is the esports scene recognized in Serbia? In Serbia, the esports scene is still in its early phase of development, so it can be said that it is currently underutilized and underestimated by domestic media. However, as Ratković and Pečić (2024) state, there are numerous promotional potentials in Serbia for esports, whether it is branding, advertising, or sponsorships, as well as partnering with influential people, or influencers, who transfer the traditional markets to the Internet, bringing more visibility to esports. The potential of esports has been recognized by famous Serbian traditional sports clubs, such as Red Star Belgrade (sr. Crvena Zvezda) (n.d.) and Partizan (n.d.), who have formed individual esports teams for numerous popular esports titles, such as League of Legends and Counter-Strike, or other, less popular esports games, such as FIFA and PES. However, for esports to be recognized and covered,

having a cluster of esports teams that embody two popular clubs is not enough, while also requiring enough content to achieve adequate media visibility. In Serbia, there are no official news sites that exclusively cover esports, but there are other sites that provide information about esports, such as tournaments, marketing, or other events, such as Fortuna Esports (n.d.) or Klan RUR (n.d.). In terms of sections, Sport Klub, as a specialized sports media, is the only Serbian media site that has a dedicated “Esports” section (Sport Klub, n.d.), while other news sites categorize news and information about esports in separate sections labeled as “other”. However, how often does Serbian media report on esports events and information? This research article has a goal to review the issues regarding media reporting about esports, be it Serbian or international events, and to better indicate to media broadcasters the importance of this niche in Serbia, which does not need to be related solely to business news but also to informative and educational content.

Methods

The paper aims to analyze Serbian news sites Nova (semi-tabloid), Republika (tabloid), and Sport Klub (specialized sports media) to determine the representation of esports content in Serbia. This empirical research employs a mixed-methods approach to content analysis, including quantitative and qualitative analysis, “in order to gain complete knowledge about the subject of research” (Bešić, 2019). Quantitative analysis is aimed at studying the content of the message, while qualitative analysis involves drawing conclusions about the assumed goals, the foundation of which lies not only in the content of the message but also in the social context in which communication takes place (Manić, 2017). The research period equally includes all news sites for the length of one year, starting from January 1st, 2023, to January 1st, 2024. By applying this content analysis, the research aims to achieve the following goals:

1. To determine the amount of e-sport content uploaded on news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub in 2023.
2. To determine the representation of esports content in the context of domestic and international esports scenes on news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub.
3. To determine which video games were the most represented in esports content uploaded on news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub.
4. To determine the differences in how journalists approach reporting on esports content on news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub.

Based on the aforementioned research goals, the following research question was formed: In what way is esports content presented on news sites in Serbia? Based on the research question and goals, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H₁: News sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub follow esports content less than general sports content.

As Koković (2004) has claimed, sports niches tend to have lesser representation than the already established popular sports in the media scene, which is why it is important to confirm the quantity of media attention given to esports events and personalities on news sites in Serbia. To test H₁, Serbian news sites were searched as follows. To research esports content on news sites Nova and Republika, specific keywords were employed on their respective search systems. The main keyword was e-sport, with varieties of the term in English (esports) and Serbian (esport, elektronski sportovi). The keyword e-football (sr. e-fudbal), written in Serbian, was used on the site Republika, as it was used as a tag on certain media articles. On the other hand, the news site Sport Klub had its own Esports section, so the qualitative analysis was achieved by manually searching the section Esports, and its respective subsections LOL, Dota 2, CS:GO, and Other sports (sr. Ostali sportovi). To confirm the differences in the quantity of media coverage between esports and other sports, Google's advanced search system was employed, with a time frame that matches the research, to reach the indexed pages that are related to sports content. A specific formula was used for each Serbian news site: Nova (site:https://nova.rs/ "sport"), Republika (site:https://www.republika.rs/ "sport"), and Sport Klub (site:https://sportklub.n1info.rs/ with words "sport", "football", "tennis", "volleyball", "handball", "rugby", and "golf" in Serbian (sr. "fudbal", "košarka", "tenis", "odbojka", "rukomet", "ragbi" "golf") as it is a specialized news site that covers a variety of sports).

H₂: Esports content on Serbian news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub shows a greater representation of the domestic esports scene than the international esports scene.

Even if esports in Serbia are underdeveloped, they show potential (Ratković & Pečić, 2024), which is why there is an expectation that the domestic esports scene would receive more media coverage in Serbia than the international esports scene. This assumption indicates the possibility of an imbalance between reporting about domestic and international content. To test H₂, media articles from Serbian news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub were analyzed through the context of events or subject (team or individual), as their affiliation with the domestic or international esports scene. News articles that did not meet the criteria were marked as "uncategorized". Greater media representation of a specific scene implies that either do-

mestic or international esports cover more than 50% of media content about esports during the research period.

H₃: Video games League of Legends and Counter-Strike 2 are represented by the news sites more than other esports.

The assumption is that specific video games in the esports industry, such as League of Legends, Defense of the Ancients 2, and Counter-Strike 2 (previously known as Counter-Strike: Global Offensive), are represented more in Serbian media than other, less popular esports. These niche esports titles include, but are not limited to: Fortnite, Apex Legends, eFootball Pro Evolution Soccer, NBA2K, Call of Duty: Warzone, Rocket League, Tekken, or Street Fighter, as well as many other games which will be mentioned if they had any media coverage. To test H₃, media content from Serbian news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub was analyzed, as a way to determine which video games have greater representation in esports reporting, implying that either popular or less popular video game titles have more than 50% of media coverage about esports during the research period.

H₄: There are significant differences in terms of approach when reporting about esports between Serbian news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub.

The assumption regarding the disproportionate way media services cover esports news is established by analyzing one semi-tabloid (Nova), one tabloid (Republika), and one specialized sports media (Sport Klub). To test H₄, the differences in reporting about various aspects of esports were analyzed, including tournaments or competitions, player profiles, industry news, or differences in editorial policies (i.e. neutral reporting in contrast to promotional reporting), with additional observation of the narrative used in said media content (language and depth of content).

Results: Quantitative analysis

On the news site Nova, the majority of sports content was categorized in the Nova Sport section, while most esports content was usually in the subsection Sports - Other (sr. Sport - Ostalo), with instances where certain content was in other sports sections, such as Basketball (sr. Košarka), or non-sport sections, such as IT. On Nova, over 26.000 news articles were published about sports in general, while esports content only made up 0.1% (15 articles) in 2023. In conclusion, with this data, Nova published one article about esports every 24 days in 2023. Considering the published esports content on Nova in 2023, the domestic esports scene was represented more (53%) than the international esports scene (40%), while only 7% of content did not

cover a specific esports scene, but another non-esports game (Grand Theft Auto 6). The most represented esports on Nova in 2023 were NBA2K (27%), followed by other games, such as Counter-Strike 2 (21%), Valorant (12%), Grand Turismo 7 (12%), League of Legends (7%), and PES (7%). The final 14% of content did not cover a specific esports game.

On the news site Republika, the majority of sports content was categorized in the Sport section, while most esports content was usually in the subsection Other sports (sr. Ostali sportovi), but there were instances in which certain esports content was categorized as part of the main Sports section. On Republika, over 21.600 news articles were published about sports in general, while esports content only made up 0.1% (10 articles) in 2023. Only 50% of esports articles covered esports fully, while 20% covered other sports, in which esports had a dedicated short paragraph or a single sentence. On the other hand, 30% of esports content did not cover esports at all, but other sports (Republika 1 & S.M. 1, 2023; Republika 2 & S.M. 2, 2023) or sensationalist and sexually suggestive content (Republika 1, 2023), even if these articles were obtained through the initial search results. In conclusion, with this data, Republika published one article about esports every 52 days. Considering the published esports content on Republika in 2023, only the domestic esports scene was covered (70%), the international esports scene was never covered as a topic, and 30% of the content was not about esports at all. The most represented esports on Republika in 2023 were PES (30%), followed by other games, such as NBA2K (20%), League of Legends (10%), and online chess (chess.com) (10%), while 30% of content was not relevant to esports.

As previously mentioned, the news site Sport Klub specializes in sports content, where each sports activity usually has its own dedicated section, including the generalized Esports section, and subsections dedicated to specific esports. On Sport Klub, over 24.000 articles were published about sports in general, while esports content only made up 0.1% (193 articles) in 2023. Additionally, after September 2023, not a single article was written for the Esports sections on Sport Klub. In conclusion, with this data, Sport Klub published one article about esports every 11 days in 2023. Considering the published esports content on Sport Klub in 2023, the international esports scene was represented more (71%) than the domestic esports scene (27%), while 2% of content was not connected to any specific scene, but to video game updates. The most represented esports on Sport Klub in 2023 was League of Legends (51%), closely followed by Counter-Strike 2 (48%), while Rocket League had the least content on this news site (1%). Even if Dota 2 had a dedicated esports subsection, not a single article was published about the video game in 2023.

Results: Qualitative analysis

In the context of media representation about various aspects of esports, on the news site Nova articles usually included announcements (Todorović, 2023) and results (Mijušković, 2023) from tournaments, industry news (Jakovljević, 2023), charity events (Dimitrijević 1, 2023), famous people, including occasional promotional reporting. Regarding promotional reports, an article from Nova's Basketball section (sr. Košarka) initially presented its readers the ways they can bet on esports, but, with further analysis, it was determined that it was a covert PR article, that promoted a Croatian site for online esports betting (Dimitrijević 2, 2023). When articles included tragedies from the esports scene, Nova chose to report on these themes credibly, i.e., on the death of player Karel Ašenbrener, better known as Twisten (Ljubisavljević, 2023). However, some articles included esports with a political context, in which the Serbian e-athlete for eFootball Pro Evolution Soccer, Marko Roksić, refused to participate in a tournament where he would have to play against an e-athlete from Kosovo (Dimitrijević 3, 2023). News site Nova was extremely dedicated to the domestic esports scene, including articles that presented it in the spotlight. The article (Image 1) initially described playing video games as a hobby, in which the author later elaborated on how and why esports have become such a successful industry. In the context of specific esports, Nova listed popular video game titles such, such as League of Legends and Counter-Strike 2, as well as important leagues for Serbian e-athletes, such as EBL (Esports Balkan League) and RES (Relog Electronic Sports), through which domestic teams can qualify for other prestigious European tournaments. The end-of-article statement from the founder of the Serbian NGO esports association, Zero Tenacity, who invited people to attend Games.Con, a Serbian video game and popular culture festival (Nedeljković, 2023), can be interpreted as a form of promotional reporting. However, this article had "two versions" on Nova, i.e., with different authors (Nedeljković, 2023; Marković, 2023) and sections (Sports - Other and IT), while the content (text, headline, and images) stayed the same. Even with Nova being defined as a semi-tabloid

Serbian teams become a superpower in world esports

SPORT - THE REST | Author: Vojislav Nedeljković | 30. Nov 2023 | 15:01



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- 7 The devastating photo that most realistically shows the current situation in Serbia: "After Vucic, we will need work actions"



Photo: Dragan Majan

Video games, as the most popular leisure activities, bring together more than two billion users around the world, and that number is still growing.

What used to be just a hobby, today grew into a serious industry with great potential for growth and success. Professional development of e-sports, e-sport competitions, streaming platforms and virtual reality are just some of the key trends that shape this dynamic industry.

Image 1. Screenshot from source: (Nedeljković, 2023)

news site, there was no sensationalist content, nor were there similar narratives found in the researched articles.

In the context of media representation about various aspects of esports, on Republika, articles usually included industry news (esports teams changes), statements from e-athletes, but there was also content that was disguised as esports content. As was the case on the news site Nova, Republika also had an article with political context, about the same e-athlete who refused to play against another e-athlete from Kosovo (Republika 2, 2023). Esports content on this news site was usually presented through clickbait headlines as a way to garner attention. However, clickbait proved to be a major issue on Republika, as it potentially may mislead readers on the context and/or subject of the articles. In the first example (Image 2), the headline uses terms like “horrific reinforcement” (sr. strašno pojačanje), “Bayern Munich” (sr. minhenski Bajern), and “World Cup” (sr. Svetsko prvenstvo), while including images of the Marakana stadium, which would mislead readers into thinking that the article was about a new soccer player for Red Star Belgrade. However, the article showed that it was e-athlete Mūcahit Sevimli, who previously played for Bayern’s esports team, while his photograph was only shown at the end of the article. The lead of the article contained insufficient details, while the article itself did not show more information about the e-athlete’s career or accomplishments, nor did it show any other useful information about the subject of the article (Republika 3, 2023). In another example, the name of the subject was clearly emphasized in the headline, but it could not have been interpreted whether it was an athlete or an e-athlete of Partizan before reading the article. However, the opening sentences of the article show that it is not an athlete or e-athlete, but rather a Serbian YouTuber, Luka Bojović (Lux27), who became part of the management board of Partizan Esports (M.M., 2023). Even if the article had more content than the previous one, insufficient details were provided about the article’s subject and the subject’s role in the organization, while the statements were taken from social networks. This shows that the news site Republika had focused

HORRIFIC REINFORCEMENT AT THE MARACANA: Former member of Munich Bayern and a in the audience in the Red Star World Cup!

 AUTHOR: REPUBLIC SPORT | 29.10.2023 | 22:51      

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A deal has been reached.



E-sport, and therefore E-football, are increasingly popular both in Europe and in Serbia.

The teams are doing everything in order to have the best possible compositions, and in that goal the Red Star team has brought a lot of reinforcements.

It is Mikahit Sevimli, who arrives in the Serbian capital from the ranks of Munich Bayern and will certainly represent a huge reinforcement for the red and whites.

Image 2. Screenshot from source:
(Republika 3, 2023)

solely on attention-seeking content, not educational or analytical articles, when reporting on esports.

The news site Sport Klub had only one journalist (Vladimir Belopavlović), who was covering the many aspects of esports, including announcements of popular tournaments (Belopavlović 1, 2023; Belopavlović 2, 2023) and industry news (Belopavlović 3, 2023). Additionally, the news site provided detailed reports from domestic competitions such as EBL (Belopavlović 4, 2023), and international tournaments like LEC for League of Legends (Belopavlović 5, 2023). Unlike other media broadcasters, Sport Klub had occasional segments on rumors from the industry or the scene itself (Belopavlović 6, 2023; Belopavlović 7, 2023). In one example, an article reported on a rumor from HLTV (a site dedicated to competitive Counter-Strike content) about the potential return of e-athlete Nemanja Isaković (nexa) to the permanent lineup of OG, a European esports team. Also, the article talked about potential changes within the OG team itself, which included the sale of players Abdul Gasanov (Degster) and Adam Zouhar (NEOFRAG) (Belopavlović 6, 2023). In another example, an article reported on a rumor from esports journalist Briec Seeger, in which he talked about the Croatian e-athlete Josip Čančar (Jopa) from Partizan's esports team, potentially becoming part of Finet-work KOI, specifically the esports academy of the Spanish team KOI. Additionally, the article listed Čančar's achievements in the last season, while also acknowledging his contributions to Partizan's campaign to become the EBL champions (Belopavlović 7, 2023). These articles show that rumors could be approached professionally, as the headlines themselves emphasized that they were rumors, while the sources of information were listed in the lead of the articles themselves.

The interview was also a very interesting journalistic format that Sport Klub used when reporting on esports. Even if the news site had only published one interview with an e-athlete in 2023 (Belopavlović 8, 2023), it showed the potential of Serbian e-athletes in regional and European tournaments, as well as success in international esports teams. In the interview (Image 3), Mladen Mitić (ClOx), a veteran of the League of Legends esports scene, talked about his longstanding career, the transition from the Irish esports team Nativz to the Serbian

SK interview – ClOx: Partizan has long been interested in us

LOL | Author: Vladimir Belopavlović | 16 Jan 2023 19:20 | 6 comments

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The black and whites enter the new season of the Esports Balkan League with a team that dominated the second English league for the past year. It is led by EBL veteran Mladen "ClOx" Mitić, who spoke to us before the start of the group stage of the spring championship.

Image 3. Screenshot from source:
(Belopavlović 8, 2023)

team Partizan, as well as expectations for that season. He stressed the importance of having a good team while also being critical when talking about the performances of other teams in the EU Masters tournament, emphasizing their lack of strategy and structure of play (Belopavlović 8, 2023). These segments deserve more media attention, as they show us the more personal sides of e-athletes, as well as emphasizing their skills, potential, and allowing them to share their opinions on esports in general. Even if Sport Klub was mostly professional when reporting on esports, there had been instances when clickbait was used in headlines. In the example of e-athlete Andrea Radovanović (Radosin), where the headline presented him as a Serb who became the Rocket League champion for that year, while the rest of the article showed that he was not a Serb, but rather a “French player of Serbian origin”, who has won his title while playing for Team Vitality, a foreign esports team (Belopavlović 9, 2023).

Discussion

Based on the concept of media representation of esports, the results of the Serbian news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub showed specific differences in the quantity of content, the representation of the domestic and international scenes, the popularity of certain video games, and the approach in reporting on esports. Esports had been presented through the media as extrinsic content, usually categorized in minor or irrelevant sports sections, while the quantity of the content was modest, and the quality depended on the approach of specific media. Even if 214 esports articles were found in the research period, this industry was insufficiently represented through news sites, unlike other sports, as esports only made up less than 0.1% of all published sports content on Serbian news sites Nova, Republika, and Sport Klub in 2023, thus confirming H1. Additionally, the Google search results on sports as a whole showed us only indexed pages (articles), or rather sites that the Google crawler had analyzed and stored in Google’s index, thus being available through the actual search engine (Google, n.d.). This means that there were certain articles that were not indexed in Google, but existed on the news sites, meaning that there was potentially an even larger disproportion between sports and esports content on these news sites.

In the context of disproportion of reporting on different esports scenes, Serbian news sites Nova and Republika were more focused on the domestic esports scene, while Sport Klub was more focused on the international esports scene. Additionally, esports content on Republika was only focused on the domestic scene, deciding not to report on the international scene. However, if the quantity of all Serbian news

sites was accounted for, the domestic esports scene (28%) was represented less than the international esports scene (69%), which did not confirm H2. Only 3% of media content was neither about the domestic nor the international esports scene.

In the context of the representation of specific esports, video games League of Legends (46%) and Counter-Strike 2 (44%) received more media attention than other video games. These popular video game titles consisted of 90% of all esports content on Serbian news sites in 2023, thus confirming H3. However, even if popular esports titles were the most represented, the video game Defense of the Ancients 2 (Dota 2), with an average of 430.000 players in 2023 (Steam Charts, n.d.), and a dedicated section on Sport Klub, had not been the subject of any media article about esports in that year. Other, less popular esports were present in 8% of esports content, while the final 2% consisted of articles that were not about esports at all. However, it was noticed that news sites Nova and Republika reported more on esports that simulated physically demanding sports, such as NBA2K (basketball simulator) and eFootball Pro Evolution Soccer (soccer simulator), while Sport Klub was more focused on the aforementioned popular titles, League of Legends and Counter-Strike 2.

In the context of the differences in how journalists approached reporting, each news site showed significant differences in the way they tackled esports content, thus confirming H4. Journalists of the semi-tabloid news site Nova presented relevant esports content, including news, tournaments, and other quality articles, while approaching serious topics professionally. Journalists from the tabloid Republika reported the least on esports, while approaching the topic in the form of flash news, with more images than text, clickbait headlines, and a sensationalist narrative. Journalists of the specialized sports news site Sport Klub approached esports in more detail than others, publishing the majority of esports articles in 2023, including news, reports, interviews, and rumors (that were adequately presented and marked).

Conclusion

The analysis of media representation of esports culture in Serbia revealed significant challenges that could stifle the development of this industry in the country. Key issues included the marginalization of esports as a secondary topic within the news media's framework, thereby limiting the quantity of content and its visibility. Despite the global growth of esports, and evident interest by Serbian news media, the underutilization of the momentum that esports had, has in turn, influenced the quantity of content about this topic. Referring to H1, or rather the fact that esports content had less than 0.1% of sports-related articles in Serbia, proves that news

media might not highlight this topic, because of the lack of public interest. For example, Sport Klub had a dedicated esports section and the most esports content in 2023, yet had stopped reporting about this topic by 2024. Another important factor is the disproportion of the domestic and international esports scene. Referring to H2, this lack of representation was not equal across all news media, but had highlighted a lack of interest toward the domestic scene, which had less than a third of content published in 2023. Although it is clear that the international scene has many years of history and tradition, the domestic scene required additional support in order to achieve a breakthrough across news media. This did not necessarily mean that the news media had to focus solely on the domestic scene, but the fact that they should not discriminate one or the other. However, the scenes were not the only parts of esports being disproportionately represented. It was clear that some esports titles had suffered this exact problem. By highlighting H3, the problem of media favoritism was apparent, as popular video game titles were garnering more attention than the niche titles of esports. Even if the popular esports titles were starved of media attention in some cases (the reporting of Nova and Republika), the totality of esports content was severely focusing on popular and marketable video games. In order to be informed about the niche esports events and news, the audience must desperately search other sections of media sites, with in expectation to gain information about this topic. This can prove to be a problem, as domestic media sources do not inform about esports in a timely manner. In order for esports to be a more attractive topic, the news media must find a way to keep public interest by improving the quality of reporting in Serbia, not focusing solely on quantity. By highlighting H4, even if there were differences in reporting styles, a problem arises when a style becomes ethically questionable. As seen in the reporting style of Republika, its sensationalist approach had proved to be a problem, as the use of clickbait could disinform the audience, and with its discovery, establish distrust in news media and the reports of this topic. However, certain news media had discovered that by applying diverse types of journalistic forms could keep public interest in esports, as seen with Sport Klub journalists using interviews and rumors in an ethical manner. Journalists must restructure their approach in order to better understand the dynamics of this scene to attract an audience interested in this form of entertainment. The results indicate a need to improve the quantity and quality of media content about esports (domestic and foreign), as well as the need for specialization of media and journalists, to ensure diversity in reporting on this growing industry.

Conflict of interests:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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