

**Research article**

**COGNITIVE BIAS IN THE INTERPRETATION  
OF SPORT SUCESS AND FAILURE**

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**Abstract.** *The purpose of news reports is to relate facts and information; however, in the press coverage of the games of the Serbian national football team the media stance on why and how the games were lost or won is very much present, thus placing the locus of control on internal or external axes. The aim of the paper is to examine if cognitive bias (locus of control, self-serving bias, fundamental attribution error) is present in the interpretation of sport outcomes in the public discourse and if so, whether it is reflected in a sample of the sports audience as well. A multimethod approach was used to analyze interpretive styles and different types of cognitive biases in the interpretation of the national football team's victories and losses in the sports press and among the sports audience during the World Cup in Qatar 2022. The authors conducted mixed method research, combining qualitative (critical discourse analysis) and quantitative methods (a survey conducted on 161 participants) reflecting linguistic and psychological theoretical frameworks. In the first phase, we identified linguistic means that shape interpretative tendencies in sports media. Elements of cognitive biases are recognized – self-serving bias, internal attribution and high affective involvement in the interpretation of victories, while defensive mechanisms through defensive attribution, externalization, distancing and passivization of the national team appear in the interpretation of losses. The survey revealed that male respondents are more prone to internalization when interpreting victories than female respondents, while older respondents are more prone to internalization when interpreting defeats.*

**Key words:** *cognitive bias, internal and external locus of control, critical discourse analysis, interpretation of sport outcomes, Serbian National Football Team*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

**Sport in the public discourse – public discourse in sport**

In the media, national sport representatives and teams are portrayed as an embodiment of national ideals, strength, success, and pride. Top athletes are seen as kings and national heroes. They are the best among us and their sport successes are generalized into all other personal qualities. They have the power to make everyone else winners or losers; they are the guardians of a nation's pride and honor, keepers of tradition. As such, they enable and institutionalize a cultural and historic continuum of the sport tradition.

Sport discourse cannot be observed independently of other public discourses in any given society. As Michel Foucault (1972) stated in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, discourse is not merely a group of symbols but also a social practice which systematically shapes objects about which it informs. That means that sport is not an isolated construct nor is it the source (or product) of its signifiers and cultural symbols. Sport clubs, events, competitions, organizations, rules, infrastructure, technology, participants, fans, education, politics, social networks, media etc., together constitute a context and form meanings within the sport discourse. Discourses are not a simple reflection of what exists, nor are they representations of the existing meanings and forms; discourses determine the way in which people will perceive, categorize, and evaluate the world in which they live (Schirato, 2007). Discourses are only seemingly consistent and continuous. Depending from which or whose perspective (players, coach, spectators, referees, media, etc.) a sport event is observed, there could be multiple discourses in competition with one another. Discourses as such represent mediators between social structures and individuals, which shape their perception and cognition, and consequently their behavior. Social identities and relations are formed in and through discourse, implying that discourse helps construct reality from a particular perspective (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Therefore, different discourses may be said to represent different perspectives of the world, and that individuals' specific identities, which are a consequence of the different contexts they live in, affect their perspectives (Maftoon & Sabbaghan, 2010). In critical discourse analysis (CDA), a criticism is conducted of social relations which allow manipulations, and of language which is used to not only sustain but also create such social relations, aiming to induce at least some social change (Hart, 2014). One such change might be raising language awareness in a sense that a hidden agenda might be present in utterances, which could enable addressees to understand issues regarding power and control as well as the role that language plays in these issues (Fairclough, 1992; Maftoon & Sabbaghan, 2010). As Silaški and colleagues (2009) underscore in their analysis of the Serbian public discourse, the basic principle of CDA is to identify and analyze such linguistic manipulations in discourse, that is, it is important to determine which linguistic means and choices are used to achieve goals through which persuasion and manipulation are achieved in discourse.

Based on the aforementioned, CDA research is clearly warranted in attempts to uncover the relationship between language use, power, and ideology (Maftoon & Sabbaghan, 2010) since language is used as a means to influence what and how people think, alter people's perceptions toward a social event, belief, or ideology. All levels of linguistic analysis can be relevant for implementing ideologies and consequently, within the CDA model, for analysis in this respect (Fairclough, 1992; Del-Teso-Craviotto 2006, Silaski at al., 2009).

### **Sport, Identity, and Cognitive Bias**

Sport fans develop long-term relationships with their favorite team or sportsperson, and often display enthusiastic loyalty. This is often accompanied by higher levels of irrational and affective tendencies. The origins of such traits are interpreted by some authors (Deighton, 1992; Barthes, 1972) as stemming from uncertainty of the sport outcomes. However, to keep the audiences' attention, the competitors must have relatively equal chances for victory, producing feelings of hope and fear in the spectators. This combination creates apprehension enhanced further by feelings of suspense and excitement (Zillmann, 1996; Carroll, 1996; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Therefore, the primary source of entertainment is the affective excitation caused by cognitive evaluation of uncertainty. Additionally, group behavior is characterized by impulsivity, irritability, irrationality, a highly emotional state, lack of judgment and critical thinking, which leads this behavior to be termed collective euphoria (Le Bonn, 1895/2009). The appeal of football can therefore be attributed to its captive nature, but also to the psychology of groups and the allure of collective behavior. When the aspect of strong group identity is also added, as is the case with national teams, together with media stimulation, a very dynamic and affectively tense social climate is created.

Wins and losses affect the emotional state of fans. When an opponent makes mistakes or is sanctioned, this increases the chances for "our" team to win, so the feelings of pleasure and relief arise, while disappointment and anxiety are felt if "our" team loses. These emotions and the anticipation of the outcome affect the level of empathy, that is, increase the level of identification with the team or sportsperson one favors. Zillmann (1978, 1983) provides a conceptual explanation for this effect through *excitation transfer theory*. Emotional reactions and empathic identification intensify as the game nears its end because of the parasympathetic nervous system involvement. This further leads to an increase in the feelings of pride and satisfaction for the team's success, and alternatively, blameworthy emotions and dissatisfaction for the team's loss (Madrigal, 2003).

Two forms of comforting behaviors can be identified when accepting sport failure. The first one is minimizing the significance of the victory, and the second one is making excuses for the loss. In order to maintain a positive image of oneself (or the team), the excuses cannot be directed towards endangering the quality and ability of the favored competitor. External circumstances and unfair conditions place the locus of control externally, while the inner abilities stay solid and the self-image remains unharmed.

Fans have a tendency of seeing reality differently, that is, they process information in a biased manner. The purpose of this is to portray the favored team in a positive light at all times. Indirectly, it also maintains the fans' personal identity and high self-respect. An explanation for this cognitive processing deviation can be found in social identity theory, which presupposes that people partly define themselves through belonging to social groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982). Identification with sport teams is a very important source of self-determination in sport fans. When national teams are concerned, identification with a team is intertwined with identification with larger social groups, such as national identification. The success of a national team affects the positive image about the nation itself. Research has confirmed the existence of fans' bias in evaluating the past outcomes of their favored team (Roese and Maniar, 1997), attribution errors when evaluating the present quality of the team (Tykocinski, Pick, &

Kedmi, 2002), as well as distorted and biased expectations of future performances (Hirt et al., 1992; Hirt & Ryalls, 1994).

Since Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman brought cognitive bias to the attention of the scientific community in 1972, lists and classifications have multiplied, as have scientific publications concerning this topic. Cognitive biases are forms of distortion of cognition, perception, attitudes or judgment from reality or objective reality. Individuals consistently warp reality in order to please or protect themselves. Every “subjective reality”, is therefore functional and evolutionary adaptive for the individual (Haselton, Nettle, & Andrews, 2005). Some cognitive biases are aimed at compensating for the lack of information, the limitations of the human cognitive apparatus, while some are directed towards the preservation of the self, one’s values, ego and self-respect. The latter group is divided into two subgroups, where direct cognitive biases are linked to the preservation of the image of a person, and are indirectly related to the preservation of the image of group to which a person belongs (Ariely, 2008). Campbell & Sedikides (1999) introduce the term self-serving biases and define them as an attributive disposition where an individual presents active and internal factors as responsible for their success, and passive, less controlled and external factors as justification of failure.

As each individual’s integrity is systematically protected by its idiosyncratic explanatory style, in a similar fashion, each society is characterized by its own interpretative patterns. They are interwoven in traditional concepts, visions of the past, present, and future, in the ways in which society reacts to crises and faces up to challenges, and how it celebrates victories or justifies losses. This paper analyses individual interpretative tendencies, but also tendencies of the public towards an interpretative style as represented in public sport discourse – written news reports. The assumption is that a permanent, stable and pervasive bias in the interpretation of sport victories and losses is present in the Serbian public discourse. In case that this is a universal tendency, it can be hypothesized that this self-serving bias will be reflected in discursive practices – in the language of politics, historiography, in everyday speech, media, and sport.

The research problem can be summarized in the following question: what discursive practices can be observed in the interpretative style of sport victories and losses? The focus of the research are self-serving biases realized through 1) discursive practices in media reports and 2) individual and group differences of the sport audiences. Since the collective consciousness is an agent of the public discourse, the discourse is inclusive and interactive with the interpretative styles of individuals which feed into it. The two “layers” of discourse are complementary and reflect the following dichotomies: individual-collective, content-form, agent-structure, latent-manifest, subjective-objective, as well as explorative-confirmative.

The aim is to observe whether self-serving cognitive bias is present in the articles on outcomes of the Serbian national football team, which discursive practices were used and through which linguistic means. Additionally, the aim is to determine if statistical consistencies exist in the frequencies of the internal and external factors in relation to the different outcomes of the matches, gender, and age of the respondents. The basic assumption is that statistically significant differences in frequencies will be found in the internal and external interpretative factors dependent on the game outcome, the gender and/or age of the respondents.

## METHODS

Due to the multidisciplinary approach used, a mix-method research was selected. For the linguistic aspect of this research, a qualitative analysis was carried out in line with CDA and cognitive linguistics. Content analysis was carried out on material consisting of 34 texts published online by various sources of daily newspapers written in Serbian. The selected articles reported on the Serbian national team (SNT henceforth) and their matches during the World Cup Qualifications and during the World Cup itself. Overall, the material consists of 20666 words. In order to observe the manner in which the press might express concepts related to the notions described in the previous sections of the paper, linguistic content was identified which expresses inner qualities and external (un)fortunate circumstances in descriptions of losses or wins of the SNT. Additional categories were derived post-analysis, inductively (Patton, 2002).

A short survey was conducted in both traditional and online formats, immediately following the conclusion of the World Cup. The instrument was constructed for the purpose of this research, in which the main questions were to identify the reasons for victory or loss of the Serbian national team in two high-stakes matches, and were constructed as binary choice items (as shown below).

Why did the Serbian national team beat the Portuguese national team during the qualifications for the World Cup?

- Because they were better.
- Because they were lucky.

Why did the Serbian national team lose against the Swiss national team in World Cup?

- Because they were worse.
- Because of bad luck.

Our complementary study included 161 (80 male and 81 female) participants from Serbia (mean age 31.31). In order to test frequencies of the responses between two cases (variables named *Victory* and *Loss*), a simple *Chi-square independence* test was used to determine whether or not there is a significant association between two categorical variables, along with the strength of the association test of the two variables to measure how strongly the two categorical variables are associated: Cramer's V and the Contingency Coefficient. The independent samples *t*-test was used to check statistical differences across the *Age* control variable.

## RESULTS FOLLOWED BY DISCUSSION

### **Victories of the Serbian National Team**

In the newspaper reports about victories of the SNT, we observed that the main strategy by which emphasis is laid on the internal locus of control is reporting on the quality of the SNT. The external locus of control is achieved through emphasis on the significance of the victory and minimizing the active participation of the opposing team (OT).

In Table 1, we see the attribution of internal qualities for both teams; however, the SNT has been given an advantage not only in the number of accounts (OT:8, SNT:64), but also in the linguistic variation. In the first row of the SNT column we observe statements of great actions (verbs and adverbials); in the second row, the quality of the players, the team as a whole and the coach, provides a variety of positive adjectives.

**Table 1** The positive qualities of the two teams<sup>1</sup>

OT	SNT
[1] dok su se Portugalci odlično <i>branili</i> i povremeno stvarali šanse (while the Portuguese were excellent at defense and occasionally created opportunities)	[1] Zaigrao hrabro, kako je i najavljavao poslao neodbranjivu "žabicu" u mrežu. (Having started playing bravely, he sent an undefendable "skimming stone", as he had announced, into the net.)
[2] Napadač Juventusa je odličan pokušaj imao u 34. minutu (The Juventus attacking midfielder had an excellent attempt in the 34 <sup>th</sup> minute)	[2] Opet naši dobro napadaju (Our team is attacking well again)
[3] Portugalci jačim pressingom kontrolisali meč (Portuguese players controlled the game with a higher pressing tactic.)	[3] Odlična kontra izabranika selektora Stojkovića (Excellent counterattack by selector Stojkovic's chosen few)
[4] opasni Bruno Fernandes (the dangerous Bruno Fernandes)	[4] Sjajno se namestio kapiten Srbije (the Captain of Serbia positioned himself excellently)
	[5] Svaka čast onom ko ih je uklopio tako idealno. (Congratulations to the one who brought them together so ideally.)
	[6] Orlovi pritiskaju domaćina koji ne zna gde se nalazi. (The Eagles are pressing the home team who do not know what is happening to them.)

The examples given in the second row of the OT column may have been employed to emphasize how difficult it might have been to win against such difficult adversaries, thus additionally stressing the significance of the SNT victory (also see Table 3).

To claim the better quality of the SNT, comparisons were also used, as seen in Table 2.

**Table 2** Comparisons of the SNT and OT

[1] Srbija je u ovom trenutku BOLJA od Portugala (Serbia is in this moment BETTER than Portugal)
[2] Mitrović je pokazao da je bolji skakač od Ronalda. Da. Bolji je! (Mitrovic showed that he is a better rebounder than Ronaldo. Yes. He is better!)
[3] Veljković je bio snažniji od Sančeza (Veljkovic was stronger than Sanches)
[4] Bili smo bolji rival. (We were a better rival.)

<sup>1</sup> Only the most illustrative excerpts from the press have been presented due to space constraints. The statements have been left in the original language to portray genuine linguistic content, metaphors, word play, etc. The excerpts have been left in the original form as well, containing spelling mistakes, capital letters etc. while the only intervention is the conversion from the Cyrillic alphabet into Latin for the sake of uniformity. Translations by the authors of the paper are provided in brackets; the translation is literal so as to reflect the word choices, tenses, agency, etc. Where necessary, an explanation is given to clarify the possible lack of understanding of a phrasing which is too literal.

Another way to present the SNT as a better team is to minimize the quality of the OT (Table 3). Here, the OT are seen as more lucky than able, more a result of an external force than skill, the players are presented as instruments, not active participants - agents of the positive outcomes. Possession of the ball and scoring a goal is a gift from SNT, or a result of the audience's support. Such descriptions minimize the quality of the opposing team and sometimes even degrade it.

**Table 3** Minimization of the OT's ability

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[1]	Renato Sančez je poklon loptu [...] (Renato Sanches has [done something] to the ball gifted to him...)
[2]	Nemanja Gudelj je pogrešio i poklonio loptu domaćinima (Nemanja Gudelj made a mistake and gifted the ball to the home team)
[3]	Imali su sreće Norvežani koji nisu znali šta ih je snašlo (The Norwegians, who had no idea what had happened to them, were lucky)
[4]	umeju da koriste i najmanji kiks (they can use the slightest slip up)
[5]	Domaći su nošeni podrškom sa tribina mogli vrlo rano da stignu do vodstva, već posle dvadesetak sekundi (The home team, elated by the supporters' cheering, managed to take the lead only twenty seconds into the game)
[6]	Haland i ekipa mogli su samo da gledaju kako Milinković-Savić brani (Haaland and the team could only watch Milinkovic-Savic defending)
[7]	loptu poslao pored Rajkovića za vodstvo domaćina 1:0 (...sent the ball past Rajkovic putting the home team in the lead)

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The second strategy is one of presenting the victory as extremely significant, which is done through a careful weaving of the narration, which consists of several phases, as presented in table 4.

The construction of the social reality is the following – because it was difficult and unlikely (as if moving mountains, playing on a steep hill, the beginning was tragic), victory is extremely important, historical, and the agents of the victory are heroes, deserving of national pride and comparable to saints. This is seen in the usage of superlatives, metaphors (magicians, bosses, heroes), collocations used in historical accounts. Good examples of this are 'VELIKI ALEKSANDAR MITORVIĆ' – *Aleksandar Mitrović The Great*, and 'Mitar Strašni' - *Mitar the Terrible*. Here *Mitar* is already a nickname (originally the root name from which the surname had been derived), which in such a form coincides with the name of an important Serbian saint, and to which the associative and metaphorical transfer has been added to show approval, and in this case glorification, and aligning his success with that of kings.

**Table 4** The significance of the victory, presented in three major categories:

It was too difficult	It was unlikely	It is historical / the agents are heroes
[1] onda uzbrdica postane naglo strmija, zadatak na toj neopisivo teži, ali... vera ima moć da i "planine pomera", pa su "orlovi" prestali da se pentraju, već su - uzleteli. (And then the upward slope becomes steeper, the task to be carried out on it indescribably harder, but... the faith has the power to "move mountains", so "the eagles" stopped climbing, they took off.)	[1] Utakmica nije mogla da počne na lošiji način – bio je to horor početak. (The game could not have started in a worse way – it was a horror beginning.)	[1] meč decenije (the game of the decade)
[2] Da je bilo lako, nije. Niti je iko očekivao da može biti lako. "Svako pašče na svom bunjištu jače", kaže stara izreka, a igrati na terenu Kristijana Ronalda i donedavnih šampiona Evrope jedan je od najvećih reprezentativnih izazova koji nekoga može da zadesi. (Was it easy – it wasn't. Nor did anyone expect it to be. "Every dog is stronger in its own field", an old proverb says, and playing in Cristiano Ronaldo's field, the field of the recent European champions, is one of the greatest challenges for any national team.)	[2] Sve je počelo košmarno (It all began nightmarishly)	[2] Konačno - za istoriju, za čast, za ponos čitave nacije (Finally – for history, for honor, for the whole nation's pride)
	[3] Užasno je počelo veče u Lisabonu po naš sastav (The evening started horribly for our team in Lisbon)	[3] ISTORIJSKA POBEDA ORLOVA U PORTUGALU (A historic victory for the Eagles in Portugal)
	[4] Ova ekipa je spremna na čuda (This team is ready for miracles)	[4] [Orlovi su] definitivno ispisali istoriju ([The Eagles] have most definitely written [made] history)
	[5] ne može da igra više zbog povrede (cannot play anymore due to an injury)	[5] jednu od najvećih pobeda u istoriji našeg fudbala (One of the greatest victories of our football history)
		[6] je jednu od najvećih pobeda u ovom veku (one of the greatest victories in this century)
		[7] Bogovi. (Gods.)
		[8] PIKSI JE I DALJE MAĐIONIČAR (Piksi is still a magician.)
		[9] "ORLOVI", CAREVI! ("The Eagles", Bosses!)
		[10] MITROVIĆ JE HEROJ NACIJE (Mitrovic is the nation's hero)
		[11] MITRE, IKONO NAŠA (Mitar, our icon)
		[12] Strašni Mitar u 91. minutu utišao 60.000 Portugalaca (Mitar the Terrible silenced 60,000 Portuguese in the 91 <sup>st</sup> minute)
		[13] VELIKI Aleksandar Mitrović (Aleksandar Mitrovic the Great)

Another strategy to stress the low probability for victory and the importance of the victory is to represent the course of the game as unfair towards the SNT, and by extension towards the nation. Consequently, the SNT, having won, overcame even such circumstances (Table 5):



**Table 5** Examples of circumstances against the SNT / Serbia

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[1]	sudija Orsato nije smatrao da je Bernardo Silva s leđa napravio faul nad Gudeljom (referee Orsato did not think that Bernardo Silva committed a foul against Gudelj from the back)
[2]	ali već drugi put na ovom meču sudija Orsato i njegovi pomoćnici ne signaliziraju korner za Srbiju (but this was already the second time already in this match that the referee Orsato and his assistants did not signal a corner kick for Serbia)
[3]	Italijan se baš "razmahao" kartonima u Lisabonu (the Italian is really "throwing around" cards in Lisbon)
[4]	Džabe i Kristijano RONALDA, guranje od strane sudija, sviranje nepostojećih faulova (Cristiano Ronaldo, referees pushing against our team, signaling non-existent fouls, it was all in vain)
[5]	Paulinja naterao Strahinju Pavlovića da ga zaustavi prekršajem (Paulinho made Strahinja Pavlovic stop him with a foul)
[6]	PLJAČKA! ČIST FAUL PRE GOLA PORTUGALA! (Theft! A clear foul just before Portugal scored a goal!)

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Here the referees are represented as willful and lacking in objective evaluations, their judgements are based on choosing to be on one's side – and that is the opposing side (the first four examples: the referee did not think that foul play occurred; not signaling a corner for Serbia, a referee is "card-happy", and referees are pushing against our team). Also we see the lack of the SNT player's agency in getting a card – he was made to stop the other player, and finally, the SNT has been robbed by foul play, which was not called by referees.

To illustrate the point how reality is construed, we can analyze the following statement:

*[...]u ovaj tim Dragana Stojkovića Piksija koji je pokazao, dokazao i svima u inat rekao - Srbija je u ovom trenutku BOLJA od Portugala. I to nije fraza, niti euforična rečenica, ovo je realnost!*

*(...Dragan Stojkovic Piksi's team, which showed, proved and in spite of everyone said – Serbia is in this moment BETTER than Portugal. And this is not just a phrase or a euphoric sentence, this is reality!)*

We see that in spite of all the unfavorable circumstances, the unfair positions of others towards Serbia, Serbia (as a team?) is better than Portugal, which, the author claims, is not a hyperbole, but reality, thus instructing readers to accept this point of view.

### **Losses of the Serbian National Team**

In the written press coverage of the SNT losses, several discourse strategies have been identified, linked to both the placement of the internal and external locus of control. The internal locus of control was achieved in descriptive practice and accounts of the poor quality of the SNT and/or their performances, materialized as verbal/adverbial descriptions and adjectival constructions, and also the great quality of the OT. The discourse strategy which accounts for the insurmountable quality of the OT is leaning towards the external locus. In utterances leaning towards the external locus stating the unfavorable circumstances for the SNT, several subcategories can be identified: external-fateful circumstances, others' behaviors directed against the SNT, the removal of agency and responsibility through passivization.

**Table 6** Inadequate quality of the SNT

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[1]	i bio apsolutno nedelotvoran (and was absolutely ineffective)
[2]	grogirana "banda" (a drowsy "gang")
[3]	Odbrana nam je bila bušna (Our defense was full of holes)
[4]	Taktika mu nikad nije bila jača strana (Tactics were never his strong suit)
[5]	u timu koji je još jednom pokazao da ne zna da se brani. (in a team which once again showed that they cannot defend themselves)
[6]	katastrofalne igre naše odbrane. (the catastrophic play of our defense)
[7]	Neopreznost Gudelja (The recklessness of Gudelj)
[8]	smušene reakcije odbrane Srbije (the baffled reaction of the Serbia's defense)

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In these accounts (Table 6) individual players, the coach, and team as a whole are depicted as lacking in quality.

**Table 7** Unfavorable circumstances - fate and external factors beyond control

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[1]	a samo Srbija uvek uspe da bude gora nego što to zaista jeste. To nam prokletstvo nikad neće dati mira. (and only Serbia always manages to be worse than it really is. That curse will never leave us alone.)
[2]	kako su raznorazne priče uticale na ekipu u Kataru. (how all sorts of stories affected the team in Qatar)
[3]	Imamo tim za četvrtfinale, međutim, nekad mora mnogo stvari da se poklopi. (We have a team worthy of the quarter finals; however, sometimes many things have to align.)
[4]	Švajcarska ponovo kobna po Srbiju (Switzerland is again fatal for Serbia)
[5]	Meč je počeo loše po Srbiju (The match started poorly for Serbia)
[6]	možda nismo imali sreće (perhaps we had no luck)
[7]	ma koliko je bila velika vera da se u Dohi može ponoviti lisabonsko čudo (no matter how grand the faith that the Lisbon miracle can be repeated in Doha)
[8]	Džaka nije propustio priliku da napravi fiku sredinom prvog poluvremena (Xhaka did not miss the opportunity to make a fuss in the middle of the first half)

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The loss has been attributed to some external factors (Table 7), that is, unrelated to the quality of the players and the game: gossip as a primary focus, a poor onset, others creating a fuss. Most examples, however, relate to fate and luck (a curse, everything has to align, faith is not enough, miracles did not happen), as if even the universe is against *us* – and once Serbia is without support and allies, it is too easy for it to be defeated. Along these lines are the examples from the following category, in which others are directly working against the SNT.

**Table 8** Examples of circumstances directly against the SNT

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[1]	ali penal mu nije dodeljen. (but a foul was not ruled.)
[2]	i to pored sudije koji nekako to nije video. (and right by the referee who somehow managed not to see it.)
[3]	Sudija je odlučio da Strahinji Pavloviću pokaže žuti karton, zbog prekršaja nad Nejmarom. (The referee decided to issue a yellow card to Strahinja Pavlovic due to foul play over Neymar.)
[4]	Sudija ošteti Srbiju protiv Švajcarske (The referee harmed Serbia in the game against Switzerland)
[5]	Sličan start [...] Iranac nije kaznio javnom opomenom. (A similar start [...] the Iranian did not punish with a public warning.)

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According to accounts given in Table 8, it is the responsibility of the referees to estimate whether foul play occurred, almost as if it did not depend on the actions of players themselves. So, a new reality is created in which opponents are not only the OT, but the referees as well, so a loss is guaranteed in such circumstances. To minimize the responsibilities of the SNT players even further, passivization is used in some examples.

**Table 9** The removal of agency through passivization

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[1]	jeste hvatanje za gušu Švajcarca od strane Vanje Milinkovića-Savića (...was the grabbing of the Swiss player's throat by Vanja Milinkovic-Savic)
[2]	primljen gol kad mu vreme nije (a goal received at an inopportune time)
[3]	Od očajja, do sjaja i nazad - Srbija ispustila pobjedu protiv Kameruna (From despair, to glory and back –the victory against Cameroon slipped from the hands of Serbia)
[4]	ali im je sve na kraju iskliznulo kroz prste. (but in the end, everything slipped through their fingers.)
[5]	a onda bili samo nemi posmatrači maestralne akcije (and then we were merely observers of a majestic action)

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The first example in Table 9. is very interesting as it almost entirely removes agency from the player who actually grabbed an opposing player by the throat, which is not only foul play, it is a life-threatening action, therefore sanctionable. Here, it is presented as something that happened to a Swiss player, and the agent is added as an afterthought (linguistically realized in a grammatical construction possible in Serbian, but very infrequent and perceived as awkward). Another aspect illustrated here is euphemizing the action itself, where *to grab (uhvatiti)* is very active and willful, while turning the verb into a verbal noun *grabbing (hvatanje)* creates a more passive situation. Other examples vary in the ways passivization is achieved, but mostly rely on the concept of loss as something that 'happens'.

**Table 10** The great quality of the OT and their play

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[1]	Švajcarci su silovito počeli (The Swiss are off to a forceful start)
[2]	Posle poraza od moćnog Brazila u prvom kolu (after the loss from the mighty Brazil in the first round)
[3]	Petostruki šampion planete je potpuno zaslužen stigao do trijumfa nad našom selekcijom, golovima u drugom poluvremenu. (The five-time champion of the planet has deservedly made it to the triumph over our national team, by scoring goals in the second half.)
[4]	brzonogi Vinisijus (the fast-legged Vinicius)
[5]	Lucidni Nejmar (Lucid Neymar)
[6]	inteligentni Švajcarac (the intelligent Swiss player)

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Attributing realistic assessments of the quality of the OT game or players speaks in favor of placing the locus of control internally. Examples of such accounts are given in table 10. However, when such qualities are given additional values, augmented and hyperbolized, this might present a shift in the placement of the locus of control, as the purpose of such characterization is to present the reality of an unlikely victory for the SNT, therefore similar to the fate-related external circumstances (see Table 9).

**Table 11** The OT quality exceeds the SNT's quality – justification of the loss

[1]	"Primili smo golove na neverovatno glup način i nismo uspeali da se vratimo" ("We received the goals in an unbelievably stupid way and did not manage to come back from that")
[2]	Drugi srpsko-švajcarski "rat" (The second Serbian-Swiss "war")
[3]	BRAZIL JE, IPAK, PREJAK - Srbija nemoćna pred prvim favoritom (Brazil is, after all, too strong – Serbia is powerless against the true favorite)
[4]	Orlovi su izgubili od petostrukog svetskog šampiona (The Eagles lost to the five-time world champion)

### Survey Results

The *Chi*-square test of independence was calculated to assess the relationship between the variable named *Victory* and the variable named *Loss*. There was no significant relationship between the two variables,  $\chi^2_{(1, 161)} = 0.017$ ,  $p = .897$ , followed by a negligible *Cramer's V* and a Contingency Coefficient of 0.010. Table 12. shows a crosstabulation of the frequencies of the variables *Victory* and *Loss*.

**Table 12** Victory x Loss Crosstabulation

		Victory		Total
		<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	
Loss	<i>Internal</i>	76	62	138
	<i>External</i>	13	10	23
Total		89	72	161

Regularity and consistency have not been found in the interpretation of the causes of the cases *Victory* and *Loss*. The obtained frequencies do not speak in favor of the self-serving bias. However, in both cases, the majority of interpretations relied on internal factors, which is why an additional analysis was conducted to examine if gender is a difference source.

The *Chi*-square test of independence was performed to assess the relationship between the variables *Victory* and *Gender*. There was a significant relationship between the two variables,  $\chi^2_{(1, 161)} = 4.615$ ,  $p = .032$ , followed by a weak but significant *Cramer's V* of 0.169 and a Contingency Coefficient of 0.167. The *Gender* and *Victory* crosstabulation is shown in Table 13.

**Table 13** Gender x Victory Crosstabulation

		Victory		Total
		<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	
Gender	<i>Male</i>	51	29	80
	<i>Female</i>	38	43	81
Total		89	72	161

The male respondents have a tendency for the internal locus of control in the interpretation of *Victory* when compared to the female sample. The difference is moderate but there is a statistically significant negative correlation.

The *Chi-Square* test of independence was calculated to assess the relationship between the variables *Loss* and *Gender*. There was a significant relationship between the two variables,  $\chi^2_{(1, 161)} = 5.980$ ,  $p = .014$ , followed by *Cramer's V* of 0.193 and a Contingency Coefficient of 0.189. The *Gender* and *Loss* crosstabulation is shown in Table 14.

**Table 14** Gender x Loss Crosstabulation

		Loss		Total
		<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>	
Gender	<i>Male</i>	74	6	80
	<i>Female</i>	64	17	81
Total		138	23	161

In the interpretation of *Loss*, both the male and female respondents leaned toward internal factors, and we singled out a statistically significant positive correlation.

On the overall sample, no statistically significant consistency was found in tendencies of the respondents towards the internal or external locus of control, irrespective of the *Victory* or *Loss* cases. Gender variations are visible in the interpretation of the *Victory* case, represented by a greater frequency of males towards internal factors, and toward external factors with the females.

The independent samples *t*-test was calculated to compare age in *Internal* and *External* locus of control preferences in both situations – *Victory* and *Loss*. There was no significant difference in age between *Victory Internal* ( $M = 30.438$ ,  $SD = 9.672$ ) and *Victory External* ( $M = 32.389$ ,  $SD = 12.278$ );  $t_{(159)} = 1.1$ ,  $p = .273$ . There was a significant difference in age between *Loss Internal* ( $M = 32.986$ ,  $SD = 10.893$ ) and *Loss External* ( $M = 21.261$ ,  $SD = 2.241$ );  $t_{(159)} = 11.190$ ,  $p < .001$ . When interpreting *Loss*, a statistically significant difference was found among the older respondents, who leaned towards internal factors, while younger respondents leaned towards external factors.

#### BRIEF DISCUSSION

Reporting on the outcomes of national team competitions is a complex task, involving various types of pressures. On the one hand, wide audiences must be engaged and on the other, writing must reflect the interpretative tendencies of the public discourse (Sabedini, 2014). As individuals, reporters shape the public discourse but are also shaped by it, and so their reporting style is formed both consciously and intuitively. In other words, their interpretative style is not only a conscious tendency to appease the wide readership, but it also reflects their own implicit biases towards the dominant discourse.

This multilayered study has shown that an interpretative tendency linked to victories and losses exists in the Serbian public discourse namely in 1) sport reporting about national teams and 2) the interpretation of the sport audience.

Research of this type is difficult to find, and so interpreting the results within the referential framework is a challenging task. Literature in general points to consistent findings that winners are more likely to interpret the outcomes internally compared to losers, and that this difference is more prominent in individual than team sports (De Michele, Gansneder, & Solomon, 1998; Zaccaro, Peterson, & Walker, 1987). The closest research design to the one carried out here is “Attributions in the Sports Pages” by Lau

and Russel (1980). They state that internal attributions for success were found in accounts of victories, while external attributions were identified in the coverage of failures.

Our linguistic content analysis of the press identified several key interpretative tendencies in accounts of victories and losses of the Serbian national football team. When reporting on victories, the following discursive practices place the locus of control internally:

- [1] Agency of the SNT (emphasizing the active part in achieving victory)
- [2] Passivization of the OT (in contrast to the agency of the SNT)
- [3] Augmenting abilities of the players, coach, and the SNT team
- [4] Emphasizing the significance of the victory (historic success)
- [5] Emphasizing the difficulty of winning (thus augmenting the achievement of the SNT)
- [6] Emphasizing the low probability of winning (minimizing the effects of external in favor of internal factors)
- [7] Emphasizing the quality of the OT (maximizing victory over the OT)

In newspaper accounts of losses, contrary to expectations, the external locus of control has not been found as a dominant interpretative tendency. However, specific self-serving biases were found, whose aim is to relativize, rationalize and justify the unfavorable outcomes. The internal locus of control of the SNT was found responsible for the failure in conjunction with lessening or removing agency, and was lessened by external factors:

- [1] Passivization of the SNT (they suffered loss)
- [2] Agency of the OT
- [3] Criticism of the SNT quality
- [4] External locus of control (circumstances – esoteric, fate, poor luck)
- [5] Injustice (the willfulness of others – referees)
- [6] Emphasizing the quality of the OT (rationalization of failure)
- [7] Indifference

In both cases, a self-serving bias has been found, and in the case of losses it is accompanied by defensive attribution, as a mechanism of biased defending oneself from accepting one's own responsibility for failure (Walster, 1966). Any cognitive or perceptual process, if distorted by the need to maintain and enhance self-esteem, can be referred to as a self-serving bias, as is the tendency to perceive oneself in a favorable manner (Myers, 2015). Individuals tend to ascribe success to their own abilities and efforts, but ascribe failure to external factors (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Motivational factors such as self-enhancement, self-presentation and cognitive processes such as locus of control and self-esteem are responsible for these interpretative tendencies, but also some cultural specificities (Shepperd, Malone & Sweeny, 2008).

There is evidence of cross-cultural differences in the tendency to exhibit the self-serving bias, particularly when considering individualistic (Western) versus collectivistic (non-Western) societies (Al-Zahrini & Kaplowitz, 1993; Schuster, Forsterlung, & Weiner, 1989; Hooghiemstra, 2008; Kudo & Numazaki, 2003).

Serbia is a collectivistic society (Hofstede Insights, 2022). People in such societies belong to groups, are interconnected, loyal and display a high level of conformity. Strong familial and friendly relationships presuppose specific roles and responsibilities within the groups. This speaks in favor of strong identification with the SNT, involvement of the

fans, affective aspects. Evident is also the need to single out individuals who are responsible, in this case the players, for successes or losses. According to Hofstede's study, Serbia is characterized by a large distance of power and avoidance of uncertainty, with very low scores on the indulgence dimension. This is in line with the authoritarian collective character and tendency towards authoritarian types of cognitive biases. Ego-defense mechanisms of psychological projection are frequent, authoritarian aggression in the humiliation of the loser; great importance is assigned to strength, force, and power; winners are heroes and idolization happens; there is a tendency to express cynicism, destructiveness, suppression; epic hyperbole and a tendency to believe in mystic determination and superstition (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 2019/1950; Altemeyer, 1998). One of the most prominent dimensions of the authoritarian character is the tendency towards the fundamental attribution error.

The examination of the interpretative tendencies of victories and losses with sport fans has shown significant differences across gender and age in the preference of external or internal locus of control. Research so far has shown that in general there are no significant differences in gender when locus of control is observed independently from the behavior domain (Schultz & Schultz 2005). The majority of these studies pertained to the domain of academic achievements, where the males showed a greater tendency towards the internal locus in interpreting academic or business successes than the females. Other studies indicate that both males and females are becoming more external. Factor analyses of locus of control measures indicate that males and females are relatively similar in primary factors, but may differ substantially in some secondary factors (Sherman, Higgs, & Williams, 1997).

Although more informative psychological instruments and research techniques have not been used in this research, the obtained results can be seen as corresponding to the ones in literature, even on a small sample such as this one. The males are moderately, but with a statistical significance, more prone to internalization in interpretation of sport success. In line with the results found through the linguistic analysis, there are no significant differences in the interpretation of losses and the externalization of the locus of control. Older respondents showed a greater tendency towards internalization compared to the younger ones. This finding corresponds to the general tendency where internalization of the locus of control grows with maturity (Tamayo, 1993; Shewchuk, Foelker, & Niederehe, 1990), although the majority of the findings emphasize the importance of specific domains and the multidimensionality of the phenomenon (Lachman, 1986). The contradiction of the findings in literature can be explained by the range of the respondents' age, that is, tendencies revert back to externalization in old age, and this concept must be observed and examined orthogonally (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Ryckman & Malikiosi, 1975).

## CONCLUSION

The multidisciplinary basis of this paper encompasses sport, media, social psychology, cognitive sciences, and linguistics. Therefore, the multimethod approach was used to analyze interpretative styles and cognitive biases in the interpretation of victories and losses of the Serbian national football team in news reports on their matches during the qualifications and World Cup in Qatar 2022. The obtained results are informative and to a degree, expected, and correspond to the current research in this field. Elements of

cognitive biases were identified: the self-serving bias, internal attribution, and high affective involvement in the interpretation of victories. Additionally, in the interpretations of losses, defense mechanisms were found in the form of defensive attribution, externalization, distancing, and passivization of the SNT. The discourse analysis revealed descriptive insight into the content of these phenomena, thus illustrating latent codes of the national discourse, while the survey results revealed insight into cross-group (gender and age) differences in the interpretative tendencies of the sport audiences. The findings of this paper can be applied in sport psychology to awareness raising and educating on the cognitive biases (of players, referees, coaches, public, journalists), by pointing out language patterns which participate in biased discursive practices. Raising awareness about the forms and consequences of biased reporting on sensitive sport topics is not only an ethical and a matter of fair play, but also contributes to the development of collective responsibility, mental health, and self-awareness.

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## **KOGNITIVNA PRISTRASNOST PRI INTERPRETACIJI USPEHA I PORAZA U SPORTU**

*Svrha novinskih izveštaja je da prenesu činjenice i informacije, međutim, u medijskom izveštavanju o utakmicama fudbalske reprezentacije Srbije veoma je prisutan stav o tome zašto i kako su utakmice izgubljene ili dobijene. Cilj rada je da se ispita da li je kognitivna pristrasnost (lokus kontrole, pristrasnost očuvanja, fundamentalne atribucijske greške) prisutna u interpretaciji sportskih ishoda u javnom diskursu, i ako jeste, da li se ona odražava i na uzorak sportske publike. Korišćen je multimetodski pristup za analizu interpretativnih stilova i različitih vidova kognitivnih pristrasnosti u interpretaciji pobjeda i poraza nacionalnog fudbalskog tima u sportskoj štampi i među sportskom publikom, tokom SP u Kataru 2022. Autori su sproveli istraživanje mešovito tipa, kombinujući kvalitativne (kritička analiza diskursa) i kvantitativne metode (anketa sprovedena na 161 ispitanika) u skladu sa multidisciplinarnim pristupom ovoj temi, koji obuhvata lingvističke i psihološke teorijske okvire. U prvoj fazi, identifikovali smo jezička sredstva koja oblikuju interpretativne tendencije u sportskim medijima. Prepoznati su elementi kognitivnih pristrasnosti – pristrasnost očuvanja, unutrašnja atribucija i visoka afektivna involviranost u interpretaciji pobjeda, dok se u interpretaciji poraza pojavljuju i odbrambeni mehanizmi kroz odbrambenu atribuciju, eksternalizaciju, distanciranje i pasivizaciju nacionalnog tima. Druga faza (anketno istraživanje) utvrdilo je postojanje međugrupnih (polnih i starosnih) razlika u interpretativnim tendencijama sportske publike. Osobe muškog pola su sklonije internalizaciji pri interpretaciji pobjeda od ispitanica, dok su stariji ispitanici skloniji internalizaciji pri interpretaciji poraza.*

*Ključne reči: kognitivna pristrasnost, spoljašnji i unutrašnji lokus kontrole, kritička analiza diskursa, interpretacija sportskih uspeha i poraza, fudbalska reprezentacija Srbije*