

RANKING OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS DISCIPLINES

Ranking de disciplinas deportivas de ámbito profesional

Pedro García-del-Barrio¹, Christian Medina²

¹ Facultad de Ciencias Empresariales, Universidad de Navarra, Spain

² Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Spain

ABSTRACT: Sports activities and events, as well as the practice of physical exercise and sports-related activities, are increasingly present in daily life thanks to technological advancements and social networks. Globalization and the ease of obtaining information have fostered new consumption patterns, increasing the paramount role of sport spectacles in the entertainment sector. The new context demands a global perspective to assess the ability of each sport discipline to attract investors, broaden fans interest, and generate revenues through sponsorships, broadcast contracts, etc. Indeed, the business of professional sports is increasingly attracting the interest of academics and practitioners, as manifested by the growing expansion of the sport disciplines in the media showcase.

This paper establishes a global ranking of the degree of popularity of the main sport disciplines based on the relative intensity with which fans and individuals follow sporting events. We rely on the figures offered by Google Trends, a tool that we use as a proxy variable to compare the degree of interest attached to each sport discipline. The ranking, based on websites, reveal the hierarchy of the main sports disciplines worldwide: 1. Soccer; 2. Golf; 3. Basketball; 4. American Football; 5. Baseball; 6. Tennis; 7. Volleyball; 8. Cycling; 9. Hockey and 10. Rugby.

KEYWORDS: Sports disciplines; global popularity; fans; media and social networks

RESUMEN: *Los eventos y espectáculos deportivos, así como la práctica de ejercicio físico y otras actividades relacionadas con el deporte, están cada vez más presentes en la vida diaria, gracias en buena medida a los avances tecnológicos y a las redes sociales. La globalización y las facilidades de obtención de información han fomentado nuevos patrones de consumo, acrecentando el papel primordial de los espectáculos deportivos dentro del sector del entretenimiento. Este nuevo contexto reclama una perspectiva global, acorde con una evaluación más atinada de la capacidad que cada deporte tiene de atraer inversores, ampliar el interés de los aficionados y generar ingresos a través de patrocinadores, contratos de retransmisión, etc. En efecto, el negocio del deporte profesional está atrayendo de manera creciente el interés de académicos y profesionales, como pone de manifiesto la creciente presencia de disciplinas deportivas en el escaparate mediático mundial.*

Este artículo establece un ranking global de la popularidad de las principales disciplinas deportivas en función de la intensidad relativa con la que aficionados y el público general siguen los eventos deportivos. Se emplea una metodología basada en las cifras de Google Trends, la cual se usa como variable proxy para comparar el grado de interés que despierta cada disciplina deportiva. El ranking, basado en sitios Web, establece la jerarquía de las principales disciplinas deportivas a nivel mundial es: 1. Fútbol; 2. Golf; 3. Baloncesto; 4. fútbol americano; 5. Béisbol; 6. Tenis; 7. Voleibol; 8. Ciclismo; 9. Hockey y 10. Rugby.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Disciplinas deportivas; popularidad global; aficionados; medios de comunicación y redes sociales*

Recibido/received: 30-06-2022

Aceptado/accepted: 29-07-2022

Contact details:

Corresponding author

Pedro García-del-Barrio
pgbarrio@unav.es
Edificio Amigos, Universidad de Navarra,
Campus Universitario, 31009, Pamplona,
Navarra, Spain

Christian Medina
chris4298@uic.es
Immaculada, 22
08017 Barcelona

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire, it has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope, where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.”

(Nelson Mandela, 2000)¹

1. Introduction and literature review

Professional sports, part of the entertainment industry, have an enormous capacity to arouse emotions and, hence, to attract people’s interest. The remarkable expansion of sport disciplines in the global media showcase grows along with the variety of new technological developments. The advent of the Internet era entails a faster and broader development of sports businesses, thereby becoming an important ally of the industries to achieve competitive advantage (Evans & Smith, 2004).

To evaluate the ability of sports disciplines to attract audiences and generate revenues, modern sport markets must be analyzed in a global context. The sport business has the ability to attract investment and to generate economic returns, in the form of sponsorship and broadcasting contracts, expanding the interest of fans and audience levels (Ratten & Ratten, 2011; Biscaia et al., 2013; Pérez et al., 2015; Nicholson et al., 2018; Aguiar-Noury & Garcia-del-Barrio, 2019).² The exposure of sport events in the media indicates the fans’ degree of interest towards the sport disciplines. Chaddha (2017) remarks that: *“Athlete driven media is immensely important to the sports media industry, as it represents the present and the future of how consumers get their sports related reporting. Athlete driven media refers to sports related content that is created and posted directly by the athlete. This can be on social media, blogs, or other outlets that engage fans”*.

In this context, it is not surprising that the sports business has increasingly attracted the interest of both academics and practitioners. Concerning team-sport leagues, previous research assessed their comparative status based on annual revenues. For instance, Aguiar-Noury & Garcia-del-Barrio (2021) compare America versus Europe, concluding that the former group of leagues (NFL, NBA, MLB and NHL) do typically generate higher earnings than latter group (soccer leagues in Europe).

This paper addresses the study of the sports market share and evolution, focusing on the role of the global media showcase. Gulan (2016) highlights that the media dimension is crucial for the eventual fate of sport disciplines: *“Provide considerable knowledge*

¹ Speech at the inaugural Laureus World Sports Awards in 2000 (Monaco). Retrieved on 10th May 2022 from: <https://www.globalgoals.org/news/sport-for-development-and-peace/>

² Other aspects deserve attention concerning the international dimension of sports. In particular, online marketing strategies and media ventures have become crucial in recent times to engage with the public and to strengthen the relationship with the followers (Santomier & Stuart, 2008; Phua, 2010; Meng et al., 2015; Marques et al., 2018).

about sports, and the ways in which the media choose to characterize or emphasize certain aspects of sports contribute to the mind-set of individuals in society". Rowe (2004) also stresses the links between the media and sports and culture: "*Media sport is probably now the most vibrant area of study connecting orthodox academic concerns in social science and the humanities with the politics of everyday life*".

Moreover, technological developments incite changes in the field of sports business, creating opportunities for investments and the necessity to implement certain public policies (Ratten, 2019). Similarly, the digital transformation in the sports industry combines innovations at different levels, which involves a variety of stakeholders, including the consumers of sport spectacles.

From the viewpoint of the fans, the new advances entail different ways of interacting and accessing data. For instance, the use of apps based on social networks permit sport-teams create contents to engage the fans and, simultaneously, enable supporters to share information and opinions with other fans. The resort to social media in marketing has also interested researchers in regards the analysis of contents, recurrence of posting, communication of brand image, feelings expressed by the fans, etc. (Araújo et al., 2014; Anagnostopoulo et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018; Corthouts et al., 2019). Moreover, there is evidence that consumers of sport-related events experiment a growing emotional link with sports through new technologies (Nicholson et al., 2018).

Worldwide audiences attached to particular sports brands or leagues pull in business venture and investments, involving purchasing of shares, clubs' acquisitions, transfer of players, etc. Some of these new patterns seem to have benefited soccer clubs and leagues, as they have successfully expanded into new markets in Asia and America (Hill & Vincent, 2006; Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2019; Aguiar-Noury & Garcia-del-Barrio, 2019). The growing predominance of soccer leagues in Europe manifests a strong capacity for attracting large audiences and signing high broadcasting contracts. Actually, the greatest source of global spectacle seems to stem from games opposing the most popular clubs in European competitions (Hoehn & Szymanski, 1999).

Past research has featured the significance of understanding the stage of a team's internationalization – i.e., clubs – to develop business strategies and increase brand value (Richelieu, 2008; Richelieu & Desbordes, 2009; Giroux et al., 2013). Besides, inspecting the international expansion of domestic leagues may be relevant in search of strategic actions (Ferreira et al., 2011). Hence, the analysis of the sports industry should be better addressed within the entertainment sector and adopting a worldwide perspective.

Thus, we tackle here the issue of business development in the context of the globalization of professional sport disciplines. Actually, the paper presents an overview of the evolution of worldwide markets and fans across the main professional sport disciplines.

Another path for research relates the capacity of sport businesses to promote highly valued goals from a social viewpoint. Researchers discuss on matters like the

development and implementation of sports public policy, the encouragement of social initiatives (Bjärsholm, 2017; Miragaia et al., 2017; Peterson & Schenker, K, 2018).

This paper tries to provide insights on the comparison of the popularity among the main sport disciplines worldwide. To this aim, we rank the sport disciplines according to their relative interest, which we capture through the figures reported by the “Google Trends” tool (a measure of the relative intensity with which worldwide Google users search for contents related to each sport).

Following previous research (Choi et al., 2012), we use normalized data with respect to the maximum number of searches in the corresponding searching period. Records from “Google Trends”, collected as we already described, are used to compare the degree of attention that fans pay to each of the sport disciplines. There are previous papers that used a similar, although non-identical, approach by relying on the number of contents and/or article news in the Internet reported by the Google search engine (Garcia-del-Barrio & Pujol, 2007; Garcia-del-Barrio et al., 2020).

2. Methodology and data collection

In carrying out the different analyses, we rank sports on the bases of Google users’ behavior. Initially, we try capturing the degree of interest of the public through the records measuring the intensity with which Internet users search for information in the Google search engine (“*Google Trends Web*”). To obtain the figures on which computing the calculations, we define strings for the main sport disciplines: soccer, basketball, golf, American football, baseball, tennis, volleyball, cycling, hockey, and rugby. We expect that the relative amount of web searches provide us with an accurate estimation of the interest that supporters pay to each sport discipline. The information conveyed by Google Trends is expressed as for a top reference value of 100, passing on values that extend somewhere in the range of 0 and 100.

In handling the data, we only account on the numbers, while not considering the real substance of the stories or site pages reported by Google. Regardless of whether the web information just speaks of some portion of the visibility, the exceptional development of new media advances and overall global access to data give us the equivalent measures of worldwide consideration.

In conclusion, we trust that *Google Trends* figures are accurate indicators of the degree of popularity related to each sport discipline. Past studies demonstrated that the information given by this tool is dependable and assists with anticipating customer tendencies (Vosen & Schmid, 2011; Choi & Varian, 2012). Then, we use also another alternative measure: *Google Trends News*, which assess the relative recurrence with which users search for news articles identified with every one of the Top-10 sport disciplines. While *Google Trends Web* delivers a global perspective on the comparative interest drawn by each sport, *Google Trends News* measures the degree of attention based on search intensity of only news articles or stories.

The investigation was conducted, in case of *Google Trends Web* approach, for the period January 2004 to December 2019; whereas *Google Trends News* was analyzed in a shorter period of 11 years, because the data in this case was only accessible since 2008.

Our research focused on the assessment of the interest shown by Internet users through time (increment or reduction in respect to different sports) and how the incomes of each sport disciplines advanced in the same timeframe. The chosen approach captures the individuals' interest in a particular sport discipline, no matter what are the reasons behind; in this regard, the interest may derive from the players sporting skills, but also from other personal characteristics that make them attractive to the people.

3. Discussion of the results

This section examines data obtained from the Google Trends to perform several analyses. First, we define a ranking of the Top-10 sport disciplines worldwide, according to which sports have the greatest levels of exposure in the media showcase. Actually, the results on the popularity status are derived from the intensity in the searching activity of hundreds of thousands, and more often millions, of Internet users. We consider that we achieved reliable comparative figures, which enable us to rank the popularity and media exposure of sport disciplines.

In addition to that, we analyze how the attention that fans pay to the different sport disciplines evolved through the years (both in terms of visibility and popularity), and how diverse it is across certain countries from different continents.

Additionally, we use records from *Google Trends Web* and *Google Trends News* to analyze the evolution of the sport disciplines over time, and to examine how each sport acts through a tendency line. In other words, our methodology permits examining distinctive patterns of each sport through time. Then, we further compare the results obtained by applying the two aforementioned approaches: *Google Trends Web* and *Google Trends News*.

Finally, our results are confronted with rankings proposed by other sources, like the one computed by sportshow.net, based on the number of fans. Moreover, our approach was confronted with a ranking based on searches in Baidu, which is the main web search engine in China, registering 1.54 billion of total web searches daily. This variety of data sources in our analyses give robustness to our results.

Global media ranking of sport disciplines

Table 1 reports the share of the worldwide results obtained both based on computing the average number of monthly searches made by Google users in "Google Web" and searches in "Google News" associated to each of the sport disciplines considered.

The analysis of the Top-10 ranking of sports in terms of media exposure (based on *Google Trends* records), allow us concluding that Soccer stands out compared to other sports.

Table 1. Sport disciplines Top-10 ranking - Google Trends WEB and NEWS (in %)

	Sport Discipline	Google Trend WEB (in %)	Sport Discipline	Google Trend NEWS (in %)
1	Soccer	46.81%	Soccer	27.54%
2	Golf	10.75%	Golf	15.65%
3	Basketball	9.94%	Baseball	10.67%
4	Am. Football	8.84%	Am. Football	10.37%
5	Baseball	7.23%	Basketball	9.15%
6	Tennis	6.87%	Tennis	7.42%
7	Volleyball	3.52%	Hockey	6.50%
8	Cycling	2.41%	Cycling	5.59%
9	Hockey	1.90%	Rugby	5.28%
10	Rugby	1.73%	Volleyball	1.83%
	TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%

Source: authors' calculations from Google Trends Web and News

Evolution over time

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the evolution of sport disciplines over time, showing how the different sports in our Top-10 ranking evolve over the years.

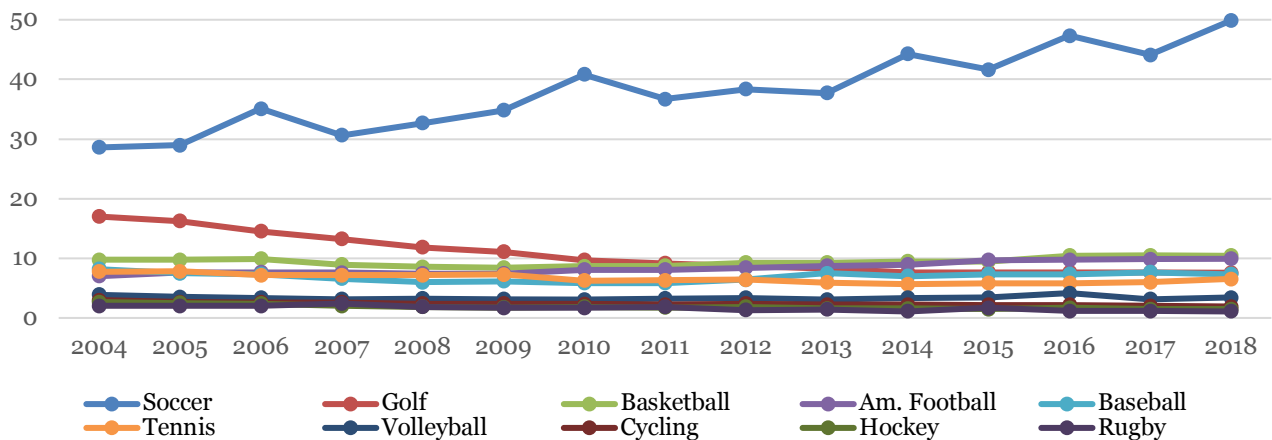


Figure 1. Top-10 Sports Status Evolution (Google Trends Web)

The examination of the results permits concluding that Soccer has increasing interest worldwide. We also observe how the majority of the sport disciplines, with the exception of golf, either maintain their share (of fans' degree of interest) or display an upward trend. Our results presumably tell about how significant not only the sport is, but the relevance that the superstars of each sport may have in the interest of people in the sport.

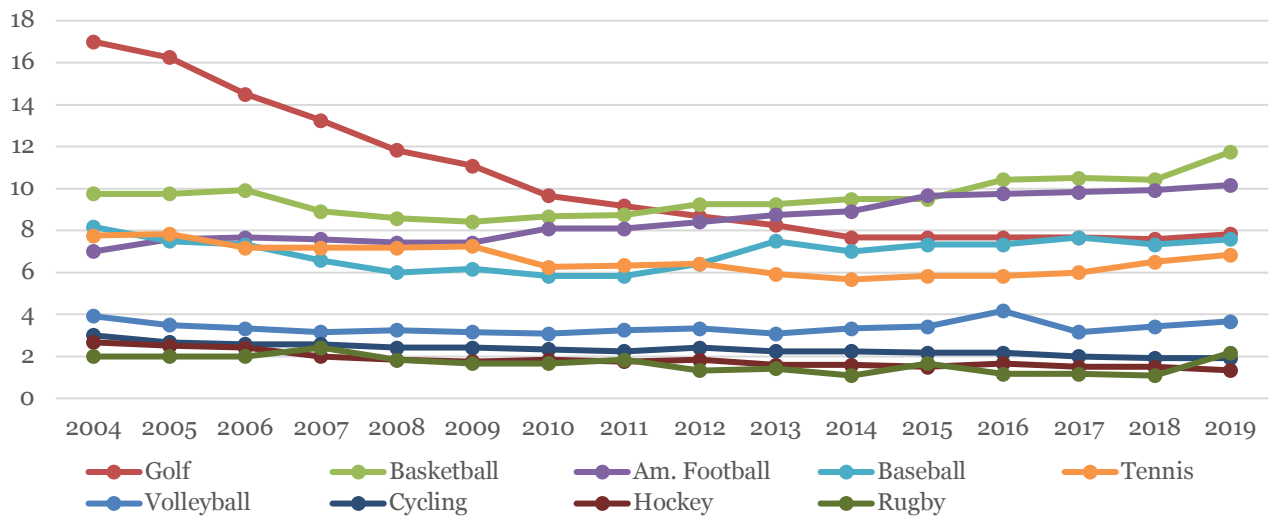


Figure 2. Top-10 Sports Status Evolution except Soccer (Google Trends Web)

Figure 3 complements the analysis by displaying the evolution over time of the sports ranking based on records from *Google Trends News*, instead of *Google Trends Web*.

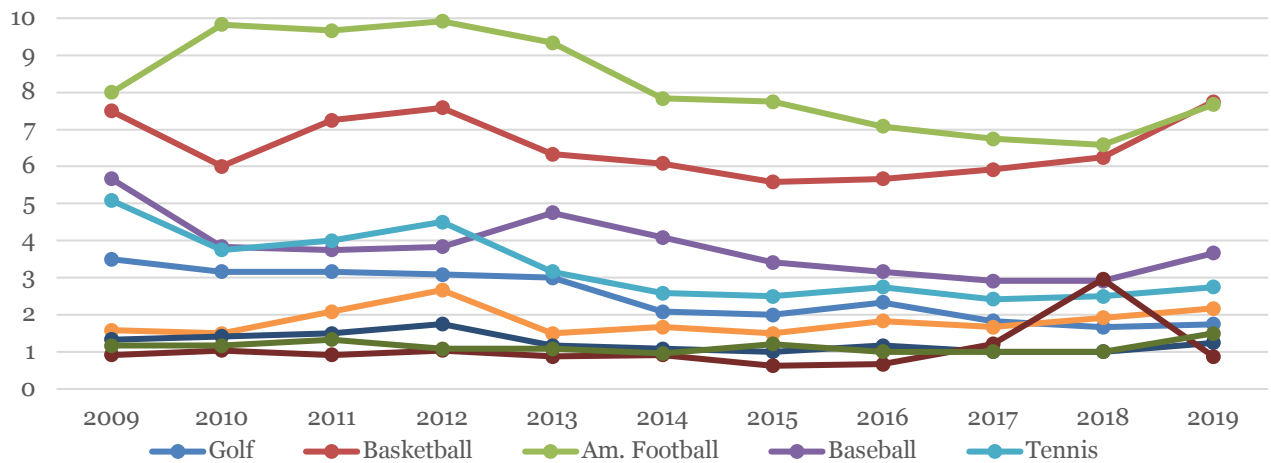


Figure 3. Top-10 Sports Status Evolution except Soccer (Google Trends News)

Then, we compare in Figure 4, the global visibility of sports disciplines (in terms of their media exposure) and their popularity. Again, the analysis finds Soccer has the greatest media status, ahead of all the other “rival” disciplines.

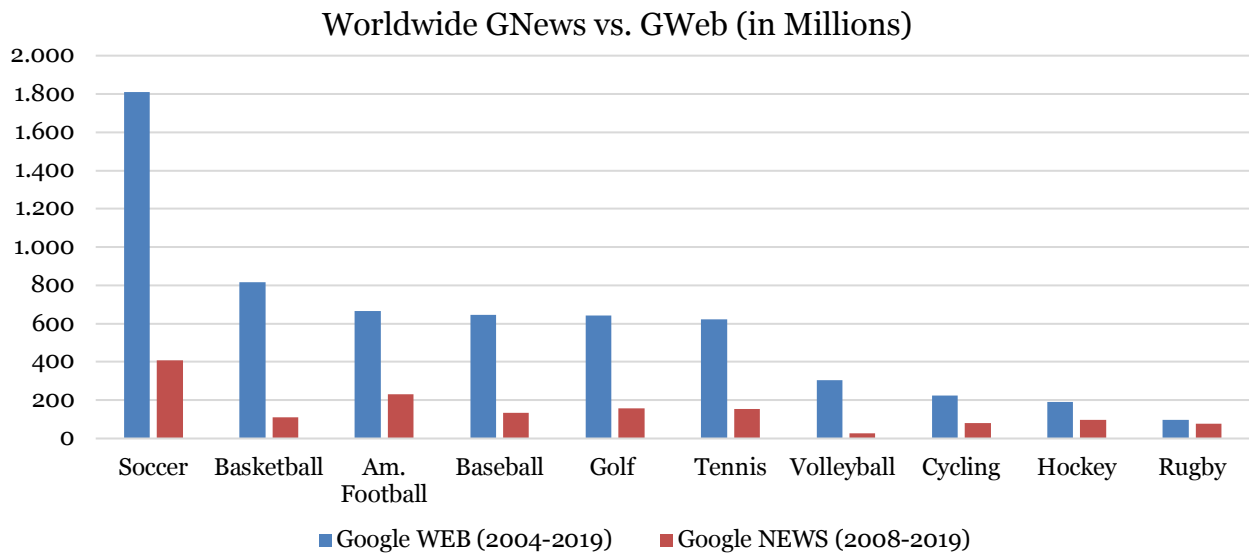


Figure 4. Global Sports Visibility (GNews) & Popularity (GWeb) (in Millions)

To complement the analysis, Figure 5 shows the relationship between the two approaches used to rank the hierarchy of sports (*Google Trends News* and *Google Trends Web*). The fact of finding a high, and positive, correlation between both variables indicates that our results are robust. In Figure 5, given that it deviates radically ahead of the other sports, we show a graph where Soccer is omitted.

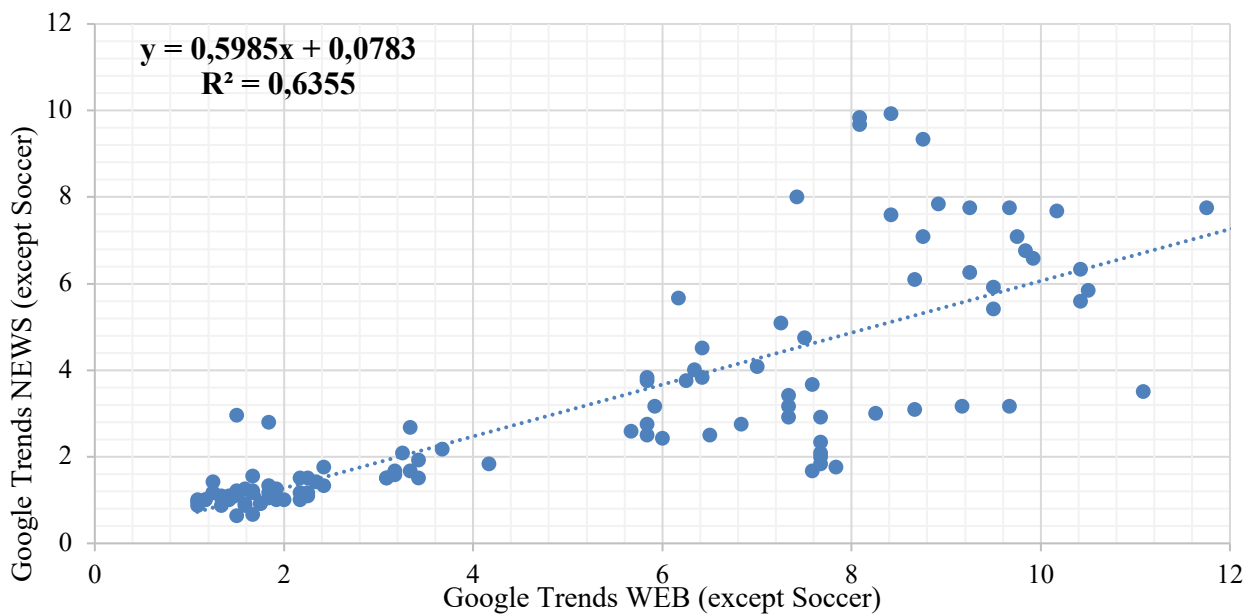


Figure 5. Global sports popularity vs. visibility except soccer (GTWeb vs. GTNews)

To examine the similarities and differences between the two approaches, Table 2 reports the multiplying factors, an analysis that yields interesting conclusions.

On one hand, the Top-4 Sports in the ranking result to be very similar in both approaches: Soccer, Basketball, Baseball and American football (even though not necessarily in that specific order). On the other hand, the leading sport discipline, i.e.

Soccer, attracts more than twice the level of interest as Basketball, and about 18 times the attention that people pay to Rugby.

Table 2. Multiplying factors between sport disciplines (Calculation from raw data in Millions)

	Soccer	Basketball	Am. Football	Baseball	Golf	Tennis	Volleyball	Cycling	Hockey	Rugby
Soccer	1									
Basketball	2.22	1								
Am. Football	2.72	1.23	1							
Baseball	2.80	1.26	1.03	1						
Golf	2.81	1.27	1.03	1.01	1					
Tennis	2.91	1.31	1.07	1.04	1.03	1				
Volleyball	5.93	2.68	2.18	2.12	2.11	2.04	1			
Cycling	8.01	3.61	2.94	2.86	2.85	2.76	1.35	1		
Hockey	9.43	4.25	3.46	3.37	3.35	3.24	1.59	1.18	1	
Rugby	18.83	8.49	6.92	6.37	6.69	6.48	3.17	2.35	2.00	1

Source: authors' calculations from Google Trends

Hierarchy of Sport Disciplines among Spanish Fans

This section presents the results of applying the same analysis, but limited now to Spain. Thus, Table 3 shows the Top-10 ranking of sport disciplines of the Spanish fans.

Again, Soccer appears in first position, followed by Basketball, Golf, Cycling and Tennis. Of course, the presence of top players of the country, who stand out in a certain discipline, reaching the status of “superstar”, determines also the hierarchy of that particular Sport. Therefore, it is just normal that Basketball reaches the 2nd position, as the national team and the ACB league many followers in the country (the Spanish national team ranked 2nd in worldwide FIBA ranking). More surprising, perhaps, is the appearance of 3 individual sports in the Top-5 ranking: golf, cycling and tennis.

Again, Golf has many followers in Spain, something that can be due to top players like Jon Rahm (2nd ranked in the Official World Golf Ranking); Cycling has a lot of tradition in Spain and gathers many followers in a main event such as “Vuelta España”; and finally, Tennis, which is also appealing given the large number of top Spanish tennis players, including of course Rafael Nadal.

Table 3. Sport disciplines in SPAIN Top-10 ranking- Google Trends WEB and NEWS (in %)

	Sport Discipline	Google Trend WEB (in %)	Sport Discipline	Google Trend NEWS (in %)
1	Soccer	58.11%	Soccer	56.01%
2	Basketball	13.32%	Basketball	15.34%
3	Tennis	8.49%	Tennis	9.20%
4	Golf	6.81%	Cycling	5.85%
5	Cycling	5.61%	Rugby	3.09%
6	Rugby	2.45%	Golf	2.86%
7	Volleyball	2.12%	Volleyball	2.68%
8	Hockey	1.33%	Hockey	1.86%
9	Baseball	0.90%	Baseball	1.84%
10	Am. Football	0.86%	Am. Football	1.29%
	TOTAL	100%	TOTAL	100%

Source: authors' calculations from Google Trends Web and News

Hierarchy of Sport Disciplines in the USA and Brazil

This section applies our approach to a couple of representative countries from North and South America. The countries were chosen by taking into account their population and the degree of interest. Hence, our analysis will compare USA (329 Million people) and Brazil (210 Millions).

From Figures 6 to 9, we illustrate the different patterns in the Top-10 ranking for the USA and Brazil, based on *Google Trends Web* and *Google Trends News*. Comparing it to the worldwide ranking a main difference is seen, which is the position of American Football on the first place, but also some facts that may seem surprising: the recent rise of Soccer positioning it in 2nd place, something that can be related with the Latin population of the USA; the 3rd position held by Golf, which can appear to be too high, although some press articles suggest the incredible interest for this sport in the USA especially until 2009, when Tiger Woods had an enormous impact in this matter.

Concerning Brazil, Soccer attracts most of the interest from fans and general population, while American Football, Baseball and Golf find themselves relegated to bottom positions. Brazil, as with all South America, was greatly influenced by European countries such as Portugal or Spain, which can explain the main differences it shows compared to the USA in its ranking, which was influenced more by England perhaps.

Our results also inform of an increase of visibility and popularity of American Football, where the Super Bowl is a key factor in this respect, even in the global showcase (Marca, 2018). The figures for Brazil suggest some conclusions: the outstanding importance of Soccer in the country, with a tremendous visibility, with its peak of popularity on 2010 when the South Africa World Cup had a huge impact worldwide. It is also interesting to see how Volleyball, a sport that is not relevant in many countries around the world, has kept its 2nd position throughout the years.

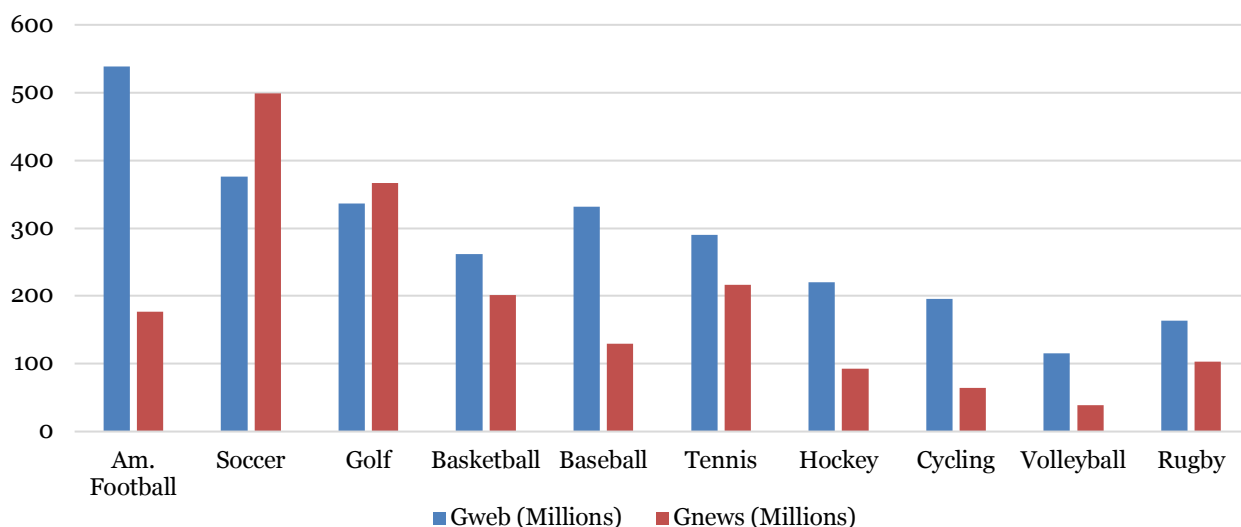


Figure 6. USA Sports Visibility (GNews) & Popularity (GWeb) (in Millions)

It is also interesting to see how in the USA the amount of *Google News* searches of Soccer is higher than American football, which can be justified with the number of events that generate news in the world of soccer: while American football only generates news of interest in the country, Soccer has a worldwide reach generating a many news.

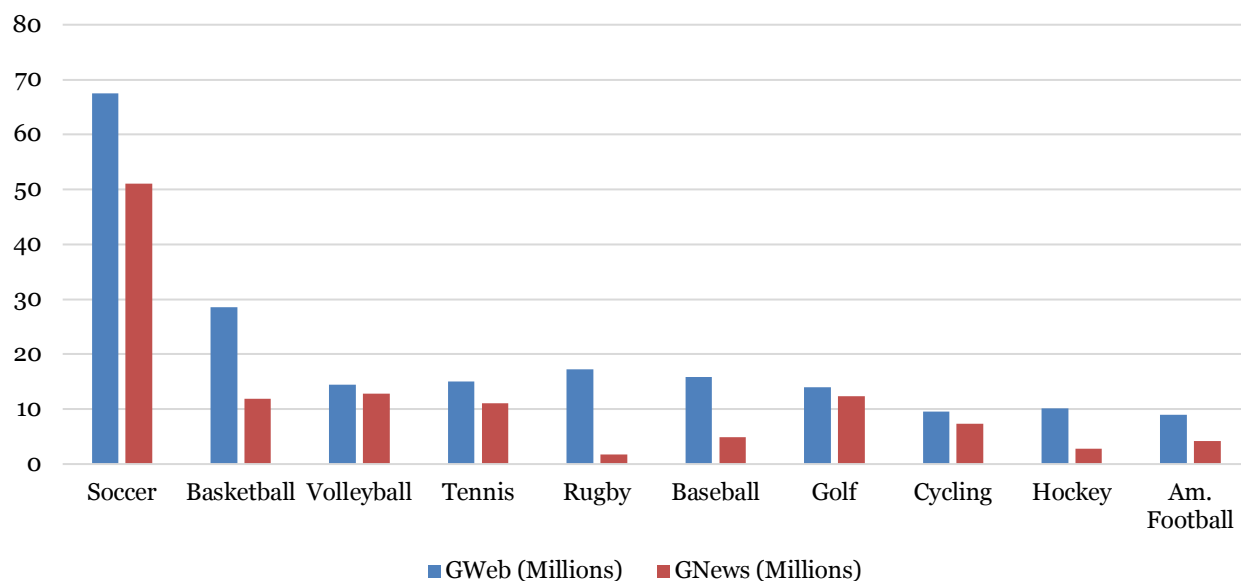


Figure 7. Brazil Sports Visibility (GNews) & Popularity (GWeb) (in Millions)

Then, Figure 8 compares the USA and Brazil, which features the ranking of Sports, in terms of popularity and visibility, in these two countries. To facilitate the comparison, we report the aggregate figures of each Sport in percentage, thus confronting the relative importance of each Sport discipline in a country compared to the results of the other.

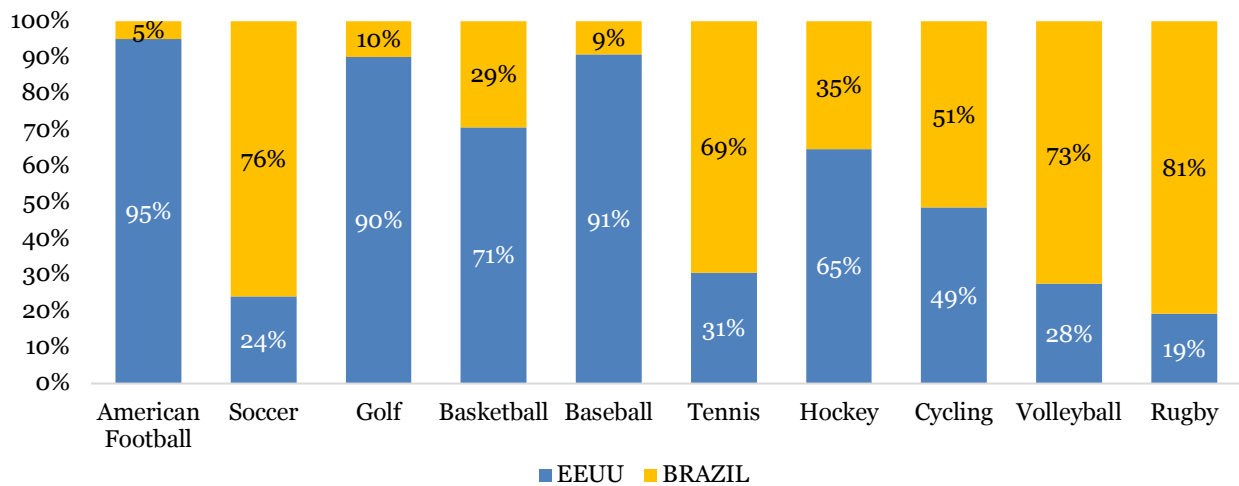


Figure 8. Percentage of Popularity by Sport - USA vs. Brazil (% wrt total Web searches)

We then apply the same methodology to representative countries in Africa and Asia. Consider, for instance, the cases of Nigeria and Indonesia. Again, in order to easily access the analysis of the results, Figure 9 compares aggregate figures of each Sport in percent.

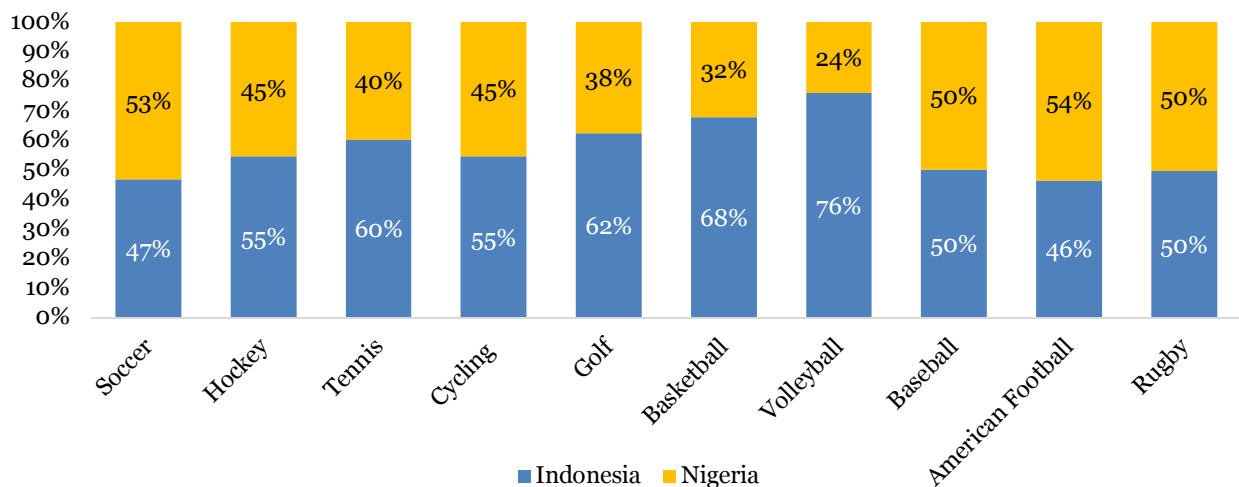


Figure 9. Percentage of Popularity by Sport - Indonesia vs. Nigeria (% wrt total Web searches)

4. Conclusions

Professional sports compete with other entertainment activities in the worldwide market. Moreover, certain features make the consumption of sport events more appealing than other entertainment choices. We argue here that the development of technological innovations facilitates to sport disciplines offering a broad variety of content and increasing the interest of the supporters.

The paper aims to attain a broader comprehension of the sport industry by looking at the popularity and visibility of sport disciplines in the worldwide media showcase, and to analyze it over time. Among other results, we identify Soccer as the leading sport discipline in Europe and possibly, worldwide. Other increasingly popular sports include: American Football, Basketball, Baseball and Volleyball.

To accomplish the goals of the paper, we adopted a methodology based on the “Google Trends” tool. Actually, we appraised the level of interest raised by the Top-10 sport disciplines worldwide, as captured by their degree of Popularity and Visibility. This approach required gathering a great deal of information to create the rankings and to examine their evolution. In considering both the searches of News and general Web searches, we defined the rankings of sport disciplines in terms of media exposure and popularity, and observed the development of the rankings as the years progressed. The assessment of some rankings through time was also complemented with data obtained from Baidu, the China’s most popular searching engine in Internet. .

We conducted several analyses to evaluate the level of consideration conceded by the consumers of sports spectacles. First, we observed the development of interest generated by some main sports all around the world. The outcomes from the study of the degree of interest of sport disciplines, based on “Google Trends” outcomes, allowed us to rank the hierarchy of the main sport disciplines according to their comparative number of contents or searches, respectively.

The ranking based on the number of searches in “Google Web” allowed us establishing the rank of the major sports disciplines worldwide: 1. Soccer; 2. Golf; 3. Basketball; 4. American Football; 5. Baseball; 6. Tennis; 7. Volleyball; 8. Cycling; 9. Hockey and 10. Rugby. As a complementary analysis, the same procedure was applied limiting the information to news articles (searches made in “Google News”), resulting a slightly different ranking: 1. Soccer; 2. American Football; 3. Basketball; 4. Golf; 5. Baseball; 6. Tennis; 7. Hockey; 8. Cycling; 9. Rugby and 10. Volleyball.

Concerning the evolution over time, we observe an stable order in the rank of sport disciplines worldwide, even if Soccer is becoming increasingly predominant over time.

Besides, by selecting a few representative countries, we deepened into the analysis of the globalization of sport disciplines. Further investigation was carried out to examine worldwide which of the Top-10 sport disciplines experienced greater expansion in America and Asia relative to historically European sport disciplines: it seems that soccer has been in an ascent lately in the USA and China; tennis and golf have likewise expanded their media exhibit notoriety and popularity in Asia and North America.

The main limitation of this research project is the possible bias on the records available for countries like China, since they do not use Google. We tried to overcome this difficulty by taken data from Baidu, which may not use the same sources and filters to collect their web searches.

Another field to be explore in the future are e-sports, as part of the entertainment industry that is growing in recent years. It has large economic support of many

companies, and the interest of a lot of people worldwide. In the Web link of Forbes shown in references, we see how in 2019 they had an audience of more than 433 million and exceeded 1 billion dollars in revenues (Ayles, 2019). In any case, this paper invites future research to examine other sports and disaggregated analysis by countries.

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García-del-Barrio, P. & Medina, C. (2022). Ranking of professional sports disciplines. *Journal of Sports Economics & Management*, 12(1), 68-83.

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