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EDITED BY
Iker Sáez,
University of Deusto, Spain

REVIEWED BY
Henri Tilga,
University of Tartu, Estonia
Eneko Sanchez Mencia,
University of Deusto, Spain

*CORRESPONDENCE
Aron Laxdal
✉ aron.laxdal@uia.no

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Who speaks out, and about what? An examination of how physical education is portrayed in Norwegian news media

Aron Laxdal *, Benjamin Aasen, Anna Stensrud and
Tommy Haugen

Department of Sport Science and Physical Education, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway

This study examined how physical education is portrayed in Norwegian print media from 2012 to 2022. Using content analysis informed by agenda-setting and framing perspectives, 256 newspaper articles were analyzed to identify dominant voices and themes. The findings show that students and university faculty are the most visible contributors, while teachers are underrepresented, especially in national media. Coverage largely mirrors academic discussions and tends to frame physical education through health-related and expert-driven narratives, often linking the subject to broader social and political debates. Such portrayals may narrow public understanding by overshadowing physical education's educational and formative purposes. The study discusses how media framing can shape perceptions of physical education's role in education and health policy and underscores the need for more balanced representations to foster a broader and more informed public debate about its value in society.

KEYWORDS

agenda setting, assessment, content analysis, framing, health

Introduction

Several scholars have argued that physical education has a low academic status and that the knowledge students gain in the subject is considered less valuable than other forms of knowledge (e.g., [Hardman, 2008](#); [Sæle, 2017](#)). Furthermore, physical education is often described as an activity-based or health-focused subject, where exercise and fitness are prioritized over learning ([Larsson, 2016](#); [Sæle, 2017](#)), and where performance and athletic skills take precedence ([Westlie, 2022](#)). Children and youth often perceive the subject as a break from more academically demanding subjects, viewing it more like recess than as part of the school's educational activities ([Shirotriya and Beighle, 2023](#)). While this has contributed to the subject's popularity, it has also sparked widespread debate ([Larsson, 2016](#); [Larsson and Redelius, 2008](#); [Moen et al., 2018](#); [Säfvenbom et al., 2015](#)). Discussions surrounding physical education often evoke strong opinions, driving engagement and controversy across various media platforms. As a result, the future of the subject is frequently questioned.

In today's society, news media plays a significant role in people's daily lives ([Elvestad, 2015](#)), and access to information is greater than ever before. This has created new opportunities for the public to express opinions, reflect on, and discuss issues relevant to their lives. In this context, physical education is a subject that provokes strong opinions, whether from students, teachers, parents, politicians, or healthcare professionals.

Understanding the role of news media in shaping public discourse is therefore crucial, not only because of its growing influence but also due to the power it holds in a democratic society. Rather than simply mirroring reality, news media plays an active role in shaping public perception (Atton, 2009; McCombs and Shaw, 2023). While it may not dictate what people think, it influences which issues gain attention and how they are framed (Brown and Deegan, 1998). In other words, the way we perceive and discuss reality is often shaped by what we read, hear, or see in the news. Given this influence, examining how media coverage shapes public opinion is essential.

This study emerged from our observation that public discussions of physical education in Norwegian news media were often negative and one-dimensional. Media coverage tended to portray the subject mainly through a public health lens, emphasizing its health benefits, while largely overlooking its educational, social, and formative dimensions. We also noticed that much of the debate was dominated by health professionals, whereas the voices of some key stakeholders were less represented. These tendencies suggested a need to examine more closely how the media frames the subject and which perspectives are given prominence.

With this in mind, this study examined how Norwegian news media covers physical education by analyzing which topics gain media attention and whose voices are amplified in these discussions. The aim of the study was to answer the following questions: What characterizes the discussion on physical education in Norwegian news media? Who speaks out, and about what? In order to answer those questions, we relied on the theoretical framework provided by Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs, 2005) and Framing Theory (Entman, 1993).

Background

No research has been done on media representations of physical education in Norway, even though previous studies have shown that news media can play a powerful role in shaping educational discourses, public perceptions and policy debates (Cohen, 2010; Thomas, 2011; Ulmer, 2016). The influence of media as a “window to the world” suggests that how physical education is portrayed in the public domain may affect how the subject and its teachers are understood, valued and supported. Hyndman et al. (2020) conducted a text mining analysis of international English-speaking media over a 5-years period and found that media reporting largely constructs physical education around health-focused discourses emphasizing physical activity and exercise as medicine, shaping public perceptions and policy understandings of the physical educator profession. Setiawan (2023) analyzed social media content from 2020 related to physical education using big data analytics and found that the subject was commonly portrayed as requiring physical rather than cognitive effort, reflecting the influence of pandemic-related distance learning. Physical education teachers were additionally depicted through gendered and moralized portrayals, combining masculine stereotypes with both admiration and negative sentiment linked to misconduct cases. These findings indicate that the media can reinforce particular discourses and stereotypes that influence how physical education is perceived by the public. While such media-focused research remains unexplored in the Norwegian context, studies

of physical education in Norway have instead concentrated on pedagogical, curricular, and experiential aspects of the subject.

Norwegian research on physical education since 2012 has focused on key themes such as inclusion, lifelong enjoyment of movement, adapted instruction, and different stakeholders' perspectives on the subject (Haugen et al., 2021; Ligestad and Mestad, 2018; Svendby, 2016; Aasland, 2019a). Studies have also explored students' experiences, body image, motivation, and attitudes (Moen and Rugseth, 2018; Säfvenbom et al., 2015; Walseth et al., 2017). Additionally, research underscores the importance of creating a safe learning environment and implementing diverse teaching methods. A review by Løndal et al. (2021) identified four main themes in research on physical education in Norway: (1) Learning in the subject (e.g., learning processes and motivation), (2) Teaching practices (e.g., assessment methods, instructional models, inclusion), (3) Research on physical education as a field (e.g., policy documents, curriculum content, subject structure), and (4) Broader topics related to physical education (e.g., well-being, mental health). Løndal et al. (2021) also highlight a gap between the curriculum's ambitions and the reality of classroom practice. However, little is known about how such educational aims and professional challenges are represented in the wider public arena through news media, or how these representations may influence the legitimacy and direction of the subject in society.

Theoretical framework

Drawing on Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs, 2005), this study examines which aspects of physical education gain visibility in Norwegian news media. Agenda-setting theory posits that the media's emphasis and repetition of certain topics shape public awareness and perceptions of importance (Coleman et al., 2009; McCombs, 2005). In other words, by prioritizing particular issues, the media guide audiences' attention and influences the public agenda. This effect is especially strong among individuals who have limited direct experience with the topic and thus rely on media portrayals to form opinions (Weaver et al., 2010; Zucker, 1978). The selection of sources plays a key role in this process. News outlets typically privilege expert voices, such as health professionals or policymakers, whose authority and perceived credibility lend weight to specific viewpoints (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2002; Bujalski et al., 2018). While the media are expected to represent a diversity of perspectives, this reliance on expert commentary can narrow the range of opinions presented and reinforce certain professional or institutional framings of an issue (McCombs et al., 2014).

Whereas agenda-setting theory addresses what issues receive media attention, Framing Theory focuses on how those issues are presented and understood. Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) posits that by selecting and emphasizing particular aspects of reality, communicators make them more salient, thereby promoting specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and proposed solutions. Frames are shaped by journalistic routines, institutional contexts, and broader cultural values, and they interact with audiences' existing beliefs and experiences (Scheufele, 1999). Thus, framing is both a product of media production and audience interpretation (Entman, 1993).

Framing also influences how individuals allocate attention, shaping not only what people think about but also how they think about it. Ultimately, framing has the possibility to subtly guide perception, often without audiences being consciously aware of its influence. By applying framing theory, this study seeks to uncover how Norwegian news media represent physical education, what meanings are emphasized or marginalized, and how these representations may privilege certain understandings of the subject over others.

Materials and methods

To map the news media's coverage of physical education in Norway, a search for newspaper articles was conducted using the Retriever search engine over a 10-years period (2012–2022). This search included all Norwegian news articles containing the keywords physical education and gym class (i.e., “kroppsøving” and “gym”) in the headline or lead paragraph during the specified timeframe. Due to practical constraints, the study was limited to print newspapers. The search was configured using the following filters:

- Search options: Title and lead paragraph
- Search field: intros:[(kroppsøving OR kroppsøvingsfaget OR gym OR gymtidene OR gymtid)]
- Sources: Norwegian editorial sources
- Timeframe: 01.07.2012 – 01.07.2022
- Filter: Media type > Print newspapers

The initial search yielded 2,225 newspaper articles. A manual review was conducted based on the following inclusion criterion: the article had to highlight, discuss, or debate an individual's or a group's perspective on a situation, attitude, or teaching practice specifically related to physical education. A large number of articles were excluded based on this inclusion criterion or one or more of the following exclusion criteria: duplicates ($N = 149$), news without opinion or discussion ($N = 107$), economic news ($N = 138$), local stories ($N = 190$), articles discussing practical-aesthetic subjects but not specifically physical education ($N = 44$), special-interest newspapers ($N = 43$). After filtering, 256 articles remained. These were then categorized based on the type of author (journalist or opinion piece), type of newspaper (national or local), and the individuals or groups expressing opinions in the article (potentially multiple perspectives in the same article).

Analysis

To examine the themes discussed in the articles, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2016) informed by an abductive research approach (Johannessen, 2022). The abductive stance meant that we moved iteratively between the data and relevant theory to explore how media texts construct meaning about physical education.

Each article was read several times to gain an overall impression before coding began. One researcher coded all articles to ensure consistency in interpretation, while the other team members

reviewed and discussed emerging patterns throughout the process. Each article was coded for 2–4 subtopics that captured its main content, such as ball games, grading practices, fear of showering, or optional physical education (a full list of codes from the initial analysis can be seen in the [Supplementary material](#)). The coding was done manually using a shared spreadsheet that allowed codes to be sorted, grouped, and compared.

After the initial coding, similar codes were merged and refined through several rounds of discussion within the research team. This process resulted in six overarching themes that captured recurring discursive patterns across the data: (1) Physical activity and health effects, (2) Teaching content, (3) Adapted education, (4) Assessment, (5) Shower and locker room concerns, and (6) Is physical education necessary? Throughout the analysis, we made notes about interpretive choices and theoretical connections, which helped trace how the themes developed. The collaborative discussions also served as a form of analytical triangulation, supporting the credibility of the findings.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

To ensure the study's quality and transparency, we drew on established criteria of trustworthiness (Milne and Oberle, 2005). Credibility was strengthened through researcher triangulation, discussions around coding, and iterative comparison between data and theory. Dependability was supported by maintaining detailed documentation of analytic steps and decisions, including coding notes and memos that together formed an audit trail. Conformability was addressed through reflexive discussions within the team, where we critically examined how our backgrounds and preconceptions might have influenced the interpretation of data. Transferability was supported by providing a rich description of the data material, context, and analytic process, allowing readers to assess the relevance of findings to other settings.

The first and last authors are teacher educators with research expertise in physical education who occasionally contribute commentary on the subject in the media. The second and third authors were preservice physical education teachers at the time of the study. This combination provided both professional distance and insider perspectives. Internal discussions allowed for continuous reflexivity and challenged taken-for-granted assumptions, promoting a balanced interpretation of the data.

Findings

Who speaks out?

The findings revealed a relatively even split between journalistic content and reader contributions (54% vs. 46%). Journalist-written articles featured an average of 1.8 unique perspectives per article, suggesting that most of these articles incorporate diverse viewpoints, resulting in a more nuanced discussion of debates surrounding physical education. In contrast, reader contributions averaged only 1.1 perspectives per piece, making them generally less nuanced and more reflective of a single person's opinion. A majority of the articles were published in local newspapers

(76%), which is unsurprising given that local publications far outnumber national ones. Distinguishing between these sources is valuable when assessing their influence on public perception of physical education. Students were the most represented group (37%), appearing in both reader contributions and journalist-written articles in roughly equal proportions. University staff also had strong representation (31%), regardless of newspaper or author type. Notably, teachers were underrepresented (20% overall, only 7% in national newspapers and in reader contributions). This uneven visibility may subtly influence how authority and expertise around physical education are constructed. A complete breakdown of authorship, publication type, and perspectives is provided in [Table 1](#).

What do they speak about?

Physical activity and health effects

This theme focuses on discussions of physical education from a health perspective, where its value is assessed based on the health benefits of physical activity rather than its educational content. Across many articles, health-related frames dominate, positioning physical education primarily as a tool for achieving broader public health goals rather than as a learning arena. The focus of the debate centers on the amount of physical activity students receive during school hours through physical education and how it impacts their current and future health. Often, physical education is framed in ways that could also apply to recess, outdoor lessons, or other school-based physical activities. Consequently, the terms “physical activity” and “physical education” are frequently used interchangeably. This conflation reinforces certain priorities such as activity levels and health outcomes while sidelining discussions of pedagogy or educational value. Overall, this topic was the most prominent and widely discussed. However, most articles within this theme date back to 2012–2015, when political efforts aimed to increase physical activity in schools to improve children’s health (see for example “More physical education in schools” from *Bergens Tidende*).¹ The ensuing debate was divided, with differing views on what should be prioritized in the subject and what measures schools and society should implement to promote health and physical activity (see for example “This is not important enough” from *Stavanger Aftenblad*).²

Teaching content

This theme covers discussions about the content, quality, and variety of physical education lessons. It encompasses debates on teaching practices and what activities should be included in the curriculum. Media coverage here often reflects a tension between tradition and renewal, where some narratives emphasize stagnation while others foreground progress and innovation. Many articles in this category highlight concerns over a lack of activity variety (see for example “Gym Classes in School” from

Hallingdølen).³ Additionally, some articles raise issues regarding inadequate resources and facilities, particularly for activities like swimming and skiing, where financial constraints are often cited as obstacles. Such accounts frequently assign responsibility to schools or municipalities, framing them as either barriers to or enablers of educational improvement. In reader contributions, many express hope for curriculum improvements, advocating for more diverse and engaging activities. However, coverage of teaching content is not solely critical—several articles emphasize the potential within physical education, particularly when discussing unconventional activities and their positive impact on students. During the 2020 curriculum renewal, teaching content emerged as a central debate topic. The analysis suggests that the discussion post-2020 has become more optimistic, shifting from criticism to focusing on opportunities for improvement. However, some curriculum changes faced opposition, such as when the Norwegian Automobile Federation (NAF) criticized the removal of traffic and cycling education from the physical education syllabus.

Challenges and opportunities related to adapted education

This theme explores issues related to student diversity and the challenges of creating an inclusive physical education program. It is the most complex theme and includes discussions on identity-based differences, such as religious considerations and gender roles (see for example “The weak gender” from *Dagbladet*),⁴ individual learning needs that require tailored instruction, and other aspects meant to ensure that all students can learn and thrive in physical education. Media discussions often construct inclusion as both a pedagogical challenge and a moral responsibility, producing contrasting portrayals of who counts as included. Although much of the discussion focuses on existing challenges, some articles also present positive stories about adapted education (see for example “PE doesn’t have to be lame” from *Adresseavisen*).⁵ This theme represents the voices of those advocating for greater inclusivity and promotes diverse interpretations of how physical education should be structured. Still, certain perspectives, particularly those of marginalized students, remain less amplified, shaping an uneven picture of inclusivity in practice.

Assessment

The theme assessment revolves around the debate on how the students are evaluated based on established criteria, particularly regarding the inclusion of effort as a factor in the formal assessment (see for example “Effort must count in physical education” from *Adresseavisen*).⁶ In 2012, a decision was made to include effort in the grading of physical education. This sparked a divisive

1 “Research has shown that physical activity enhances cognitive capacity. [...] Teachers observed that students became calmer and more focused.”

2 “Increasing physical activity in schools is beneficial, but addressing inactivity is not the school’s responsibility.”

3 “Seriously?! How many students actually enjoy repeating the same activities over and over? Very few, I’d say. Who stays motivated to be active outside school when gym class is just endless repetition? NO ONE.”

4 “The idea of having boys and girls in the same gym class was surely well-intended in the name of equality. But perhaps it was a miscalculation.”

5 “At this age, many students have already quit organized sports. We can’t just offer the same activities at school. [...] Gym sessions should be dynamic and engaging. I aim to create activities where everyone can participate, and no one feels excluded.”

6 “Effort in physical education means tackling challenges to the best of one’s ability without giving up, demonstrating independence, and pushing one’s physical limits. Continued practice should matter because movement

TABLE 1 Descriptive distribution of author type, newspaper type, and contributor label.

All included articles														
	Author		Type of newspaper		Perspective									
	Journalist	Non-journalist	Local	National	Student	Teacher	Politician	Parent	University faculty	Health personnel	Headmaster	University student	Sports representative	Other
Quantity	139	117	195	61	94	50	50	10	79	20	33	5	15	21
Percent	54.3%	45.7%	76.2%	23.8%	36.7%	19.5%	19.5%	3.9%	30.9%	7.8%	12.9%	2%	5.9%	8.2%
Only journalist-written articles														
Quantity	139	x	119	20	50	43	43	6	41	17	32	2	12	5
Percent	100	x	85.6%	14.4%	36.0%	30.9%	30.9%	4.3%	29.5%	12.2%	23.0%	1.4%	8.6%	3.6%
Only reader-written articles														
Quantity	x	117	76	41	44	7	7	4	38	3	1	3	3	16
Percent	x	100%	65%	35%	37.6%	6%	6%	3.4%	32.5%	2.6%	0.9%	2.6%	2.6%	13.7%
Only local newspapers														
Quantity	119	76	195	x	70	46	38	7	57	15	30	4	12	17
Percent	61%	39%	100%	x	35.9%	23.6%	19.5%	3.6%	29.2%	7.7%	15.4%	2.1%	6.2%	8.7%
Only national newspapers														
Quantity	20	41	x	61	24	4	12	3	22	5	3	1	3	4
Percent	32.8%	67.2%	x	100%	39.3%	6.6%	19.7%	4.9%	36.1%	8.2%	4.9%	1.6%	4.9%	6.6%

debate, with varying perspectives emerging in the media, especially concerning the balance between skills and talent on one hand and effort on the other. These discussions often highlight implicit hierarchies of merit and how notions of fairness, ability, and discipline are positioned as competing values. One side of the debate argues that effort should be recognized as part of a student's overall learning outcome in physical education. Proponents of this view claim that effort is a key factor that should be acknowledged, as it can motivate students to work harder and improve over time. Because physical education is a practical subject where students actively participate in movement-based activities, supporters argue that effort is clearly visible through engagement, participation, and progression, and should therefore be rewarded in the grading process. On the other hand, critics oppose the inclusion of effort as an assessment criterion (see for example "Skill is more important than effort" from Bergens Tidende).⁷ Some argue that effort is subjective and difficult to measure objectively, which could lead to unfair grading. Additionally, it is pointed out that some students have innate talent or physical abilities that give them an advantage, regardless of effort. Furthermore, teachers may struggle to assess individual effort accurately, particularly in large classes where students have varying levels of ability and engagement. The resulting tension between effort and skill becomes a reflection of broader struggles over what kinds of achievement society chooses to recognize.

Shower- and locker room concerns

The theme on shower- and locker room concerns highlights the challenges related to changing rooms, showering, body image, and nudity. Several articles discuss students' reluctance to shower after physical education and emphasize how the lack of private shower stalls or designated personal spaces can make this a barrier to student comfort and well-being in the subject. At the same time, some opinion pieces argue that locker rooms and communal showers serve an important social function in promoting hygiene, a sense of community, and acceptance of diverse body types (see for example "Make it mandatory to shower naked after gym class!" from Aftenposten).⁸ In this coverage, bodily exposure is often framed as a site of tension between norms of conformity and individual autonomy. This theme represents a unique aspect of media coverage on physical education, as the locker room experience is distinct to this subject. Unlike the other subjects, students must change and shower in front of their peers, which many find challenging. The differing portrayals of this issue also signal shifting boundaries of privacy, modesty, and socialization in school life. While this is a less dominant topic, it has left a significant mark on the debate, especially between 2013 and 2016, when it

received considerable attention. In recent years, however, it has garnered less public focus.

Is physical education necessary?

The debate on whether physical education is necessary questions its value and relevance in today's school system. Although this theme is less prominent than others, it has still played a notable role in recent discussions. Articles in this category challenge the traditional view of physical education as purely a health and fitness subject, calling for more reflection on what students actually learn and whether the subject fulfills a necessary role in modern education (see for example "Is there a point to gym class?" from Østlendingen).⁹ This questioning of purpose functions as a discursive re-evaluation that reshapes what counts as valuable knowledge in schooling and whose interests such evaluations serve. This debate became particularly relevant during the recent curriculum renewal, which reignited discussions on the purpose of physical education and whether there should be a separate subject dedicated to physical learning and development. The prominence or marginality of such debates illustrates how public attention can legitimize or downplay the perceived importance of certain subjects in education.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the debate on physical education in Norwegian media by analyzing contributors and the dominant themes. The results reveal a balanced mix of journalistic content and opinion pieces. Distinguishing between these content types is essential, as opinion pieces typically rely on subjective experiences, whereas journalistic articles are expected to present issues from multiple perspectives and with factual basis (Pereira, 2008). Given the media's influence on public communication (Weaver et al., 2010), representing diverse perspectives is necessary for a balanced portrayal of physical education.

There were notable differences in how local and national newspapers covered physical education, with most articles appearing in local newspapers. While national newspapers reach larger audiences and therefore have greater agenda-setting power (McCombs, 2005), local newspapers tend to emphasize community-based stories. This pattern illustrates how the media participate in defining what counts as important and legitimate knowledge about physical education. In this sense, the media can be viewed as part of a broader educational discourse that elevates certain values over others (Apple, 1993; Ball, 2013; Bernstein, 2000).

Our findings show that students contributed the most to the debate in both local and national newspapers. Their dominance suggests that student voices are prioritized as particularly relevant first-hand accounts. This aligns with earlier research (Sæle, 2017; Larsson, 2016; Larsson and Redelius, 2008), highlighting the diversity of students' experiences in physical education. Such focus both personalizes the debate and influences

and self-awareness are key to the subject's purpose. These goals provide a fair way to assess effort."

7 "Should grades be based more on skill and talent, or on effort and attitude? I believe skills should weigh significantly more. In every other subject, students are graded on their abilities. [...] Trying your hardest doesn't always mean success. If you don't master the skill, your grade should reflect that. That's how it should be."

8 "Mandatory naked showers after gym class? That's an uncomfortable proposal. For many, it would push them far beyond their comfort zone; for some, it would feel like sheer humiliation. To me, that only proves how necessary it is."

9 "We need to train physical education teachers who align more closely with the curriculum's goals, teachers who go beyond sports and performance. They should be able to justify their teaching choices and clearly explain to parents and students why gym class matters."

which knowledge forms are granted legitimacy. Teachers appear particularly underrepresented in national newspapers, potentially shaping public views of the profession. This marginalization may reinforce narrow understandings of teachers' roles as media discourses unevenly distribute symbolic authority (Bernstein, 2000). Media priorities and representations can shift over time, suggesting that this trend could change. However, an important question remains: are physical education teachers not engaging enough in media discussions, or are they being overlooked?

There is considerable evidence that teachers' perspectives are underutilized in media coverage. The media select expert sources to provide key insights and establish credibility (Althaus and Tewksbury, 2002). While teachers possess both theoretical and practical expertise closely linked to the school environment, university researchers tend to be perceived as more authoritative due to their academic affiliations. A similar hierarchy appears between education and health sectors, where the latter often receive greater public trust. Repeated privileging of certain professions strengthens hierarchies and narrows interpretive space. Nonetheless, contrasting viewpoints within debates add depth and highlight competing interpretations, such as physical education as health promotion versus as an educational and social subject.

Framing theory helps explain these patterns. By emphasizing some actors and perspectives while downplaying others, media frames make researchers and health professionals appear more authoritative, whereas teachers are rarely positioned as credible sources. Students' personal experiences are often highlighted as human-interest stories, giving them visibility but limited influence. Such framing contributes to the reproduction of professional hierarchies and shapes which voices gain prominence in public debates about physical education.

Based on our findings, we cannot determine why teachers are less visible in national media. The contrast with academic research, where teachers often participate when approached as informants, suggests only that their perspectives are available when invited, even if they do not feature prominently in public debate. This highlights the need for further examination of how teacher voices are included or omitted across different arenas.

Media coverage of physical education appears to be influenced by current social and political agendas. Media attention tends to follow issues signaled as socially pressing (Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Wonneberger and Vliegthart, 2021). This pattern is evident in discussions on physical education, where change or controversy often triggers intensified reporting. At times, provocative statements appear to be used strategically to stimulate debate and coverage. By highlighting controversial opinions and subsequent counterarguments, the media both respond to and shape public concerns.

It is essential to recognize that the media are not a uniform entity. Different platforms and editorial policies shape how issues are presented. For instance, when coverage focuses mainly on competitive sports, it may create a narrow view of physical education, overlooking aspects such as inclusion and diversity. Such selectivity shows how meaning is constructed not only through what is emphasized but also through what is omitted. The underrepresentation of teachers further limits their ability to shape public understanding, particularly in national media. Including a wider range of voices could therefore support a more balanced portrayal of the subject.

The tensions observed in media discussions on physical education mirror those found in academic research, both in Norway and across the Nordic region. Topics such as locker room and shower concerns (e.g., Moen et al., 2017, 2018), differing interpretations of health and health discourses (e.g., Korp et al., 2023; Quennerstedt et al., 2021), debates on learning approaches (Laxdal et al., 2020; Nyberg and Larsson, 2014), assessment practices (e.g., Arnesen et al., 2013; Aasland and Engelsrud, 2017), and the future of the subject (e.g., Aasland, 2019b) reflect these shared debates. This indicates significant overlap between media debates and academic priorities. Løndal et al. (2021) note that research on physical education is often conducted with a clear divide between researchers and practitioners. However, their study found that teachers were involved as informants in 47 of the 116 scientific papers analyzed, suggesting that teachers receive comparatively greater representation in academic research. This contrast highlights the importance of examining how different arenas, including academic, professional, and public contexts, define and legitimize knowledge about physical education.

By highlighting whose voices are currently dominating, the present study points to a need for more deliberate strategies that elevate teacher and practitioner perspectives. Because media coverage appears to privilege students and health-sector experts and reproduce narrow health-oriented frames, preparing teachers to critically interpret and strategically engage with media may help broaden public understandings of what the subject entails. Strengthening media literacy and communication training in teacher education, alongside encouraging schools and professionals to participate more actively in public debate, can elevate practitioner perspectives and counterbalance existing hierarchies of voice. Such efforts may enhance the visibility and legitimacy of physical education by foregrounding its educational, social, and formative purposes.

The findings of this study should be considered in light of its limitations. Focusing exclusively on print newspapers is a limitation, given the growth in digital and social media. The volume of media content was the main reason for this restriction, as major media companies (e.g., Schibsted) often publish identical stories across multiple channels, leading to a high number of duplicates. Our preliminary analysis indicated that online articles were generally also available in print, suggesting that this omission is unlikely to have affected the analysis or conclusions in a substantial way. Social media and blogs were deliberately excluded from the study's scope, as they lack editorial oversight and do not operate within the same domain as professional news media. Another consideration is the subjectivity inherent in our methodological approach. While we have aimed for transparency and reflexivity, fully capturing the nuances of media portrayals remains challenging. Future research could build on this study by examining how patterns of visibility and meaning shift across digital platforms with different logics of attention and representation. Moreover, a limitation of the present study is the lack of empirical evidence considering the actual reasons for the marginalization of the teacher voice. Future studies would do well to gain in-depth knowledge about possible issues such as professional status, public credibility and the theory vs. practice discourse in education in direct link to the present topic.

Conclusion

The coverage of physical education in the news media from 2012 to 2022 largely mirrors the academic discussion surrounding the subject. Media shape the debate through their choices of what to highlight and how to frame it, influencing public perceptions and potentially the subject's future direction. By emphasizing certain perspectives and voices, the media construct particular understandings of what physical education is and what it should be, while others remain less visible. We acknowledge that the media are not a single, unified entity; different platforms, editorial policies, and individual contributors offer varying perspectives. Nonetheless, the recurring emphasis on health-related aspects and expert commentary suggests a narrowing of the debate, in which the educational and formative purposes of the subject risk being overshadowed. A broader and more balanced representation could strengthen public understanding of physical education's educational, social, and health-related roles. By considering both its strengths and challenges, the media can help foster a more informed discussion about its value in society. Greater awareness of how such narratives are constructed may encourage more reflective and inclusive public debates about the future of the subject.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

AL: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. BA: Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AS: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TH: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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