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DOPING (USING STIMULANT MEDICATIONS) AS A CRIMINAL OFFENSE AND MEDIA REALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF REPORTING ON PROHIBITED SUBSTANCES IN SPORT

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Abstract: The paper analyzes doping as a complex phenomenon at the intersection of criminal law and media reality, with a particular focus on the criminalization of doping and its representation in the media. Based on a review of relevant scholarly literature and a comparative legal analysis, the study highlights the existence of different legislative models and challenges in the relationship between sports law and criminal law, especially with regard to evidentiary standards and the proportionality of sanctions. At the same time, the analysis of media reporting shows that the media, through framing and dominant narratives, actively participate in shaping the social perception of doping, often contributing to the stigmatization of athletes, but also to the exposure of doping scandals. The key finding of the paper is the existence of a gap between legal regulation and media representation of doping, indicating the need for an integrated approach that connects legal mechanisms with responsible media reporting.

Keywords: doping, criminalization, media, sports law, stigma

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Introduction

Doping in sports is a complicated, multidisciplinary issue with social, ethical, legal, and medical aspects. Doping, in its broadest meaning, is the use of illegal substances or techniques to improve athletic performance, undermining the core values of equality, fair play, and sport integrity (Lakhel, 2025). From a historical standpoint, doping has progressed from simple stimulants to complex pharmaceutical and biotechnology interventions, making its legal and regulatory management even more challenging (Lakhel, 2025).

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and its Code play a key role as a global normative framework in the modern strategy to combat doping, which is based on a combination of sporting (disciplinary) and legal methods. However, in addition to sports consequences, a growing number of jurisdictions have implemented criminal law provisions that make some types of doping illegal. The manufacture, distribution, and administration of banned substances are among the doping-related practices that at least 37 governments have made illegal, according to recent study (Lockett et al., 2026). This pattern suggests that doping has evolved from a strictly athletic infraction to one including criminal culpability and public interest (Milišević et al., 2021).

The link between criminal law and sports disciplinary law, the proportionality of sanctions, and legal certainty are just a few of the theoretical and practical concerns raised by the criminalization of doping (Kostadinović, 2024). The lack of consistency in normative approaches at the worldwide level is reflected in the scholarly literature, which highlights different models of criminalization (e.g., models focused on fraud, protection of minors, or trafficking of narcotics) (Lockett et al., 2026). However, some scholars cast doubt on the efficacy of criminal law measures, pointing out that their implementation may have little preventive effect if sufficient institutional and educational mechanisms are not in place (Blank et al., 2021).

In addition to its legal dimension, doping has a strong media reflection that shapes public perception. Media coverage of doping scandals often extends beyond the realm of sport and enters the sphere of moral judgment and social stigmatization of athletes. Research shows that media exposure of doping cases can have long-term reputational consequences for athletes, exceeding formal sanctions and affecting their social and professional status (Petróczi et al., 2026). In this context, doping is not viewed solely as a legal or sporting issue, but also as a media-constructed reality.

The media, as key actors in shaping public opinion, play an ambivalent role: on the one hand, they contribute to uncovering doping scandals and promoting transpa-

rency in sport; on the other hand, through sensationalism and selective reporting, they may reinforce stigmatization and oversimplify the complex legal and ethical aspects of the issue. High-profile cases, including organized doping networks and systemic abuses, have demonstrated that media reporting often serves as an initial trigger for institutional responses and legal proceedings, as well as for the construction of public narratives about athletes' "guilt."

Examining the connection between doping as a criminal violation and how it is portrayed in the media becomes very important in this context. The formation of the social reality of doping and possible disparities between legal control and public perception can be understood through an examination of how the media covers banned substances. In light of this, the analysis of doping as a criminal violation and media reality via the prism of reporting on banned substances in sports is the topic of this paper. The purpose of the study is to investigate how the judicial system and media discourse interact, as well as how much the media influences how society views doping.

Literature Review

Academic research on doping has long since evolved past oversimplified views that characterize it only as an athlete's own moral failings. Previous research has already shown that doping is motivated by psychological, social, economic, and performance-driven factors. Ehrnborg and Rosén (2009) stress that environmental pressures, the need to preserve status, and the desire for social recognition are all factors that contribute to the use of illegal substances. Accordingly, Morente-Sánchez and Zabala (2013) show that athletes' attitudes on doping vary depending on their knowledge, beliefs, sports context, and perceptions of what "others" are doing. This changes the emphasis from the lone perpetrator to the sporting culture where doping decisions are made. Elbe and Barkoukis (2017) further systematize this shift, arguing that the psychology of doping shows how athletes' behavior emerges at the intersection of individual dispositions and social influences, rather than as a purely autonomous decision.

This line of reasoning is quantitatively reinforced by the meta-analysis of Ntoumanis et al. (2014), which identifies positive attitudes toward doping, social norms, and the use of legal supplements as some of the strongest predictors of doping intentions and behaviors, while morality and self-efficacy function as protective factors. Importantly, this challenges the dominant narrative of the "bad individual": if social norms and perceived permissibility are such strong predictors, doping must be understood not only as individual misconduct, but also as a socially produced form of deviant behavior. Bloodworth and McNamee (2010), in a qualitative study of young British athletes,

reach a similar conclusion from a different perspective: athletes generally endorse anti-doping values, yet simultaneously recognize a sporting environment in which suspicion that others are doping undermines the ideal of "clean sport." Bloodworth et al. (2012) further nuance this finding, showing that young athletes formally reject doping, but become more tolerant when the issue is framed in hypothetical scenarios involving undetectable substances or when supplementation becomes normalized.

The literature on doping prevalence highlights significant challenges in accurately estimating how widespread doping truly is. De Hon, Kuipers, and van Bottenburg (2015) emphasize that relying solely on positive test results underestimates the actual occurrence, as tests detect only a portion of doping behavior. Their review indicates that intentional doping among some elite athlete groups may be much more common than official figures suggest. However, Gleaves et al. (2021) caution that combining various study types produces highly inconsistent estimates, ranging from minimal to very high prevalence rates. This points to issues not only with the existence of doping but also with the reliability of measurement methods. Overall, while the exact numbers remain debated, there is consensus that official anti-doping data do not fully reflect the scope of doping.

The methodological uncertainty surrounding doping prevalence has significant consequences for both legal approaches and media coverage. When the empirical foundation for understanding the extent of doping is unstable, policies focused on repression and media alarm may be based on an incomplete or skewed picture. Elbe and Barkoukis (2017) highlight that psychological studies often use indirect indicators, like intentions or attitudes, rather than confirmed doping behavior. In combination with Gleaves et al. (2021), this underscores that the crucial concern is not just the quantity of doping, but also the definition and standards of evidence used to identify it. This distinction is especially important legally, where criminalization demands more rigorous proof than what is typically required in sports governance or media narratives.

Qualitative study offers a deeper understanding of how athletes enter "zones of vulnerability," whereas meta-analytical studies find broad determinants. Erickson, McKenna, and Backhouse (2015) demonstrate that athlete identity, moral position, familial ties, and the larger social milieu all play a role in preventing doping, in addition to awareness of banned substances. This subtly criticizes a limited teaching approach that limits doping prevention to knowledge about prohibited drugs. In a meta-synthesis of qualitative research, Williams et al. (2024) expand on this viewpoint by showing that "clean sport" obstacles and enablers are dispersed across capability, opportunity, and motivation. As a result, systems that only concentrate on individual education are unable to address risk-filled circumstances, team norms, and sports culture.

Didymus and Backhouse (2020) concretize this broader picture through narratives of rugby players, where both permitted and prohibited substances appear as means of coping with injuries, stress, competitive pressures, and expectations of masculinity. Their findings are significant because they frame doping not merely as a calculated pursuit of success, but also as a response to psychosocial pressures. This aligns partially with Ehrnborg and Rosén (2009), but extends further by showing that substances can become normalized within the everyday management of sporting life. At this point, the literature clearly transitions from a moral to a sociological interpretation of doping.

The literature is especially crucial when discussing the accountability of those around the athlete. Backhouse and McKenna (2011) show that although medical professionals generally have a negative attitude against doping, they frequently don't know enough about anti-doping legislation, which could cause them to unintentionally contribute to rule infractions. This viewpoint is extended to athlete support workers more generally by Mazanov et al. (2014), who demonstrate that support staff do not always have sufficient knowledge, ethical clarity, or awareness of their responsibilities within the anti-doping system. By attributing doping incidents to the conduct of a single athlete, these findings contradict the media's propensity to personalize blame.

Whitaker, Backhouse, and Long (2014) go further by showing that even athletes themselves are uncertain about their role in reporting others' doping. Thus, while the system expects active loyalty to the principle of "clean sport," it does not always provide a clear framework of responsibility or protection against the consequences of reporting. This insight connects with Williams et al. (2024): if anti-doping behavior is socially conditioned, whistleblowing cannot be reduced to individual courage alone, but depends on institutional trust.

There is broad agreement in the literature that prevention must begin earlier and extend beyond mere rule awareness. Lucidi et al. (2017) demonstrate that media literacy can have a preventive effect on adolescents' attitudes toward doping and supplements, which is particularly relevant for the concept of media reality. Their study suggests that messages from media and digital environments are not external noise, but active factors shaping perceptions of performance, the body, and the legitimacy of chemical enhancement. However, Gatterer et al. (2020), analyzing initiatives from 53 national anti-doping organizations, conclude that prevention programs remain predominantly informational rather than developmental, interactive, and contextualized. In other words, promising directions identified in research have not yet been consistently adopted in institutional practice.

Backhouse (2023) further highlights the category of so-called inadvertent doping – unintentional rule violations linked to supplements. This significantly complicates public discourse: not all doping cases result from deliberate cheating. Rather, some arise in the gray zone of the supplement market, unclear information, and procedural obligations that athletes find difficult to navigate. This distinction is crucial for both legal and media analysis, as sensationalist narratives of the “cheater” often fail to differentiate between intent, negligence, systemic failure, and contamination.

Legal scholarship on doping primarily addresses whether the existing anti-doping regime is sufficiently fair and whether sports law should be supplemented by criminal law instruments. Duval (2016) shows that the development of the WADA Code has strengthened normative frameworks for sanctioning, intent, and responsibility, yet has not resolved fundamental tensions between harmonization and fairness. Sumner (2017) argues that there is a basis for criminalizing doping, particularly in cases involving networks of production, distribution, and systemic undermining of sport integrity. However, her argument is not indiscriminately punitive; rather, it advocates selective and carefully calibrated criminalization. This distinguishes her position from popular calls for broadly harsher punishment of all doping-related conduct.

In this situation, procedural fairness becomes a crucial concern. Star and Kelly (2022) show that different countries have different first-instance anti-doping procedures, and that athletes' positions are greatly impacted by the length of the hearings and their access to legal counsel. This criticism is sharpened by Hessert (2022), who draws attention to issues with the sharing of self-incriminating information between state authorities and sports organizations, especially when the same behavior may be considered both a criminal offense and a sporting infraction. Here, the literature clearly relates to the problem at hand: the lines separating sports discipline, inquiry, and media “judgment” become progressively hazy once doping enters the domain of criminal law.

Henning et al. (2021) add further complexity by analyzing systemic doping through the framework of risk and enabling environments. Their provocative thesis suggests that, in certain contexts, systemic doping functions not only as a means of cheating, but also as a mechanism of risk management within the sporting environment. While this does not justify doping, it strongly challenges the dominant moral and legal personalization of blame. If doping is embedded within systems of preparation, control, expectations, and informal networks, focusing exclusively on the individual athlete becomes overly simplistic.

Engelberg, Moston, and Skinner (2015), examining athletes who have committed anti-doping violations, reach a similar conclusion from another angle: decisions to engage in doping are often embedded in normalized practices, pressures, and rationalizations

that extend far beyond the act itself. This suggests that both legal and media narratives centered on individual “moral failure” are empirically too narrow. At the level of communication studies, the literature shows that the media do not neutrally reflect doping, but actively construct it. Starke and Flemming (2017) demonstrate that responsibility for doping in German print and online media is attributed both to individual and systemic levels, but that individual attribution dominates when coverage is episodically framed. Thus, journalistic framing directly influences whether audiences perceive doping as the problem of a “corrupt athlete” or of the sporting system. This has clear implications for criminal law discourse, as episodic framing facilitates public acceptance of punitive approaches focused on individuals.

Stanley (2022) deepens this perspective through an analysis of media framing of doping suspicions during the Tour de France. She shows that framing operates within the historical and mediatized context of the sport: doping suspicion becomes embedded in existing narratives about the sport, its heroes, and its controversies. Consequently, media do not merely report potential rule violations, but produce a broader symbolic order in which suspicion can persist even before formal confirmation. This is crucial for understanding media reality, as it indicates that public “guilt” may arise well before legal or disciplinary decisions.

Similarly, Travan et al. (2025) show that the language used by Australian media when discussing performance-enhancing drugs is heavily infused with terms such as “cheating,” thereby placing doping in a morally condemnatory register from the outset. Such labeling leaves little room for distinguishing between intentional fraud, systemic pressure, ignorance, or procedural complexity. In this sense, media not only simplify a complex phenomenon, but also reinforce a symbolic framework in which the athlete is already marked as a cheater. The literature also examines those who perceive themselves as “clean” athletes. Shelley, Thrower, and Petróczi (2021) show that clean athletes experience doping not only as a violation of fair play, but also as a source of frustration, distrust, and a sense of competing in a compromised system. Martinelli et al. (2023) extend this by demonstrating that clean athletes are affected not only by actual doping cases, but also by the anti-doping architecture itself, with its assumptions of suspicion, control, and procedural burden. These findings are significant because they shift the focus: the anti-doping system is not merely a neutral protective framework, but also a producer of experiences of injustice, stigma, and pressure.

For this reason, media reporting on doping affects not only sanctioned athletes, but the broader sporting culture. If the media consistently dramatize doping as an individual moral failure, while legal and sporting systems simultaneously generate prolonged suspicion and procedural uncertainty, a public reality emerges in which it

becomes difficult to distinguish between proven cases, suspicion, accusation, and social stigma. It is precisely at this intersection that the literature on doping, media, and law most clearly converges.

Three important findings may be drawn from the studied material. First, current research increasingly views doping as the result of interconnections between psychological, social, organizational, and market factors rather than attributing it to personal moral weakness. Second, legal research demonstrates that bolstering repression and harmonization does not always address fairness concerns; rather, it may raise new ones about proportionality, procedural protections, and the connection between criminal law and sports law. Third, media studies verify that the public's perception of doping is shaped by language, narratives of culpability, and framing, making the media active contributors to the social reality of doping rather than only information providers.

This creates a research gap that is directly related to this paper: while there is a large body of literature on the psychology of doping, anti-doping protocols, and media portrayals of specific cases, much fewer studies systematically link doping as a possible criminal law phenomenon with the media's creation of its social reality. To put it another way, not enough research has been done on how media coverage of banned substances affects the public's perception of doping as behavior linked to penalty, guilt, danger, and social criticism in addition to being a sporting infraction. This convergence of media representation and legal qualification is exactly what makes it a rational and academically sound area of study.

Taking into account the above, as well as the identified gap between the legal regulation and the media representation of doping, this paper is guided by the following research questions:

To what extent do legal approaches to the criminalization of doping differ across jurisdictions, and what are the key implications of these differences for legal certainty and procedural fairness?

In what ways does media reporting shape the social perception of doping, and to what extent does it diverge from legal standards and facts established in formal proceedings?

To what extent is there a discrepancy between the legal qualification of doping as a criminal offense and its media construction as a moral and social problem?

Criminalization of Doping: Comparative Legal Models and Challenges

Contemporary legal regulation of doping is no longer confined to autonomous sports law and disciplinary sanctions, but is increasingly entering the sphere of state criminal law. It is precisely at this point that a key comparative legal distinction emerges: while the World Anti-Doping Code is conceived as a global private-law framework for sporting sanctions, national legal systems are developing their own criminal-law responses, which differ significantly in scope, purpose, and legislative technique. Lockett et al. (2026), based on a mapping of legislation in at least 37 jurisdictions, identify five basic models: the comprehensive model, the trafficking-focused model, the minor-protection model, the contextual model, and the fraud-based model. This demonstrates that the criminalization of doping is not a single global legal pattern, but rather a set of different national responses to the same phenomenon.

In this sense, comprehensive criminalization models proceed from the assumption that doping simultaneously harms several protected interests: health, fairness of competition, and public trust in sport. By contrast, trafficking-focused models restrict criminal-law intervention primarily to the production, distribution, and mediation in the trade of prohibited substances, while the athlete often remains predominantly within the disciplinary sphere. Lockett et al. (2026) emphasize that legislative typologies depend on what a state primarily seeks to protect: the integrity of sport, public health, minors, or the property and fraud-related interests connected with competition. This means that the same doping-related act may in one state be treated primarily as a sporting offense, in another as a criminal offense, and in a third as a combination of both regimes (Jovanović & Atanasovska Cvetković, 2022).

A normative justification for this shift toward criminalization can be found in Sumner (2017), who argues that doping is not merely an internal violation of sporting rules, but also socially harmful conduct that may satisfy the criteria for criminal-law intervention. Her argument rests on three grounds: doping as cheating, doping as endangerment of health, and doping as a practice that undermines the “spirit of sport.” However, although Sumner advocates criminalization, her position is not unconditionally expansive; on the contrary, her analysis suggests that only a model capable of explaining why sporting sanctions alone are insufficient can be considered sustainable. In other words, the mere moral undesirability of doping is not, in itself, sufficient for every anti-doping violation automatically to become a criminal offense.

This opens an important point of controversy. If, as Lockett et al. (2026) show, states employ five different legislative typologies, then Sumner’s thesis on criminalization cannot be implemented as a single universal model, but only as a selective and con-

textual criminal-law policy. It is precisely this distinction between normative justification and legislative fragmentation that constitutes the first major challenge: criminalization of doping may appear attractive as a political message of determination, yet in practice it produces a fragmented landscape of uneven rules and sanctions.

The fundamental problem of criminalizing doping lies not only in what is punished, but also in who punishes and according to which rules (Jovanović, 2022). Sports law, based on the WADA Code, has developed its own normative system, with autonomous rules of liability, results management, and sanctioning. Duval et al. (2016) show that the 2015 reform of the WADA Code further strengthened the role of intent in sanctioning, but did not abandon the underlying logic of the anti-doping system, in which sporting liability is constructed differently from criminal liability. This means that the relationship between sports law and criminal law is not one between two identical subsystems, but between two normative logics that overlap only partially.

In this regard, Hessert (2022) particularly emphasizes that the parallelism of sporting and criminal proceedings creates serious tensions, especially where sports organizations and state authorities exchange information. His central argument is that an athlete may be compelled, in an internal sports proceeding, to provide information of a self-incriminating nature, which may then become relevant in a state criminal proceeding. This raises the question of whether the autonomy of sports law, often justified by the need to efficiently preserve the integrity of competition, comes into conflict with the basic procedural guarantees characteristic of criminal law. Hessert therefore does not simply challenge cooperation between sports bodies and state authorities, but shows that such cooperation must have clear limits if procedural fairness is to be preserved.

This observation logically builds on Star and Kelly (2022), who empirically show that procedural fairness in anti-doping disputes is not uniform even at the sporting level itself. Their analysis identifies problems relating to the timeliness of proceedings, access to legal assistance, the quality of reasoning in decisions, and the general standard of first-instance hearings. Particularly significant is their warning that delays may directly hinder an athlete's ability to establish the origin of a prohibited substance or to organize an effective defense. When this finding is connected with Hessert's analysis of parallel proceedings, an important conclusion emerges: before doping is moved further into the sphere of criminal law, it must first be determined whether the existing sports procedure is itself sufficiently fair and procedurally robust.

In other words, the relationship between sports law and criminal law is not merely a technical issue of jurisdiction, but a question of standards of justice. While Sumner (2017) views criminalization as a potentially necessary reinforcement of the anti-

doping regime, Hessert (2022) and Star and Kelly (2022) warn that any “strengthening” of repression without clear procedural delimitation may lead to legal uncertainty, double burdens on athletes, and a weakening of the system’s legitimacy. In this sense, the criminalization of doping cannot be considered in isolation from the quality of sports proceedings; on the contrary, the greater the degree of overlap with state law, the more important precise coordination between these two regimes becomes.

The issue of proof in doping cases represents a central legal challenge, because it is precisely here that the difference between the sporting and criminal approaches becomes most visible. Duval et al. (2016) show that the 2015 reform of the WADA Code increased the significance of the concept of intent, especially in the context of sanctions, but did not abandon a structure in which the sporting system remains oriented toward the efficient detection and punishment of violations. This is significant because sports law seeks to preserve the integrity of competition swiftly, whereas criminal law prioritizes a higher level of evidentiary certainty and protection of the accused. Consequently, what may be sufficient for a sporting suspension need not necessarily be sufficient for a criminal conviction.

Star and Kelly (2022) further intensify this problem by pointing out that procedural deficiencies are not merely formal errors, but can directly affect the possibility of proof itself. When proceedings are delayed, when an athlete lacks timely access to documentation, or when a first-instance decision is insufficiently reasoned, the quality of fact-finding is weakened as well. This is especially important in doping cases, where the defense often depends on precise reconstruction of the route by which a substance entered the body, laboratory documentation, and short procedural time limits. In this sense, the problem of proof is not only scientific and technical, but also procedural.

Star (2023) goes a step further, showing that harmonization of the anti-doping system remains partial and uneven in practice. Her analysis of the Indian case reveals that formal compliance with WADA rules does not guarantee equally high-quality implementation in terms of testing, athletes’ rights, and proportionate sanctioning. This finding is of great comparative importance: if implementation varies significantly across states and national anti-doping organizations, then the burden of proof and the effects of sanctioning do not affect athletes equally. This undermines the idea that the global anti-doping system automatically produces “equal conditions” and opens the way for the criticism that criminalization, in such an uneven environment, may further deepen inequalities.

Closely related to this is the issue of sanctioning. Sumner (2017) considers penal intervention justified when sporting sanctions are insufficient to protect the core va-

lues of sport and society, but Lockett et al. (2026) show that, in practice, sanctions are structured very differently depending on the legislative typology. Where the fraud model predominates, the emphasis is on unfair competitive advantage; where the protection-of-minors or trafficking model prevails, sanctioning is directed primarily at supply networks and exploitation. This means that there is no single answer to the question of “what should be punished most severely”: the athlete, the athlete’s support team, distributors, or organized supply chains. For this reason, comparative legal scholarship does not support simple intensification of penalties, but instead requires a clear identification of the protected legal interest and a proportionate choice of sanction.

Finally, in cases involving minors or particularly vulnerable athletes, the issue of sanctioning acquires an additional dimension of proportionality. Hessert (2021) shows that sports investigative procedures involving minor athletes may include highly invasive forms of data collection, concluding that existing sports regulations do not always provide sufficient protective mechanisms for this group. Although his work does not deal exclusively with criminal sanctions, it is important for the broader debate on the criminalization of doping because it warns that a repressive model without a differentiated approach to vulnerable categories may produce serious disproportions. It follows that the issue of sanctioning cannot be separated from the status of the offender, the context of the violation, and the intensity of procedural guarantees.

From a comparative legal perspective, the criminalization of doping has not developed as a single, stable, and globally harmonized model, but rather as a set of different normative strategies that vary according to the protected interest, procedural structure, and concept of sanction. Lockett et al. (2026) demonstrate the diversity of legislative typologies; Sumner (2017) provides the normative argument for criminalization; Duval et al. (2016) point to the distinctiveness of the sports sanctioning regime; Hessert (2022) raises the issue of self-incrimination and parallel proceedings; and Star and Kelly (2022), as well as Star (2023), show that fairness and harmonization in implementation are not complete even at the sporting level. The central challenge is not merely whether doping should be criminalized, but how this can be done without undermining proportionality, procedural fairness, and legal certainty.

The Media Construction of Doping: Between Information and Stigmatization

Contemporary scholarship shows that the media do not present doping neutrally, but actively frame it through specific interpretive patterns. In this sense, reporting on doping is not merely the transmission of information about prohibited substances or sanctions, but also a process of symbolically shaping meaning, responsibility, and

moral judgment. Stanley (2022), in her analysis of reporting on doping suspicions during the Tour de France, shows that media framing does not arise only once a formal rule violation has been established, but much earlier, already at the stage of suspicion, insinuation, and narrative association of the athlete with prior histories of doping in that sport. In this way, the media do not wait for the outcome of proceedings, but participate in producing a “pre-legal” image of guilt.

This finding is logically complemented by Travan et al. (2025), who show that Australian media systematically portray performance-enhancing drugs through the language of moral deviance, dominated by expressions such as cheating, violation of the spirit of sport, and unfair advantage. Particularly important is that the authors do not stop at the mere observation that the tone is negative; rather, they show that such a tone produces a broader normative framework in which the media assign themselves the authority to define “acceptable” sporting behavior for the community. In other words, the media do not merely report on doping, but also morally classify it (Mladenović, 2025).

More precisely, Travan et al. (2023) demonstrate that the framing of doping in sport may also be nationally inflected. In their analysis of Australian media, doping is presented not only as an individual violation, but also as a space in which distinctions are produced between “us” and “them,” that is, between domestic and foreign actors. Such nationalism in reporting is not a marginal feature, but an important mechanism for distributing moral condemnation and sympathy. This finding complements Stanley (2022): while Stanley emphasizes that the media generate suspicion before any formal decision, Travan et al. (2023) show that such suspicion is not distributed evenly, but may follow media and national hierarchies.

These studies suggest that media narratives about doping most often oscillate between three dominant frames: moral transgression, violation of fairness, and symbolic endangerment of the sporting community. The problem with this approach is not simply that it is critical of doping, but that it often oversimplifies cases in which there are important differences between intent, negligence, procedural dispute, and systemic pressure. It is precisely for this reason that the media construction of doping cannot be reduced to informing the public; it is an active process of selection, emphasis, and moral evaluation.

When one moves from general framing to the consequences for the athlete, the literature shows that the reputational effect of media reporting is often broader and longer-lasting than the sporting sanction itself. Tu and Li (2022), in their analysis of Chinese social media users’ responses to the controversy surrounding Sun Yang, show that digital audiences do not remain passive, but actively participate in defending or undermining the athlete’s reputation. Their findings indicate a predominance of

emotional support, but also the use of reputational defense strategies such as denial, attacking the accuser, and reminding audiences of the athlete's prior achievements. This means that the media sphere does not produce only stigma, but also counter-discourses of defense, particularly when the athlete is already strongly associated with national identity and symbolic capital.

However, this very possibility of defense does not eliminate reputational risk; rather, it shows how dependent reputation has become on media dynamics. Tu and Li (2022) clearly demonstrate that the struggle over the meaning of a doping case unfolds publicly, in real time, and with strong emotional mobilization of audiences. Their work therefore complements Stanley (2022) well: while Stanley shows how the media produce suspicion through journalistic narratives, Tu and Li show how that suspicion is subsequently translated into a digital struggle over reputation. In both cases, the athlete is exposed to a form of "public trial" that does not depend entirely on the formal legal outcome.

This problem is sharpened further by Grimes and Cox (2026), who analyze anti-doping rhetoric as a source of stigmatization. Their central argument is that the dominant language of anti-doping policy and public discourse produces a division between "clean" and "dirty" athletes, with even unintentional violators often facing public condemnation, exclusion, and reputational harm. Although their work is not a study of media content in the narrow sense, it is highly relevant to this topic because it shows that media stigmatization does not arise in a vacuum, but relies on an already moralized discourse embedded in the anti-doping system itself. In this way, media reality and institutional rhetoric reinforce one another.

In other words, the media influence athletes' reputations not only by "publishing bad news," but also by translating certain cases into enduring identity labels: suspicious, cheater, discredited, national disgrace, or conversely, victim of the system and target of unfair accusations. For this reason, reputation in doping scandals is less the result of the fact itself or the sanction imposed, and more the result of a public struggle over how that fact is interpreted.

Recent research shows that the media are no longer merely a channel through which the public learns of doping cases, but have become actors in the discovery, monitoring, and amplification of doping scandals. Fischer and Birren (2023) therefore describe social media as a growing element of doping enforcement and control. Their study identifies three important functions of digital media: agenda-setting by anti-doping organizations, normative control through posts by athletes and audiences, and the development of social media as a space of surveillance and signaling of suspicious behavior. This is an important shift in the literature, as it means that the media are no

longer merely intermediaries between institutions and the public, but part of the very infrastructure of control.

Tu and Li (2022) provide a concrete example of how this occurs in practice: in the Sun Yang case, the initial impulse of public controversy was connected with media exposure of problematic conduct, after which sports institutions, state media, and audiences on social networks became involved. Their analysis shows that the media exposure of a scandal does not end with publication of the information; on the contrary, it triggers a multi-layered communicative process in which the case is reinterpreted, contested, nationalized, and emotionally dramatized. Thus, the media not only “reveal” the scandal, but also determine the rhythm of its public life.

Schnitzer et al. (2025) add to this picture from the perspective of audiences and sporting events. Their study shows that a doping scandal during a major sporting event does not necessarily automatically undermine spectator satisfaction on site, but it remains registered as a negative element of the experience and must be included in the organizers’ communication and crisis-management strategy. This is an important finding for the topic of the media construction of doping: even when audiences do not abandon the event or radically alter their overall satisfaction, the very fact that a doping scandal becomes part of the “event experience” demonstrates how media visibility changes the symbolic status of the competition itself. Thus, the media affect not only the athlete, but also the perception of sport as a product. A well-known example illustrating the role of media in shaping public perception is the case of Chinese swimmer Sun Yang. Although the legal proceedings focused on procedural issues and anti-doping rule violations, media coverage - particularly on social and digital platforms - constructed a polarized narrative of guilt and national identity. This case demonstrates how media discourse may precede and even overshadow formal legal findings, contributing to reputational consequences that extend beyond the legal outcome (Tu, Li, 2022).

For this reason, contemporary scholarship suggests that the media should be viewed in a threefold way: as producers of interpretive frames, as intermediaries of reputation, and as integral parts of the mechanisms for revealing and sustaining doping scandals in public life. Stanley (2022) shows how suspicion is shaped; Travan et al. (2023; 2025) show how that suspicion is morally and nationally framed; Tu and Li (2022) show how reputation is defended or undermined in the digital public sphere; Fischer and Birren (2023) show that digital media are increasingly entering the sphere of surveillance and control; and Schnitzer et al. (2025) show that media scandal also leaves a trace on the perception of the sporting event itself. This confirms that doping in the media is not merely a topic of information, but a socially constructed reality with real reputational and institutional consequences.

Conclusion

Doping in sport is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond the boundaries of an individual violation and requires an integrated consideration of both legal and social dimensions. The literature review shows that doping is increasingly understood as the result of interactions among individual, social, and institutional factors, rather than exclusively as the moral deviance of a single person.

The analysis of the criminalization of doping points to the existence of different legislative models and the absence of a single unified approach at the global level. A particular challenge lies in the relationship between sports law and criminal law, especially with regard to standards of proof, procedural guarantees, and the proportionality of sanctions. These issues point to the need for careful normative balancing between efficiency and fairness. At the same time, the media play a key role in shaping the social perception of doping. Through framing and narrative strategies, they often simplify the complexity of the phenomenon and contribute to the stigmatization of athletes, while also playing an important role in uncovering doping scandals and promoting transparency.

The key conclusion of this paper is that there is a significant gap between the legal regulation of doping and its media representation. While the law strives for precision and procedural fairness, media discourse often favors simplified and normatively charged interpretations. For this reason, an effective fight against doping requires a coordinated approach that connects legal mechanisms with responsible media reporting.

Conflict of interests:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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