

A Contemporary Reading of the Bulgarian Female Athlete through the Lens of Simone de Beauvoir's Feminism

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Introduction

The challenge of gender inequality can be found in a number of spheres of society – sports being no exception. Despite positive momentum for some countries in creating equal opportunities and resources for female athletes, many still have persistent disparities. Bulgaria, a country celebrated for its impressive athletic achievements, is not an exception to these longstanding issues.

Sport is a mirror that reflects the world we live in, a micro model of our society and culture (McLuhan, 1966). Proceeding from Marshall McLuhan statement that sport is a mirror of what is happening in one country, this thesis will examine the extent of gender inequality in Bulgarian sport and how it affects female athletes' experiences and career chances. This study aims to add to the body of knowledge on gender inequality in sports and enhance gender equity in Bulgarian sports by assessing relevant data of elite female athletes in Bulgaria.

Women in Elite Sports: An Overlooked Contribution to Bulgarian Society

In Bulgaria, many studies have been done related to women, their realization and the challenges they face. Unfortunately, the focus has always been on "the woman worker", "the woman engineer", "the woman doctor", etc. (Manolov, 2019). The "woman athlete" has remained in the background, although she was precisely a main figure during the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century in Bulgaria. Although there is not enough literature on the topic, Bulgaria is the homeland of many successful female athletes who have established themselves in a number of different disciplines.

For instance, "Golden girls" (Figure 1) is the name given to the generation of rhythmic gymnasts who represented Bulgaria in the period from 1976 to 1999, when the national team was led by coach Neshka Robeva. During this period, the "Golden girls" won 14 championship titles of world championships in individual performances and ensembles; 14 championship titles from European championships; 5 from world and European cups and 2 runner-up titles from Olympic Games. Sports such as rhythmic gymnastics and prominent names such as Adriana Dunavska, Anelia Ralenkova, Bianka Panova, Dilyana Georgieva, Elizabeth Koleva, Iliana Raeva, Lili Ignatova, Maria Petrova, etc. testify to the contribution of women to the development of elite sports in Bulgaria and are a source of national pride.



Figure 1. Bulgaria's rhythmic gymnasts team – "Golden girls"

Unfortunately, instead of focusing on athletic excellence and a commitment to being role models in society at large, certain sports media outlets opt for sexualizing appearances or misrepresenting narratives, causing significant harm. Reports with frivolous titles designed for cheap clicks alongside irrelevant photographs focus solely on women's figures rather than their

talent, subsequently undermining the legitimacy of Bulgaria's elite female athletes in favor of harmful sexist stereotypes.



Figure 2. A picture from the article "Hristiana Todorova showed an amazing body, she lost 12 kg!"

For example, Hristiana Todorovas is a gold medalist winning gymnast at the 1999 European Championships. However, the article *Hristiana Todorova showed an amazing body. She lost 12*

kg! disregards her incredible athleticism and instead focuses on her weight loss (Figure 2). The title sexualizes her achievements by reducing her solely to an object of desire.

You can see more hot photos of the sexy Valeria in our gallery

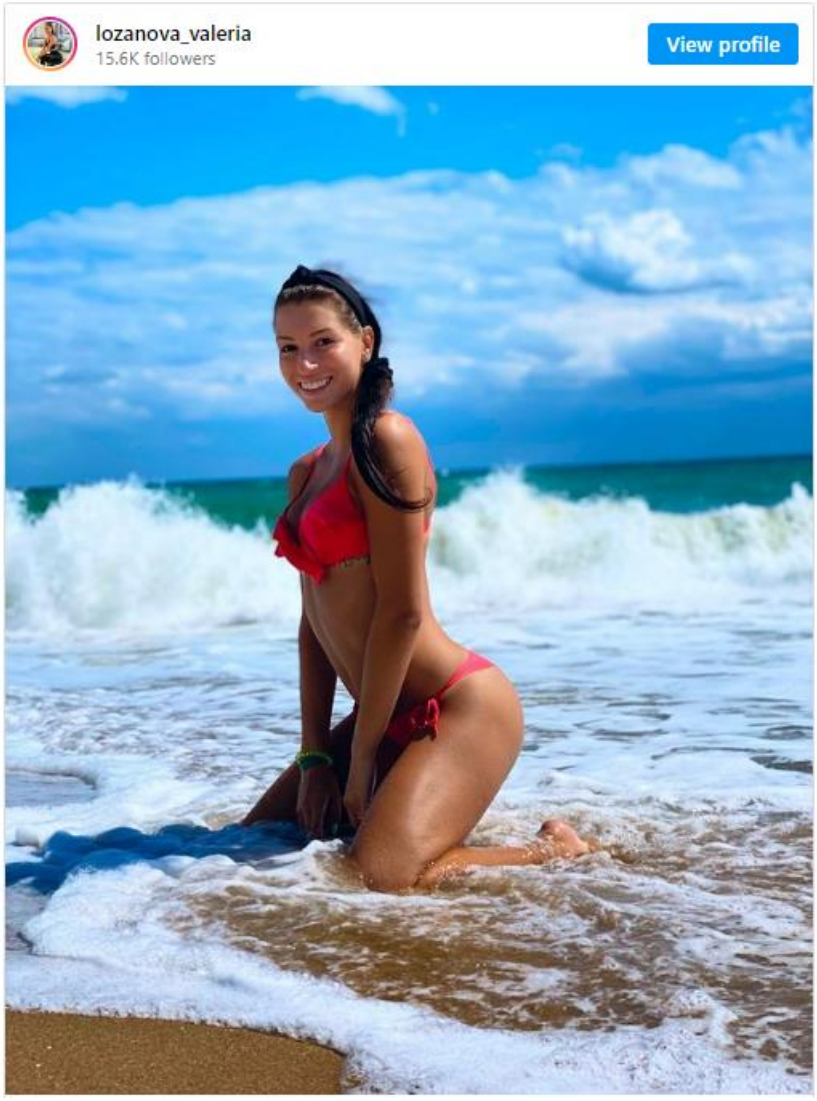


Figure 3. Valeria Lozanova in *Our karate champion exudes charm and sex appeal*

Similarly, despite holding numerous titles and cups from world and European championships, Valeria Lozanova's outstanding career as a karate athlete is often eclipsed by media portrayals focused on her physical attractiveness (Figure 3). This serves to reinforce harmful ideas about

women's value being tied primarily to their appearance rather than to their abilities or successes in sports.

While more attention has been directed towards promoting equality for women across various platforms, some elite female athletes continue to be at risk of being viewed through a sexualized lens by some sections of sports media. The examples of Hristiana Todorova and Valeria Lozanova underscore this point vividly. Representing women based on superficial markers undermines their achievements and reproduces harmful conceptions about gender roles, obstructing progress towards greater parity on multiple fronts within Bulgarian society.

This chapter highlights the implications presented by representations of female athletes within Bulgarian sports media through an examination of issues arising from inaccurate or disrespectful portrayal. A primary focus is directed towards analysing the disproportionate attention given towards physical appearance on the account of the noteworthy athletic accomplishments as well as the valuable contributions of these Bulgarian female athletes. This work attempts to answer a central question regarding elite female athlete portrayal - specifically how it may contribute to ongoing gender inequalities prevalent throughout Bulgaria’s society.

Literature Review

Gender inequalities are prevalent across all sports and affect women globally (Hargreaves, 1994). Female athletes from Bulgaria encounter the same discriminatory treatment such as underrepresentation and bias, frequently faced elsewhere too. This trend is exacerbated further within Bulgarian society due to the prevailing cultural norms affirming traditional patriarchal values (Bankov, 2004). Stoyanova (2021) observes that women's aspiration towards sport is restricted due to society's pressure, which enforces women to prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations.

For women pursuing careers in Bulgarian elite sports, discrimination stands as one of their greatest obstacles. Prejudicial attitudes towards female athletes held by coaches, classmates and fans often limit their prospects for participating and succeeding in sports (Snyder & Kivlin, 1975). These discriminatory views frequently stem from gender-related stereotypes that enforce the notion that sport represents an activity dominated by males. Consequently, such attitudes might discourage women from participating actively in athletic activities at all (European Commission, 2022).

Studies show that Bulgarian professional sports notably reflect a low rate of female athlete engagement when compared to male counterparts. According to Alexandrova-Karamanova's (2021) research, elite-level women currently only make up approximately 30% of sport participant teams, while males hover around 70%. The author believes societal norms steeped in gender stereotypes are the primary reason behind this discrepancy, which limits female engagement and interest in athletic pursuits. In addition to these trends towards gender bias, barriers facing females seeking financial or facility resources emerge as contributory setbacks towards professional

growth (Alexandrova-Karamanova, 2021). These setbacks translate into significant disparities between men and women within high-performance Bulgarian sport.

Angelova-Igova's investigation (2021) into rhythmic gymnastics in Bulgaria brings to light several key issues. This sport finds itself holding a special place within athletics as it is not only solely female but also enables women to meet their specific needs for creative expression and aesthetic fulfillment. As stated by Angelova-Igova (2021), given its significant social position, which brings both domestic and global acknowledgment, along with crucial roles in enhancing girls' development and education, rhythmic gymnastics is highly valuable amongst other sports in Bulgarian physical culture.

Studies indicate that female athletes face more difficulties than their male counterparts owing to factors such as training routines, preparation schedules, federations' support, age, marital status and motherhood (Stoyanova, 2021). This disparity is further exacerbated by social norms that uphold the position of men above women (Manolov, 2019). Consequently, women are often expected too 'catch up' with predetermined criteria set by men. The burden of gender stereotypes also affects Bulgarian society where men are less likely to take paternity leave after childbirth, placing the country among the top five EU nations with such opposition from males (Koceva & Dimitrova, 2013). A fair distribution of household responsibilities can offer a glimmer of hope for improving opportunities beyond domestic spheres for women.

Stoyanova (2021) offers an insightful perspective on Bulgarian sports within her scholarly article that takes into account women's exceptional accomplishments during Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Her work delves into philosophical-psychological principles that help establish a connection between personal values and limitless possibilities for female athletes. She goes on to illustrate how dedication, accountability and motivation are key factors behind the victories

achieved by Bulgarian sportswomen in male-dominated competitions. As noted by Stoyanova (2021), in recent times Bulgarian athletics have undergone a significant shift: male athletes who were strong contributors to the Olympics are no longer the pride of Bulgaria. Instead, Bulgaria's sportswomen have emerged as resilient competitors with outstanding leadership skills over two decades ago and still possess all the attributes admirable in an Olympian.

Stress and anxiety are experienced differently across genders according to recent research by Stoyanova (2021). Men experience lower cognitive and somatic anxiety, implying higher levels of confidence than women. Taking note of these gender based differences is essential for any analysis involving peoples' psychological well being. Additionally, Stoyanova's (2021) research highlights the critical importance of promoting equality in sporting industries as women tend to face significant challenges securing roles such as coaching jobs. Female martial arts athletes from Bulgaria reported lower levels of self confidence relative to men involved in the same sport. The disparity is often compounded by preferential hiring practices which favor men over equally qualified women candidates, according to Hartmann Tews (2003). Solving this issue requires increased financial support and administrative backing for womens sports at all levels.

Despite notable steps in the sports industry, gender inequalities persist as female athletes encounter discriminatory barriers that prevent them from accessing coaching and leadership opportunities (Knight & Giuliano, 2001). Such hurdles uphold male dominance in executive roles while hindering equal representation for women.

Notably even at the professional level of play, women athletes in Bulgaria endure lesser pay rates when compared to their male colleagues (Angelova-Igova, 2021). For example, female players, representing Bulgaria's national soccer team, may be equally accomplished as male team members but are expected to earn considerably less (Angelova-Igova, 2021). This is concerning

as it limits economic options and could hamper interest in sporting careers. Addressing gender-based disparity is critical to ensure equal opportunities for all genders within this industry.

An ongoing issue within Bulgarian sports circles is the way in which female athletes are represented by mainstream media outlets across the country. Sport coverage offers limited exposure to female athletes with many publications repeatedly ignoring or diminishing their successes on the field or track while acknowledging male counterparts instead (Sherry et al., 2016). This can lead not only to increased levels of bias but also objectification and marginalization of female athletes as they are reduced to mere objects rather than respected competitors (Knight & Giuliano, 2001).

The existing research illustrates how Bulgarian female athletes have unequal access to opportunities, resources, and representation due to gender inequality within their field. Factors such as lack of funding for facilities, insufficient education and training programs alongside prejudices based on societal norms contribute detrimentally towards this imbalance. Addressing these concerns is imperative to foster gender equality in Bulgarian sport industry while fostering its diversity.

Elite female athletes in Bulgarian sports continue to face significant obstacles revealing a deeper need to comprehend the root causes of gender inequality within this field. Given these challenges, it is crucial to delve deeper into this issue. Considering these circumstances, the research question of this thesis, "How are elite female athletes represented in Bulgarian sports media, and how does this potentially impact gender inequality in Bulgarian society?" is especially relevant in understanding biased practices, culture norms and obstacles surrounding resources.

The purpose of this study is to identify areas where gender inequality exists within Bulgarian sport and suggest ways to create an industry that treats all genders fairly and inclusively. To address this issue, I will examine Simone de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy. I have chosen her theories as they have been proved to be indispensable given her extensive contributions to feminism theory around issues faced by women. Through her concept of "the Other", Beauvoir's ideas help uncover how media coverage can contribute towards sexualizing female athletes hence reducing them to objects. As part of my research, I plan on integrating Iris Young's seminal work *Throwing like a girl*. Her extensive analysis around issues correlating with embodiment and gender will allow me to better understand the problem when exploring Bulgaria's media representation involving elite female athletes. With Young's work, I will explore ways that traditional ideas about femininity continue whilst addressing limitations toward women brought upon by these notions. By adhering to de Beauvoir's philosophies and Young's theories simultaneously, I hope to create a theoretical foundation for viewing female athletes portrayed within Bulgarian media from the correct philosophical viewpoint as well as increase awareness surrounding gender inequalities both in sports and society.

By adopting a theoretical framework approach, my research will center on analysing of Bulgarian sport media using qualitative methods. Key areas under investigation are sports news websites and national broadcast online platforms that are known for their outstanding coverage ranging from sporting events to related breaking news stories. The chosen sport media are Sportal.bg, Gong.bg, BTV.bg, NovaSport.bg and BNTSport.bg. They have the highest ratings and are a representative sample, free to viewers.

BNT Sport, BTV Sport and Nova Sport are the main news stations for reporting on sports events in Bulgaria. As esteemed channels operating under larger media organizations such as the BNT,

BTV and Nova respectively, they ensure that viewers receive up to date information via regular television programming that encompasses diverse genres beyond just sports headlines. To cater to those who seek content exclusively about sporting events, they have established online sport media channels. These progressive moves allow these leading news to to keep up with the changing audience needs and preferences.

At a time when digital space matters more than ever before, Sportal.bg and Gong.bg have emerged as two significant online platforms catering towards sports fans throughout Bulgaria. Providing timely updates for both professional athletes' latest achievements along with amateurs actively competing makes them even more attractive for users. These websites ensure optimal viewing experiences across various screens, notably smartphones or laptops, making them popular amongst consumers from all backgrounds who want direct access to sport-based stories at any time.

This thesis centers around exploring how Bulgarian sports media portrays female elite athletes while evaluating how these portrayals might have an effect on gender inequality. Through analyzing several forms of coverage such as articles, images, and headlines, this study seeks to recognize any dominant narratives or stereotypes promoting specific audience biases, which impact representation dynamics. Picking apart such representations will also be integral to investigating whether they contribute towards perpetuating gender-based social imbalances across Bulgarian society.

Theoretical framework

Simone de Beauvoir was a famous philosopher who played a key role in shaping modern day feminism. Her book *The Second Sex* offers a rich analysis of why women occupy the position they do within todays' society with particular focus on biological markers alongside influences from psychoanalysis and sociology. Thanks to her work, I have a foundation on which to build this study. A key point that stood out was Beauvoir's belief regarding sports opportunities for young females, arguing that providing access would enable them to develop an identity as active agents rather than remain passive. According to her, activities such as running and climbing should be encouraged in order to help adolescent girls unleash their physical potential. The athletic woman, according to Beauvoir, actively competes, rather than passively compares (Beauvoir, 1949).

This thesis centers primarily on an analysis of Simone de Beauvoirs feminist theory with great care given to her unique perspective on gender relations. As such, her philosophy serves as a critical aspect within the theoretical framework, which is further subdivided into three groups each addressing separate issues and discussions. The first section will delve deeper into Beauvoir's conception of women as "the Other." Section two will look closely at how Beauvoir engaged philosophically with existentialism to arrive at some particularly insightful opinions regarding gendered power dynamics. Lastly, section three will evaluate Beauvoir's concepts of transcendence and immanence and compare them with Iris Young's discoveries in her work *Throwing Like a Girl*.

Beauvoir’s Concept of the “Other”

Beauvoir's feminist theory influenced the way we comprehend women's place within society with her seminal work *The Second Sex* – a canonical feminist philosophy book. Her novel approach provides a fresh perspective on social relationships between genders by deconstructing femininity as constructed by societal systems rather than being an innate biological difference between men and women. According to de Beauvoir (1949), “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 14). She believes that people’s identification with themselves comes through existential philosophy of human existence without being restricted by societal guidelines or religious ethics. Furthermore, de Beauvoir (1949) argues that establishing oneself and creating identity begins only when individuals engage with forces outside their subjective selves such as societal constructs shaping peoples’ roles in society according to expectations.

According to Beauvoir (1949), gendered cultural norms can limit a womans ability for self-perception primarily from the fact that such structures have been created primarily from male point of view, leading many women into having limited objectives, which solely revolve around pleasing men. She refers to this perspective as "dreaming through mens dreams" (p.196). This further perpetuates a status for women as “the Other” due to a lack of autonomy associated with them becoming portrayed strictly as objects. “[I]t seems most certain that they will sooner or later attain perfect economic and social equality, which will bring about an inner metamorphosis” (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 860).

Beauvoir's Philosophical Position in Existential Philosophy

To better understand how de Beauvoir's extensive theory of womanhood applies to Bulgarian female athletes, it is necessary to delve into her philosophical position within existential philosophy. Examining this approach is especially important when considering sports. I will focus specifically on Beauvoir's position of transcendence and immanence as ways of illuminating the distinct life paths of males and females.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* makes a significant contribution to existential philosophy for her examination of the conceptual pair Self/Other. In her book, de Beauvoir (1949) argues how women experience feelings of alienation and subordination due to their frequent identification with males. She emphasizes on how "the Other" is repeatedly portrayed as inferior, subordinate or objectified while males hold power over perception by being viewed as "Self".

Beauvoir (1949) extensively uses the concepts of immanence and transcendence as a means of explaining gender inequality. More specifically, she argues that men tend to exhibit a greater degree of transcendental freedom from external constraints than women do. This difference contributes significantly towards defining patriarchal societies where even women are often complicit in maintaining oppressive systems. The assumption remains widespread that it is largely up to men to shape the world around them according to their desires while women are left confined by both physical and social constraints. This notion of immanence separates female existence from male existence because of its limiting factors on what women can do. Instead of serving active roles in their personal experiences and decision making processes, women are frequently cast as submissive dependents (Beauvoir, 1949). According to Beauvoir, this narrow conception assigns

women a secondary inferior role compared to males. Society presses females to be docile and obedient and comply with men unconditionally.

De Beauvoir's work urges me to take action against restrictive gender roles and strive for greater inclusivity in our communities. We must acknowledge that gender is not set in stone but rather shaped by social forces. This means it can evolve over time. Building a society where everyone has the autonomy to define themselves requires us first addressing how women are systematically cast aside as "the Other" and confined within immanence.

Simone de Beauvoir's and Iris Young's Ideas of Transcendence and Immanence

The ways individuals navigate social norms can be understood through philosophical ideas like transcendence or immanence. However, for female athletes in Bulgaria, gender-specific challenges could hinder their engagement with sports. This chapter aims to analyze Simone de Beauvoir's insights into transcendence and immanence alongside Iris Marion Young's observations within her work *Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality*.

Beauvoir examines how prevalent patriarchal beliefs affect the treatment of females in society today in her chapter titled *The Girl*. According to Beauvoir (1949), from childhood, little girls are taught to be submissive and passive, which reduces any chances for true satisfaction or accomplishment. In her book *The Second Sex*, particularly in the chapter titled *Childhood*, Beauvoir argues how society structures mean to subject women beneath men. Beauvoir asserts that men and women grow similarly until social structure impacts gender differentiation reducing

females' value. Young boys are taught to be self-sufficient whereas feminine social conditioning prepares females for domesticity leading to dependance and reliance (Beauvoir, 1949).

For Beauvoir (1949), the passivity associated with femininity is not an innate biological trait but rather a product of societal conditioning. Girls are socialized early on to be meek while boys are encouraged to embrace independence through tough competition while also looking down upon girls as weaker beings. This disparity manifests itself tangibly through physical activities like tree climbing or fighting games among boys. This way of growing up teaches young children, especially boys, how to be physically self assured during times of challenge. As Beauvoir (1949) observed, young girls are taught that being well liked depends on conforming themselves into a pleasing object. Consequently, their independence becomes secondary so they could get the approval of others. Beauvoir (1949) contends that by failing to use their autonomy for understanding complex issues and exploring the world around them for potential resources, female individuals may limit their ability to become active agents in their lives. Alternatively, if females are offered support, they may exhibit similar levels of passion, curiosity, personal leaderships skills, and courage similar to male individuals.

De Beauvoir highlights the concept of immanence in her critique of how young girls are socialized. Essentially they grow up seeing themselves primarily as objects instead of fully realized individuals with agency. This sort of immanence or stagnation extends to all domains according to Beauvoir (1949). As a result, instead of striving towards personal fulfillment and greater experiences beyond their present situations, females learn from an early age to prioritize others' needs before their own.

Young's assertion in *Throwing Like a Girl* is that girls' limited range of motion compared to boys stems from societal standards rather than inherent biological traits (1990). Consequently, this

dynamic contributes negatively to female athletes' self-assurance regarding physical performance. Her view coincides with de Beauvoir's idea of immanence - conceding and conforming to accepted social boundaries as part of one's identity formation.

Methodology and Materials

In a bid to understand the societal implications surrounding gender issues in sports media portrayal, this thesis adopts Simone de Beauvoir's and Iris Young's critical theory frameworks. Focusing on fifteen news articles on Bulgarian female athletes at an elite level, it will comprehensively analyze both written material as well as pictures included within these pieces. This examination will focus on the following motives: (1) transcendence and immanence, (2) “Otherness” and (3) objectification and sexualization.

Data Collection

For my thesis research, my data-gathering process commenced by identifying the top five female elite competitors from Bulgaria. With transparency being paramount to my study design's key principles, I utilized a trusted database run by the Bulgarian Olympic Committee (BOC), uniquely designed for tracking athletics' progress through ranking lists updated frequently across numerous sports disciplines. BOC stands as a reliable source with athlete profiles and accomplishment histories available online alongside physical publications. This allowed me to reflect more accurately on the successes or setbacks affecting women's success in Bulgarian athletics.

In my quest to examine gender representation through media portrayal of elite female athletes in Bulgaria, I selected five successful women athletes for analysis. Consequently, I ran searches of their names on five prominent sports news media outlets - Gong.bg, Sportal.bg. NovaSport.bg BTVSport.bg and BNTSport.bg based on their extensive coverage across various sport disciplines which have positioned them as authoritative sources in the eyes of the Bulgarian audience. My

analysis will draw conclusions from the past five years to ensure relevance and accuracy. The study has particularly identified the selected websites to guarantee a comprehensive examination of how female athletes are portrayed in Bulgaria. These websites frequently publish rankings, news, and information on various sports, featuring both men and women.

The focus of this research deals with evaluating and analyzing the first few articles presented after searching each athlete's name online. I have thoroughly examined how the athletes are depicted in regards to their sporting prowess with keen attention to details such as use of language, tone of presentation and depth of coverage of their achievements. Additionally, this research uncovers possible concerns like objectification or gender discrimination within the articles. The use of this analytical approach has allowed for a comprehensive exploration of how female athletes are portrayed within Bulgarian media. Consequently, this technique has provided crucial revelations about socially constructed views and larger cultural indications concerning these athletes' representation. I have chosen five well-known Bulgarian female athletes for my thesis, and will be looking at how they are represented in the media. These athletes' names are as follows:

- Gabriela Petrova: A triple jumper who participated in the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo;
- Neapola Mateeva: A third-generation athlete with a strong connection to sports, Neapola Mateeva plays volleyball;
- Hristiana Todorova: A former professional rhythmic gymnast who won the bronze medal in the Olympics, Hristiana Todorova has achieved a lot in her career
- Valeria Lozanova: Valeria Lozanova is a successful athlete in her sport and a national champion in karate;

- Ivet Lalova: Sprinter Ivet Lalova-Collio has competed for Bulgaria in a number of international events, including the Olympic Games.

The sport articles that I will analyze in my thesis are:

1. “Our karate champion exudes charm and sexiness” (Gong.bg)

2. “Gabriela Petrova provokes in a swimsuit” (Sportal.bg)

3. “Gabriela Petrova between the triple jump and medicine" (BTVSport.bg)

4. "Gabi Petrova is Bulgaria's number 1 athlete for 2020." (BNTSport.bg)

3. “Ivet Lalova with a hot photoshoot in a swimsuit (PHOTOS)” (NovaSport.bg)

5. “Volleyball player left without underwear on Instagram” (Sportal.bg)

6. “Neapola Mateeva: I feel the most confident on the court” (BTVSport.bg)

7. “Hristiana Todorova showed an amazing body, she lost 12 kg!” (Sportal.bg)

8. “Very hot! She showed them again” (BNTSport.bg)

9. “The Golden Ones": Hristiana Todorova on her first steps in gymnastics and her success in Rio” (NovaSport.bg)

10. “Valeria Lozanova – world vice-champion in Kyokushin karate” (BTVSport.bg)

11. “Hristiana Todorova: Bulgarian women have some of the most complicated combinations” (Sportal.bg)

12. “Valeria Lozanova with gold from the KWU Youth and Girls World Cup” (BNTSport.bg)

13. “Ivet Lalova Seventh in 200 Meters in Beijing” (BTVSport.bg)

14. “Neapola Mateeeva: I feel the most confident on the court” (BTVSport.bg)

15. “Ivet Lalova showed how she maintains her perfect shape” (NovaSport.bg)

Data Analysis

The way women athletes are portrayed in media is crucial in shaping public perception regarding gender roles and inequalities. In my research, I leveraged content analysis method as a tool for assessing their portrayal focusing specifically on their physical attributes alongside athletic successes and private lives. I aimed at comprehending the extent to which media representation affects any predisposed notions regarding gender norms and stereotypes that lead to maintaining female-centered suppression practices where one sex is seen as less capable than the other.

To investigate key areas related to my research topic extensively, I implemented a coding strategy utilizing the software program Atlas.ti. The primary advantage of this research tool lies in its ability to facilitate quick textual passage analysis. After careful evaluation and classification of each textual passage, a relevant coding label was assigned. I thoroughly categorized all collected data, including gender representation, sexualization and objectification amidst other specific themes observed. Our analysis included exploring Simone de Beauvoir's and Iris Young's concepts of transcendence and immanence, as well as De Beauvoir's "the Other", a crucial philosophical position within her existential philosophy.

In order to find relevant information sources for this study, purposive sampling was used. To examine collected data accurately, thematic analysis involving identification of recurrent patterns and themes was carried out. The presentation of findings incorporated a descriptive and narrative approach intended to shed light on key emerging themes from the research data collection process.

Ethical Considerations

The study's ethical principles put importance on protecting participants' privacy while adhering to strict academic research practices. For this reason, all online articles utilized in the analysis were situated within the public domain and required no consent from individuals since they were openly available on websites. None of the data contained personal identifiers.

To discern patterns in the chosen articles, I utilized Atlas.ti program to analyze their textual content and imagery. Theoretical framework established three guiding themes which informed the research method by which each specific passage received close examination for optimal labeling before being coded accordingly. Once finished being categorized, I undertook further analysis of the texts and images, which gave rise to three main recurring themes: (1) sexualizing language, (2) praise of the "perfect figure" and physical characteristics, and (3) lack of focus on athletic achievements.

Results

Although not all of the fifteen articles analyzed included all three motives, it was clear that each motive held significant importance within the articles as a whole. The following analysis discusses how these themes were recurrent throughout the chosen articles.

1. Sexualizing Language

It was found that eight out of the fifteen sport new articles analyzed promoted female athletes in a degrading manner via sexualizing language used within both headlines and text. This worrisome pattern in sports media is problematic as it objectifies and demeans female athletes, failing to acknowledge their athletic skill set.

When researching the results for "Gabriela Petrova" I settled on three articles. While two concentrated on Gabriela Petrova's achievements as an athlete, one piece called *Gabi Petrova Provokes in a Swimsuit* used objectifying text material. Articles emphasizing Gabriella's physical successes had headings such as *Gabriela Petrova between the triple jump and medicine* and *Gabi Petrova is Bulgaria's number 1 athlete for 2020.* Gabriela Petrova's accomplishments as a track and field athlete are positively represented by these articles, which commend her for her success in notable competitions. She has received recognition for participating in prominent competitions while showcasing outstanding performance skills. Such emphasis on Petrova's success contribute to the establishment of a narrative that speaks to her talent as well as dedication. Ensuring recognition to Gabriela Petrova’s accomplishments is essential as it shows her hard work and dedication, which can inspire.

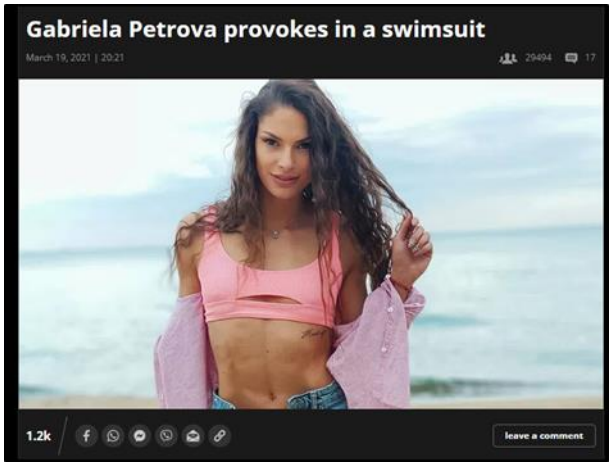


Figure 4. *Gabriela Petrova provokes in a swimsuit* article

The prevalence of sexualizing language is an issue which has to be addressed, especially as exemplified by the article *Gabi Petrova provokes in a swimsuit* (Figure 4). This type of portrayal tends to reduce female athletes to mere objects who are to be visually consumed rather than celebrated for their great success. This narrow perspective often leads to harmful stereotypes while diminishing attention given to key aspects like athletic skills or achievements.

When analyzing the article's headline related to a Bulgarian athlete one cannot help but notice its problematic nature and adverse implications. In particular, by using the word "provokes" it conveys a sense that Petrova deliberately aims to incite lustful reactions from viewers with her swimwear picture at the shore. Such a portrayal only reinforces harmful stereotypes about women athletes being judged primarily based on their looks rather than their talents or efforts. The expression, indeed, reduces the athlete's existence to mere immanence, according to the theoretical idea put forward by Simone de Beauvoir. De Beauvoirs theoretical idea implies a reductionist approach with using such a phrase - reducing athlete's existence down to mere object alone without considering their other contributions beyond their bodies. By emphasizing Petrovas physique without recognizing everything else she contributes the text falls in line with conventional

standards set forth by society towards elite female athletes. It enforces patterns of objectification directed towards females showcasing them through a lens of sexualization. By choosing to depict Petrova as an object for consumption instead of an individual, her autonomy and skill as an athlete are disregarded. Additionally, the phrase "подлуди феновете" ("drove her fans crazy") reinforces the notion that Petrovas ability to catch mens attention is what gives her value.

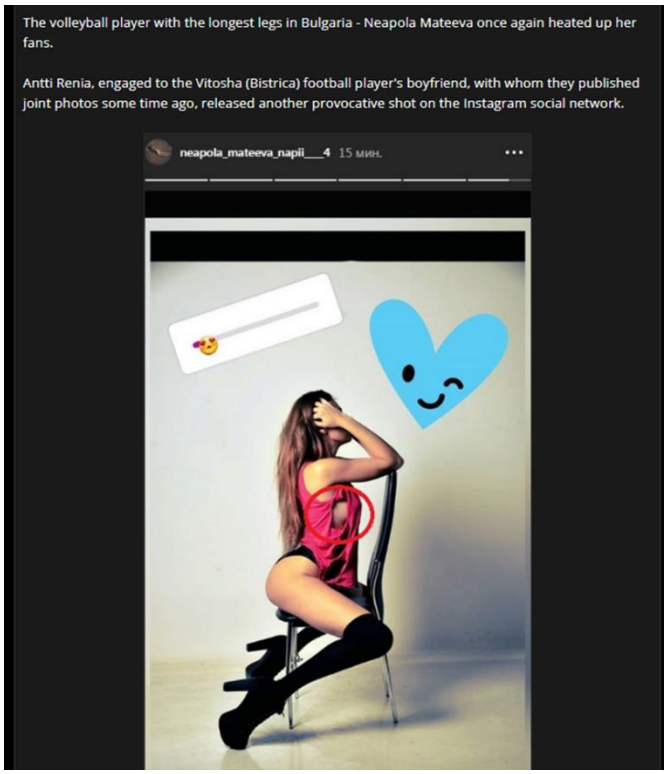


Figure 5. Neapola Mateeva in *Volleyball player left without underwear on Instagram*

Upon reviewing the articles that appeared in the Neapola Mateeva search results, I found the content to be highly concerning. Namely, the top results of every sports news website featured provocative images of the athlete and sexualizing language both within the headlines and the text. Additionally, I wish to draw attention to my first example: an article titled *Volleyball Player Left Without Underwear on Instagram* (Figure 5).

Sportal.bg's article on Neapola Mateeva falls short by emphasizing aspects of the athlete's physical characteristics at the expense of acknowledging what should be its primary focus – her sporting achievements. The article reffers to her as having “the longest legs” and mentions her physical beauty. It fails entirely to recognize the impressive talent she has shown in the sport she competes - volleyball. Instead, it focuses on her relationship with a football player. In doing so, the piece regrettably reinforces harmful gender stereotypes that hurt female athletes' reputation and contradict the idea of equality that sports are supposed to embody.

It cannot be overlooked that the media focuses mainly on who is Mateeva romantically involved with, particularly in regards to a prominent football player. This narrative downplays her athletic ability and reduces it to being secondary to her relationship status. The emphasis on personal relationships denies recognition for individual achievement while contributing towards the existing issue of gender bias within sports culture. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "the Other," it becomes clear that Mateeva's association with a football player effectively illustrates this notion. Her relationship with a male footballer results in her being objectified, underscoring archaic gender stereotypes which prioritize a woman's worth based on associations with successful men rather than on their own athletic accomplishments. This perception disregards women's unique abilities and triumphs within sports while concurrently upholding traditional notions surrounding femininity.



Figure 6. The article *Very hot! She showed them again*

Similarly to the example above, the first search result on BNTSport.bg for Neapola Mateeva was an article titled *Very hot! She showed them again* (Figure 6). The text of the article reads: "The volleyball player with the longest legs Neapola Mateeva showed them again. The former player of CSKA and Beroe, who is also the daughter of track and field athlete Venelina Veneva, shared a very hot shot on the Instagram social network. In it, she shows off a bare and juicy thigh, as well as her famous long legs." This excerpt exemplifies how Neapola Mateeva has been subjected to objectification and sexualization, perpetuating the faulty ideology, which frames women solely as instruments for male desire. The language utilized in this text reinforces these harmful notions by portraying Mateeva's legs as "bare and juicy" while also emphasizing their length as if they are all that define her. It is crucial to acknowledge that such attitudes prevent us from recognizing the true importance of one's achievements and talents beyond physical appearances.

Regarding Valeria Lozanovas online presence, it can be observed that most articles (two out of three) center around her athletic pursuits and achievements. The two pieces *Valeria Lozanova* –

world vice champion in Kyokushin karate and *Valeria Lozanova with gold from the KWU Youth and Girls World Cup*, posted on BTVSport.bg and BNTSport.bg respectively, provide insight into her successes within Kyokushin karate. These articles detail some of Lozanovas notable achievements: earning a world vice-championship title and other tournament titles. Such texts highlight the significance of dedication required to attain success as an athlete.

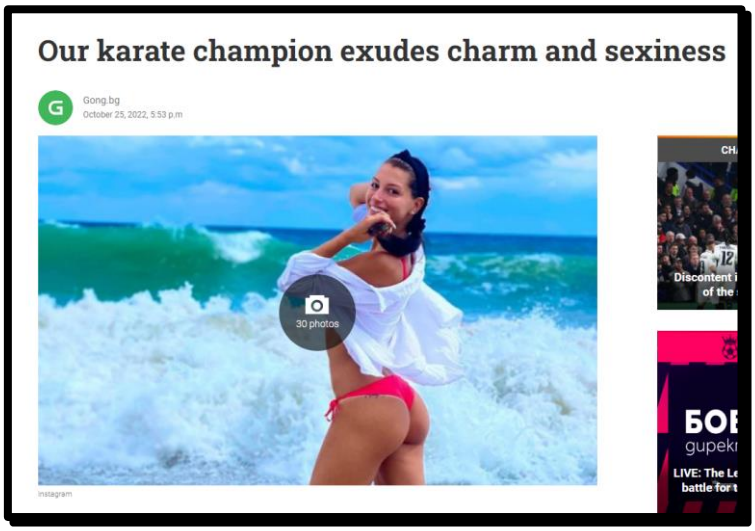


Figure 7. *Our karate champion exudes charm and sexiness* article

It is important to note that the first search result on Gong.bg directs readers to an article titled "Our karate champion exudes charm and sexiness" (Figure 7) which stands out from the others due to its distinct emphasis. Specifically, this article sexualizes Valeria Lozanova by elaborating on her physical features and allure rather than her athletic achievements.

The article's title is highly problematic. The use of terms like "charm" and "sexiness" has significant detrimental effects as they perpetuate damaging gender norms where a woman is valued primarily for her physical attractiveness. In the text, the author consistently employs language that praises her looks with adjectives such as “alluring” or “charming”. Valeria’s figure is then believed to increase men’s adrenaline and incite jealousy among women.

The representation of Valeria reveals Simone de Beauvoir's theory of "the Other" - through sexual objectification she becomes positioned as "the Other." As a result, she is turned into a commodity for others to enjoy which reinforces harmful gender stereotypes that contribute to gender inequality within sport domains. The piece emphasizes how focusing on Lozanova's physical appearance over her sporting accomplishments exacerbates these damaging attitudes about women athletes. The resulting focus on superficial aspects ultimately deters progress towards promoting equal opportunities.

2. Praising the “Perfect Figure” & Physical Characteristics

The analysis of fifteen publications revealed that an overwhelming majority of seven paid considerable attention to physical appearance and the pursuit of a “perfect figure” in Bulgarian society. Additionally, female athletes were often objectified through highly sexualized references to their physical beauty, with authors frequently commenting on factors such as weight, body shape and other aesthetic qualities.

The majority of the articles on Hristiana Todorova focused on her dedication to sports excellence particularly through rhythmic gymnastics practice. Two out of three articles found online emphasized just what an exceptional athlete she is. These pieces are called *The Golden Ones: Hristiana Todorova on Her First Steps in Gymnastics and Her Success in Rio* and *Hristiyana Todorova is now the General Secretary of the Rhythmic Gymnastics Committee of European Gymnastics*. In each Todorova’s gymnastics journey is highlighted - from young girlhood to triumph at the 2016 Rio Olympics as part of Bulgarias rhythmic gymnastic team that won bronze medals. Todorova graciously acknowledges that her win would not have been possible

without the persistent support, guidance, and dedication given by those who coached her along the way.

Upon careful analysis of various publications featuring Hristiana Todorova, it becomes apparent that some articles emphasize the athlete's sport related successes while providing useful context around the direction of her pursuits. Nonetheless, certain publications such as *Hristiana Todorova shows her great figure, she lost 12 kg* draw focus towards physical appearance rather than noteworthy accomplishments in sports.

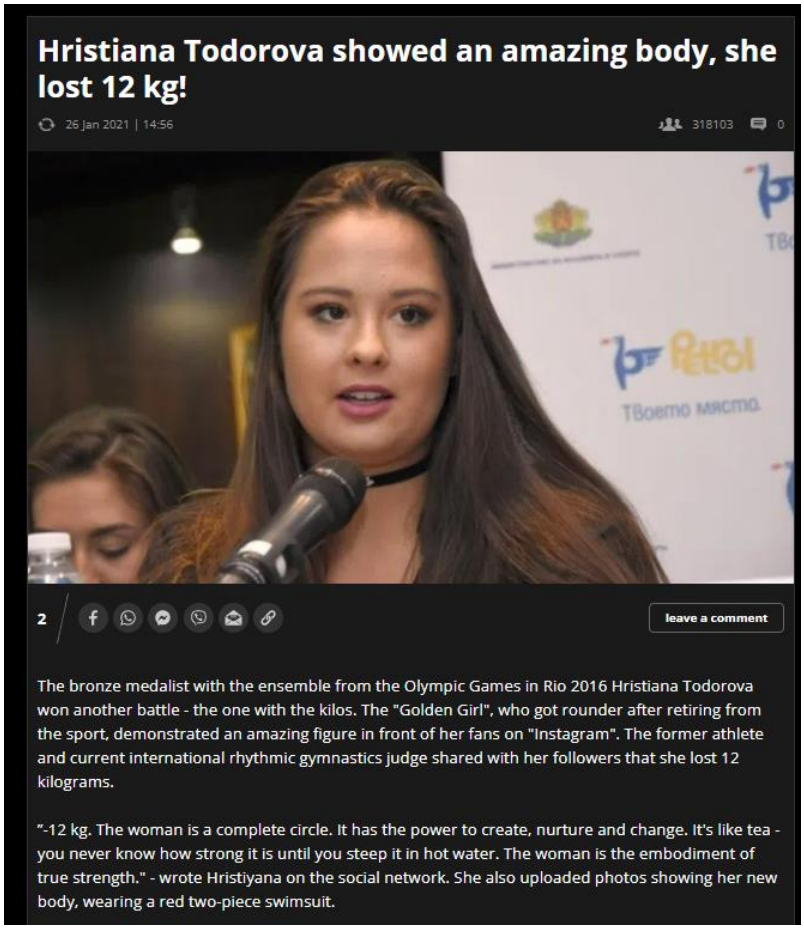


Figure 8. The article *Hristiana Todorova shows her great figure, she lost 12 kg!*

The article on Sportal.bg titled *Hristiana Todorova Shows Her Great Figure She Lost 12 Kg!* places an overemphasis on Todorovas physique overshadowing her remarkable accomplishments in gymnastics (Figure 8). The author acknowledges the social pressure in Bulgaria for women to maintain “perfect” physical appearance. By highlighting Todorova's weight loss and "amazing figure" there seems to be an expectation placed upon all women to meet the standards of beauty set by society. It further suggests that Todorova’s success in losing weight should be celebrated while any weight gain post retirement indicates failure.

By stating "Hristiana Todorova won another battle—the one with the kilos," it perpetuates the message that losing weight is a contest to be won instead of a personal decision. This reinforces harmful cultural standards around ideal body types, implying those who are not thin have flaws or imperfections. Such language can lead to negative self-image and unhealthy eating behaviors for individuals exposed to it. Additionally, phrases like "got rounder" suggests any changes in physical appearance are unwanted or bad—a sentiment potentially damaging for those experiencing similar changes.

The comments on Todorova’s figure reflect larger concerns about how we determine someone’s worth by their physical appearance. Praising someone for having an "amazing figure" reinforces societal beliefs that favor certain body types over others ignoring aspects such as athleticism or character as indicators of value. These beauty standards have significant implications for mental health outcomes with established links between negative self image and harmful behaviors such as body shaming or disordered eating patterns. As per Beauvoir's idea, transcendence involves exceeding the limits placed on individuals by society and its expectations. The essay discussing Hristiana Todorova highlights how societal pressure to maintain a "perfect figure" in Bulgaria shows an attempt at such transcendence. However, it is imperative to realize that this type of

transcendence comes with limitations and actually ends up supporting harmful beauty norms instead of opposing them.

Within Bulgarian media lies an inconsistency in coverage of female athletes. Rather than celebrating their successes as athletes, much attention is paid to their appearance. While it must be acknowledged that physical transformations are not uncommon among all athletes, discussions solely surrounding Todorova's weight loss or body shape detract from her impressive accomplishments, dedication success within rhythmic gymnastics.

When assessing coverage of Ivet Lalova's sport news, it became evident that one of the three articles under analysis - *Ivet Lalova Seventh in 200 Meters in Beijing* – focused on the athlete's accomplishments at Beijing where she took part during the 200 meters final. The article commends Ivet's skillset thoroughly and portrays her dedication to athletic performance positively.

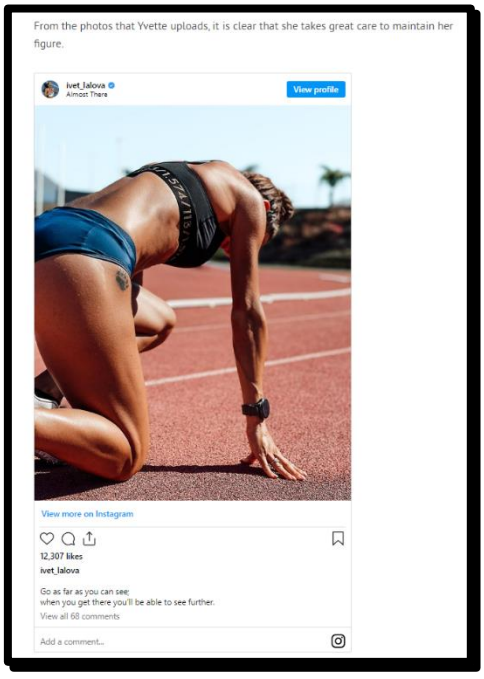
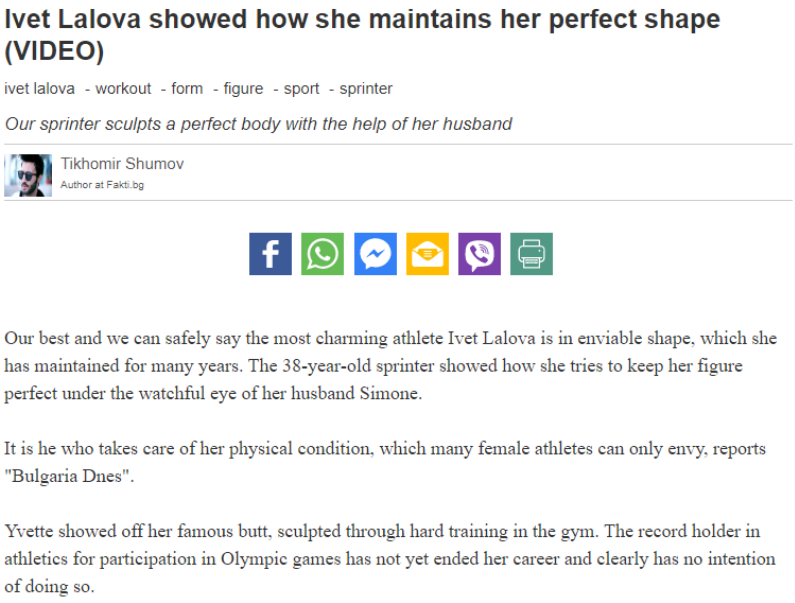


Figure 9. A photo featured in the article *Ivet Lalova with a hot photoshoot in a swimsuit (PHOTOS)*

The two other articles examined how Bulgarian culture places significance on maintaining a "perfect figure," and they highlighted Lalova's physical appearance as an example. Figure 9 is included in the article *Ivet Lalova with a hot photoshoot in a swimsuit (PHOTOS)* on NovaSport.bg, showing Lalova's figure. The accompanying text emphasizes her dedication to keeping her figure in shape. This statement underscores the cultural importance of having a "perfect body" in Bulgaria, indicating that is is essential for women to possess an attractive physique to be viewed positively. The persistent message and unrealistic ideals for a particular body form among women put tremendous social pressure on females regarding their appearance.

The text resonates with de Beauvoir's idea about how females are objectified through sexualization. By using a phrase like "hot photoshoot in a swimsuit" and putting emphasis on Lalovas' physique, the article reinforces the harmful practice of treating athletes as objects based solely on their appearance. This perpetuates negative gender stereotypes and contributes to gender inequality by reducing women to sexual objects.



Ivet Lalova showed how she maintains her perfect shape (VIDEO)

ivet lalova - workout - form - figure - sport - sprinter

Our sprinter sculpts a perfect body with the help of her husband

Tikhomir Shumov
Author at Fakti.bg

Our best and we can safely say the most charming athlete Ivet Lalova is in enviable shape, which she has maintained for many years. The 38-year-old sprinter showed how she tries to keep her figure perfect under the watchful eye of her husband Simone.

It is he who takes care of her physical condition, which many female athletes can only envy, reports "Bulgaria Dnes".

Yvette showed off her famous butt, sculpted through hard training in the gym. The record holder in athletics for participation in Olympic games has not yet ended her career and clearly has no intention of doing so.

Figure 10. The article *Ivet Lalova showed how she maintains her perfect shape*

Much like the previously analysed article, *Ivet Lalova showed how she maintains her perfect shape* (Figure 10) shines a light on the societal expectation in Bulgaria for female athletes to maintain a “perfect figure”. The accompanying text further amplifies this focus on appearance by highlighting Ivet Lalova's “envious” physique, which is a result from her rigorous routine.

The importance placed on women’s physical appearance by society is undeniable. This idea suggests that a female athlete’s value rests not only on her athletic abilities but also heavily on her adherence to cultural ideals of beauty. The article argues that for Lalova, a particular body shape deemed as "perfect" holds immense significance in shaping her identity as an athlete.

Simone de Beauvoir’s theory can be applied here: patriarchal societies tend towards objectifying women by defining them through bodily characteristics alone rather than valuing them for a range of talents or skills possessed. Female athletes like Ivet Lalova show considerable talent but still fall prey to societal expectations regarding physical appearance. The danger is that when we accept this mindset, it reinforces preconceptions that women must privilege bodily appearances over fulfilling their athletic potential. In essence, these concerns perpetuate rigid gender roles while also limiting women's autonomy.

3. Lack of Focus on Athletic Achievements

The analysis of fifteen articles brings attention to a concerning trend where eight of them lack a significant emphasis on the success and excellence of female athletes. Instead, they tend to give more importance to factors like their appearance or unrelated subjects while lack significance on their achievements.



Figure 11. *Neapola Mateeva: I feel the most confident on the court* article

A caption for an interview on BTVSport.bg on Neapola Mateeva's volleyball career can be found in the text on Figure 11. In the interview, she shares her confidence and says that being on the court makes her feel the most confident and in control. The statement demonstrates her love for volleyball and commitment to it.

Neapola Mateeva's background is further described in the caption that goes with the interview. It states that she comes from three generations of highly successful athletes. According to reports, Liliana Mateeva, her grandmother, was formerly captain of the national volleyball team and was once regarded as Bulgaria's top volleyball player. Peter, her grandfather, has experience in cycling as both a competitor and a coach.

The caption captures Neapola Mateeva's unique characteristic of possessing exceptionally long legs compared to other volleyball players. It is worth noting that such physical features do not

necessarily affect one's proficiency or accomplishments within their sport - in this case, volleyball. The article itself emphasizes Mateeva's rich athletic heritage as a potential factor behind her fervor and commitment towards playing this game at an elite level instead. Nonetheless, drawing attention solely towards Mateeva's bodily traits can sometimes fuel objectification, where one becomes significant for their looks rather than actual talents and skills that they bring onto the court.

Recognizing women's agency beyond their looks or families is a central belief of Simone de Beauvoir's theory of gender construction. Therefore, it seems appropriate to acknowledge that Neapola Mateeva feels confident while participating in volleyball - a reflection of how women can assert themselves in their chosen pursuits. However, the caption alongside reveals a tendency to concentrate more on Mateeva's athletic heritage and unique physical features like having the longest legs in volleyball. This emphasis could be viewed through the lens of objectification since it overlooks individual achievements and skillfulness exhibited by this athlete.

Iris Young’s perspective on gendered embodiment enriches our understanding of how we evaluate women today. The attention given to Neapola Mateeva’s long legs in the accompanying caption is a prime example of how Bulgarian media tend to focus more excessively on women's physique over their abilities or successes, which is an issue addressed by Young through her advocacy for recognizing womanhood outside corporeal norms marked by societal objects. Although Mateeva’s interview celebrates individual agency mirroring Beauvoir, the accompanying caption widens the gap by perpetuating objectification and emphasizing physical appearance at the expense of athletic accomplishments. Maintaining this trend directly contradicts Youngs' ideals of considering women as whole individuals by recognizing their skills, achievements, and agency beyond mere physical attributes or familial connections.

The article *Our karate champion exudes charm and sexiness* seemingly pivots around how Valeria Lozanova presents her body versus acknowledging her significant success within the Kyokushin karate community. Going by what is shown as an initial impression, the photographs depicting her in a sport set give off an impression that she will be celebrated for her athletic talent. However, disappointingly, this is not evident within the written text, which includes only one sentence indicating some previous outstanding successes - "She has over a dozen titles and cups from world and European championships". Shortly after, the text returns back to focus on much more trivial subjects such as her charm or how attractive she appears. De Beauvoir would argue that this objectification underscores societal tendencies always to prioritize looks over meaningful contribution by women. According to de Beauvoir, women have historically been viewed as secondary to men rather than recognized for their individual achievements. The lack of emphasis on the athletic accomplishments of female athletes in the analyzed articles reflects this societal tendency to downplay or disregard their achievements, reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating gender inequality.

Discussion

This thesis aimed to assess the representation of female athletes by Bulgarian sports media and any resulting repercussions for gender equity concerns. By analyzing prominent online outlets widely known for covering elite Bulgarian sport, a detailed exploration took place regarding recurring themes noted across sport media articles. The ultimate goal being to spread awareness as well as renew emphasis regarding fairer treatment practices and respect towrads professional women's athletes today.

In examining Bulgarian sports media representation of female athletes, three major conclusions were drawn through analysis. The representation of female athletes in Bulgarian sports media may: (1) reinforce unhealthy gender divisiveness when physical appearance obscures talent and skill levels; (2) diminish elite female athletes' achievements and (3) influence young girls' participation in sports.

Negative Gender Stereotypes

According to Fink (2015), the media significantly influences how the general public views gender and sports. One critical factor contributing to persistent gender inequality within sports spheres is how women are objectified and sexualized through sports media representations. Fink (2015) highlights how such practices continue to be a problem in contemporary Bulgaria. These representations often emphasize physical beauty over athletic prowess, leading to harmful stereotypes suggesting that women's value lies primarily in their appearances, as opposed to talent or achievement, which perpetuate biased attitudes against women within sport contexts today.

The Sportal.bg piece titled *Gabriela Petrova Provokes in a Swimsuit* serves as an illustration of this matter. Rather than showcasing Gabriela's remarkable athletic prowess or achievements within her sport, she is portrayed solely as an object of sexual desire. This portrayal is inappropriate for someone who has established herself among Bulgaria's elite in triple jump. Gabriela Petrova displayed remarkable skill and talent during notable events like the European Youth Championship (where she won a gold medal) and the European Indoor Championships (where she claimed silver) held in Tampere. However, despite these achievements, much of the media coverage around her focuses solely on superficial traits instead of celebrating her hard work. Such reporting objectifies female athletes and feeds harmful societal perceptions regarding womens' worth which revolve only around external beauty standards.

Media coverage of female athletes focuses mainly on their physical attributes disregarding their skills and talent resulting in negative effects for younger generations of females who view these representations. Emphasizing looks over performance capabilities sends an inappropriate message regarding what qualities define one’s value. This might discourage young female athletes to take up sports due to the association of success with attractiveness (Fink, 2015).

Diminishing Recognition of Women's Achievements

In both global and Bulgarian contexts alike gender inequality represents a significant obstacle facing female athletes who are seeking recognition for their sport accomplishments. One significant underlying factor, which strenghtens this inequity is the increased rates of objectification and sexualization seen towards women athletes across various forms of sports media today. Combined with prevailing cultural narratives which prioritize an excessive focus on

physical appearance over athleticism or competitive achievement, these factors can create significant barriers for women seeking to attain professional success as athletes.

Presently within Bulgarian sports journalism exists behavior which belittles women, particularly evident in some publications, which focus on external appearances over athletic prowess. Examples are the articles on Neapola Mateeva, which lack focus on her achievements on the volleyball court. The message being sent from placing priority on physical attractiveness is that the worth of women heavily relies upon their bodies instead of their skills or hard-earned success. This fosters gender inequality throughout competitive sports. In addition, the lack of recognition for female athlete's successes leads to inconsistencies for financial support, the amounting of support, media attention, and recognition.

Discouraging Women's Participation in Sport

The objectification and sexualization of female athletes in sports media might contribute to gender disparity in sport in contemporary Bulgaria by discouraging women from participating in sports. When women are predominantly portrayed as sexual objects rather than accomplished athletes negative gender stereotypes that claim that women are primarily appreciated for their attractiveness rather than their athletic skills can be reinforced. Young girls and women may sometimes feel discouraged from participating in sports due to the potential for unwanted attention and harassment. There are still societal beliefs that place more value on a women's physical appearance than their athletic abilities, which can make some women feel like sports are not meant for them. This mindset may lead to fewer females becoming involved in athletics, therefore perpetuating existing gender inequalities in sports.

Within Bulgaria, gender inequality continues to pose significant challenges for many women, which possibly causes persistently low levels of female engagement with athletic pursuits. Supporting this concern are findings shared by the European Parliament (2020), outlining Bulgaria as the country with one of the lowest levels of physical activity participation by women amidst EU states. This implies that it is likely that there are larger social factors at play, which undermine athletic encouragement for females. Objectification and sexualization within sport media are arguably potent contributors towards creating less-than-encouraging conditions for women seeking active involvement.

The objectification of female athletes through certain forms of media representation generates adverse outcomes regarding women's participation habits associated with physical activity. Reports indicate a negative association between the perception of excessive sexualization practices within sporting events and lower involvement levels among females (Kane et al., 2013). Objectifying practices tend to not only impact public perceptions but also considerably harm athletes' sense of self-esteem and body imag, which ultimately reduces motivation for physical activity participation among females (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Thus, emphasizing aesthetics and sexual appeal aspects surrounding sports competition may discourage women from participating in such activities as they feel concerned about their bodies. Furthermore, these media practices contribute to creating widespread negative stereotypes demeaning female athletes' potential (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Acknowledgement in competition is crucial when it comes to women's' athletics. Neglecting their skills could mean withholding crucial resources and support needed for successful performance on the same level with male athletes. Failing to prevent such disparities might result in gender inequality within the sporting world (Whisenant et al., 2002).

Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to investigate the representation of female athletes in Bulgarian sports media and examine how it may potentially foster gender disparities within the country's social fabric. Various publications have shown that professional female athletes are frequently represented in Bulgarian media through the lens of their physical attractiveness rather than their athletic prowess or accomplishments. This trend perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes, which promote the notion that women's physical appearance holds more significance than their achievements in competitive sports. As such, this practice undermines women's accomplishments while simultaneously reinforces negative attitudes towards female athletes who lack representation due to pervasive sexism. Consequently, many women may feel less inclined towards pursuing careers within sport because they might feel pressured to meet strict beauty standards or risk harassment thus perpetuating an unequal playing ground across genders. Finally, this might promote misogynistic attitudes in the sport world as well as compromise respect towards all genders.

By joining the larger discourse on gender inequality within sports, this thesis underlines the importance of persistent study and action in order to solve issues of gender inequality in sports. It is crucial to face the issues of female athletes' objectification across popular sports media outlets and acknowledge women's skills to provide a welcoming sporting environment for athletes of all genders.

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