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Economic inequalities in professional tennis: Elite success, the invisible majority, and career sustainability

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of economic inequalities on the career sustainability of athletes in professional tennis. Document analysis design was used in the study conducted with qualitative research method. The data sources of the research were prize money tables of ATP, WTA, ITF and Grand Slam organizations, player support programs, athlete income reports, academic publications and public reports. The data were evaluated under four main themes using the descriptive analysis method. These themes; income insecurity and income distribution, prize money structure and tournament levels, lower-level tournament economics and career sustainability. Findings have shown that professional tennis revenues are not evenly distributed among all players and that economic gains are largely concentrated in favor of top-ranked players. Under the theme of income insecurity and income distribution, it has been determined that lower and middle level players have more limited income sources. The theme of prize money structure and tournament levels has revealed that there are clear economic differences between the Grand Slam and top-level ATP/WTA tournaments and the Challenger and ITF levels. The theme of lower-level tournament economics has shown that although the ITF World Tennis Tour and ATP Challenger Tour cover a large player base, their economic returns remain limited. Under the theme of career sustainability, it was concluded that travel, accommodation, coaching, health and equipment expenses affect the players' opportunities to continue their professional careers. As a result, economic inequality in professional tennis has been considered not only as an income difference but also as a structural problem that determines career sustainability.

Keywords: Tennis economy; elite players; career sustainability; economic inequality.

Profesyonel teniste ekonomik eşitsizlikler: Elit başarı, görünmeyen çoğunluk ve kariyer sürdürülebilirliği

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, profesyonel teniste ekonomik eşitsizliklerin sporcuların kariyer sürdürülebilirliği üzerindeki etkisini incelemektir. Nitel araştırma yöntemiyle gerçekleştirilen çalışmada doküman analizi deseni kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın veri kaynaklarını ATP, WTA, ITF ve Grand Slam organizasyonlarının para ödülü tabloları, oyuncu destek programları, sporcu gelir raporları, akademik yayınlar ve kamuya açık raporlar oluşturmuştur. Veriler betimsel analiz yöntemiyle dört ana tema altında değerlendirilmiştir. Bu temalar; gelir güvencesizliği ve gelir dağılımı, para ödülü yapısı ve turnuva seviyeleri, alt seviye turnuva ekonomisi ve kariyer sürdürülebilirliğidir. Bulgular, profesyonel tenis gelirlerinin tüm oyuncular arasında eşit dağılmadığını ve ekonomik kazanımların büyük ölçüde üst sıralardaki oyuncular lehine yoğunlaştığını göstermiştir. Gelir güvencesizliği ve gelir dağılımı teması altında, alt ve orta seviye oyuncuların gelir kaynaklarının daha sınırlı olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Para ödülü yapısı ve turnuva seviyeleri teması, Grand Slam ve üst düzey ATP/WTA turnuvaları ile Challenger ve ITF seviyeleri arasında belirgin ekonomik farklılıklar olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Alt seviye turnuva ekonomisi teması, ITF Dünya Tenis Turu ve ATP Challenger Turu'nun geniş bir oyuncu tabanını kapsamasına rağmen ekonomik getirilerinin sınırlı kaldığını göstermiştir. Kariyer sürdürülebilirliği teması altında ise seyahat, konaklama, antrenörlük, sağlık ve ekipman giderlerinin oyuncuların profesyonel kariyerlerini devam ettirme olanaklarını etkilediği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Sonuç olarak, profesyonel tenisteki ekonomik eşitsizlik yalnızca bir gelir farkı olarak değil, aynı zamanda kariyer sürdürülebilirliğini belirleyen yapısal bir sorun olarak değerlendirilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Tenis ekonomisi; elit oyuncular; kariyer sürdürülebilirliği; ekonomik eşitsizlik.*

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INTRODUCTION

Professional tennis occupies a distinctive position within the global sports industry as an individual sport characterized by considerable international visibility, prestigious tournaments, substantial prize money, and significant commercial opportunities. The global reach of the ATP and WTA Tours, together with the prominence of the four Grand Slam tournaments, media rights, sponsorship agreements, and increasing player compensation, can create the impression that professional tennis offers substantial financial rewards (ATP, 2026; WTA, 2025). For example, the ATP reported a global broadcast and streaming audience exceeding one billion and record levels of player compensation, while prize money at major tournaments has continued to increase substantially (ATP, 2026). At the elite level, highly ranked players can generate considerable income through tournament prize money, bonuses, and endorsement opportunities, reinforcing the public perception of professional tennis as a lucrative career. However, these highly visible earnings are not representative of the broader professional player population. Research consistently demonstrates that prize money in professional tennis is highly concentrated and that many lower- and middle-ranked players struggle to cover the substantial costs associated with travel, accommodation, coaching, training, and tournament participation (Bane et al., 2014; Balliauw et al., 2023; Shrom et al., 2023). Balliauw et al. (2023), for instance, reported that players ranked outside approximately the top 250 often experience difficulty covering their professional expenses. Similarly, Shrom et al. (2023) highlighted a pronounced financial imbalance within the professional tennis system, showing that economic pressure can affect players' career progression and well-being. Thus, although elite tennis presents highly visible examples of financial success, these cases should not be interpreted as reflecting the economic realities experienced by the majority of professional players.

Professional tennis's financial structure differs considerably from that of team sports. Athletes in team sports usually gain support with salary, contracts, health insurance, and company sponsorship. Conversely, independent tennis players usually operate as businesspeople. Travel, lodging, coaching, physical treatment, supplies, visas, and tournament entry fees are all typically covered by them. Professional tennis player aspirations hence call for both outstanding physical ability and the ability to control big financial expenditures. These expenses are not limited to participation in individual tournaments but accumulate throughout the season, regardless of whether players achieve sufficient competitive results to generate substantial prize money. Schöttl et al. (2026) underline that players need to be financially viable in professional tennis; prizes alone are not enough. Such income mostly determines whether they can pay their career-related costs.

This structure better matches professional tennis with markets that run on a "winner-takes-all" model. Frank and Cook's (2010) "winner-takes-all" idea shows how small changes in performance may cause major income differences. In such markets, financial rewards are disproportionately concentrated among a relatively small number of high-performing individuals, while those with slightly lower performance levels may face substantially fewer economic opportunities. In the field of tennis, even little changes in ratings can significantly affect the caliber of events a player qualifies for, the prize money given, as well as media exposure and sponsorship potential. Income disparity is thus not only a consequence of success; rather, it acts as a filter influencing the odds of future success. Professional tennis, according to Grove et al. (2018), operates as a career market with significant uncertainty, and they claim that differences in prize money payout affect players' decisions on their professional career path.

One clear indication of economic inequality in professional tennis is the distribution of prize money. Though major ATP/WTA events and Grand Slams -top-tier tournaments- have significant prize money, most of these financial benefits go to elite athletes. The professional tennis competition structure encompasses several levels, ranging from Grand Slam tournaments and the main ATP and WTA Tours to ATP Challenger Tour events, WTA 125 tournaments, and ITF World Tennis Tour competitions. These levels differ in their competitive status, prize-money opportunities, and potential to provide players with ranking points and access to higher-level events. On the other hand, players competing in the ITF World Tennis Tour, Challenger tournaments, and qualifying events have modest prize money that sometimes falls short of covering their seasonal expenses. Professional tennis players' income concentration is quite high under the current reward system, according to Balliauw et al. (2023); this makes it difficult for those ranked lower to cover their costs. This concentration of financial rewards may reinforce existing inequalities, as players with greater financial resources can more readily sustain access to coaching, international competition, and other career-related investments, whereas financially constrained players may struggle to maintain comparable opportunities.

In professional tennis, economic inequality shouldn't just be seen as the difference between "high-earning" and "low-earning" players. This disparity affects a player's experience in many ways, including their access to events, the caliber of their training, their capacity to form a support group, the chances of getting sponsorships, and their chances of sustaining a career. Thus, although professional tennis highlights great accomplishments, it's important to realize its complicated nature, which also covers the financial difficulties experienced by the mostly invisible majority. By looking at the relationships among income distribution, award money structures, and the expenses related with following a career in professional tennis, this study seeks to investigate how economic disparities affect job sustainability.

Economic inequality in professional tennis is not mostly caused by player incomes; it is also strongly linked to the length of their careers. As said before, despite the fact that professional tennis may seem glamorous because of the significant rewards and high-level accomplishments, this exposure mostly mirrors a limited group of top-ranked players. On the other hand, the bigger portion of the professional system consists of many athletes competing in the ITF World Tennis Tour, ATP Challenger,

WTA 125, and various qualifying tournaments. Although they are essential to the existence of the professional tennis system, they also constitute the most financially vulnerable group within the sport.

Professional tennis players need to be able to play in events as well as keep playing over a long time to have a successful career. A professional tennis player must travel to competitions around the world throughout the year, maintain demanding training schedules, ensure physical condition, and minimize injury hazards. Travel arrangements, lodging, training fees, physiotherapy, equipment costs, healthcare services, and visa fees all contribute to this project's many expenses. Schöttl et al. (2026) contend that players cannot just rely on prize money; An important consideration is whether their income really offsets necessary career-related expenses. Consequently, the prize money earned by a player cannot be interpreted as an equivalent measure of financial gain, because the resources required to sustain a professional career must also be considered. Thus, the assessment of economic sustainability in professional tennis should concentrate on the trade-off between net income and costs instead of only taking into account gross income.

Lower- and middle-level professional tennis players confront a major issue in that their income varies, but their costs remain fixed. A player who is kicked out early from a competition could not receive much prize money; nevertheless, their expenditures for travel, lodging, and preparation for the same event still exist. This circumstance turns every competition into a financial danger for low-ranked players as well. Balliauw et al. (2023) found that most of the prize money in professional tennis goes to the best players, while those with lower rankings struggle to pay for their careers. This circumstance complicates lower-level professional players' acquiring enough competition experience, moving up in rankings, and maintaining their careers.

In this respect particularly vital is the lesser level competition economy. The required stepping stones for athletes to reach the top level are Challenger-level events and ITF tournaments. But usually, the reward money handed out in these events is insufficient to pay for the players' seasonal costs. Players strive in these events not just for financial benefit but also for rating points and entrance to more elite tournaments. According to Deleito Barón (2024), even though the prize money on the ATP tour has gone up, players still feel financial strain from the costs of travel, lodging, equipment, and competition. This scenario shows how career endurance is not solved just by raising reward pools.

Sponsorship and media visibility are also decisive on career sustainability. While top-ranked players can earn income from sponsorships, advertising and brand collaborations in addition to prize money, lower-ranked players have more limited access to these resources. The fact that sponsorships are generally directed towards highly visible players creates a cycle that reproduces economic inequality. Garcia-del-Barrio and Pujol (2015) emphasize that there is a strong relationship between the media value of players and their economic returns in the tennis market. For this reason, a mutually reinforcing structure is formed between ranking, visibility and revenue.

Economic fragility in professional tennis also produces psychological and social consequences. Constant travel, uncertain income, loneliness, pressure to perform and anxiety about the future make the career experience of players difficult. Shrom et al. (2023) state that lifestyle challenges and financial uncertainties can have an impact on the mental health of professional tennis players. Therefore, career sustainability is a multi-layered issue that has not only economic but also social and psychological dimensions.

Existing studies have addressed several components of this problem, including income concentration, prize-money distribution, career-related costs, and the economic conditions of professional tennis. Frank and Cook (2010) explain how small performance differences can generate substantial income disparities in winner-takes-all markets, while Grove et al. (2021) examine how prize-money differentials influence career decisions under uncertainty. Balliauw et al. (2023) discuss the sustainability of the professional tennis circuit, and Garcia-del-Barrio and Pujol (2015) examine the relationship between players' media value and their economic returns. However, further research is needed to understand how income distribution, career-related expenses, sponsorship opportunities, and the economic conditions of lower-level tournaments jointly shape career sustainability. In particular, examining the financial challenges faced by players competing at Challenger, WTA 125, and ITF levels may provide a more comprehensive understanding of economic sustainability beyond the elite level.

Against this background, the present study examines economic inequality in professional tennis by considering prize-money distribution, career-related costs, sponsorship opportunities, and differences across tournament levels. Rather than focusing exclusively on gross prize money, the study approaches career sustainability in terms of the broader economic conditions that shape players' ability to continue competing professionally. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: How do economic inequalities in professional tennis affect the career sustainability of athletes?

METHOD

Research pattern

This study was conducted with qualitative research method. In the research, document analysis design was used to examine the impact of economic inequalities on career sustainability in professional tennis. Document analysis is a qualitative research design based on the systematic examination of written documents related to the research topic. This design allows the analysis of existing documents, reports, data tables and academic publications on the subject without the need for direct participant interviews (Kıral, 2020).

In this context, the study examined prize money tables of ATP, WTA, ITF and Grand Slam organizations, athlete income reports, corporate statements regarding player support programs, academic publications and public reports on the professional tennis economy. The document analysis design enabled the evaluation of elements such as income distribution, prize money structure, career costs, sponsorship access and career sustainability in the professional tennis system through existing documents. For this reason, the document analysis pattern was deemed compatible with the purpose of the study and the main research question.

Data sources and documents reviewed

In this research, a study group was not formed based on direct interviews with athletes, coaches or managers. The data sources of the study were publicly available documents regarding the professional tennis system. In document analysis studies, documents can be used as a source of data regarding the research subject and allow contextual evaluation of the phenomenon under study (Bowen, 2009).

In this context, the research examined prize money tables of ATP, WTA, ITF and Grand Slam organizations, athlete income reports, corporate statements regarding player support programs, academic publications and publicly available reports on the professional tennis economy. In addition, publicly available ranking and income data for the top 1000 athletes in the ATP and WTA rankings were included in the evaluation. These documents and data were included in the research because they relate to the themes of income distribution, prize money structure, lower-level tournament economics, sponsorship access, career costs and career sustainability in professional tennis.

Data sources and documents reviewed

This study relied on publicly available documents relating to the economic structure and career sustainability of professional tennis, including materials published between 2023 and 2025. The sources comprised official websites and publications of the ATP, WTA, ITF, and Grand Slam tournament organizers, as well as academic publications and publicly accessible media reports.

Documents were considered relevant when they provided information directly related to the study's research question and the economic conditions of professional tennis players. This covered prize-money distribution, differences across tournament levels, career-related expenses, sponsorship opportunities, and institutional support mechanisms. Official organizational sources formed the core of the review, while academic publications and media reports provided supplementary context for the issues examined.

The study was limited to publicly accessible documentary evidence. It did not involve primary data collection through interviews, surveys, or direct measurements of individual players' financial circumstances. Accordingly, the findings reflect the information reported in the selected documents rather than direct assessments of individual players' financial situations.

A complete document inventory and a systematic record of individual access dates were not maintained. As a result, the total number of documents reviewed and the precise access dates cannot be reported. This limits the reproducibility of the document selection process and should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Data analysis

The data obtained in the research were analyzed through descriptive analysis. The analysis followed an inductive approach in which the four analytical themes emerged during the examination of the documents rather than being established entirely in advance. This approach allowed the information obtained from the documents to be systematically classified and associated with the research question. In qualitative research, approaches such as descriptive analysis and content analysis can be used to organize and interpret data under certain conceptual themes (Akdemir & Kılıç, 2021).

The documents were examined by a single researcher to identify information relevant to the research question. The researcher reviewed the available documents, identified relevant textual and numerical information, and organized the extracted information according to its substantive relevance to the study. The coding units included relevant statements and passages in documents, reported prize-money figures, ranking and earnings information, and financial information concerning tournament structures and career-related expenses. The units of analysis included relevant statements and passages, sections of documents, reported prize-money figures, ranking and earnings information, and numerical indicators relating to tournament structures and career-related expenses. The information was then grouped into four themes based on recurring topics and their relevance to the study objectives. These themes were developed during the analysis process and are presented in Table 1.

A formal coding form or standardized data-extraction matrix was not used, and independent coding by a second researcher or an inter-coder agreement assessment was not conducted. Accordingly, the thematic organization reflects the interpretive decisions of a single researcher.

Numerical information was recorded as reported in the original sources. Monetary amounts expressed in different currencies were not converted into a common currency, and values from different years were not adjusted for inflation or exchange-rate fluctuations. Differences in taxation were also not systematically examined. Accordingly, monetary figures from different currencies and periods were treated as descriptive data rather than as directly comparable measures of purchasing power or net financial benefit. Therefore, monetary figures from different currencies or periods were not treated as fully

standardized values, and comparisons involving such figures were interpreted cautiously. The analysis did not calculate players' net income after taxes and career-related expenses unless such information was explicitly available in the source documents.

Official reports and publications from relevant tennis organizations were used when available. Other publicly accessible sources, including media reports, were considered for supplementary information. However, a systematic source-ranking protocol was not established; therefore, information from different source types was interpreted in light of the information provided by each source.

The analysis themes used in the research are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis themes used in the study

Theme	Explanation
Income Insecurity and Income Distribution	This theme covers how earnings are distributed among professional tennis players, how income is concentrated among higher-ranked players, and how lower- and middle-ranked players experience income insecurity. Publicly available data on the ATP Baseline Program and ATP/WTA player rankings and earnings were evaluated under this theme.
Prize Money Structure and Tournament Levels	This theme covers how prize money differs across Grand Slam, ATP/WTA, Challenger, and ITF tournament levels. It was used to reveal the economic gap between players who can access elite tournaments and those competing mainly in lower-level professional events.
Lower-Level Tournament Economy	This theme covers the economic structure of lower- and middle-level professional tournaments such as the ITF World Tennis Tour and the ATP Challenger Tour. It was used to evaluate the economic conditions of players who represent the "invisible majority" of professional tennis.
Career Sustainability	This theme covers factors affecting the continuity of a professional tennis career, including travel, accommodation, coaching, health, equipment, sponsorship access, and player support programs. It was used to evaluate how economic inequalities affect players' ability to sustain their professional careers.

Validity and reliability

To ensure validity and reliability in this research, care was taken to select documents from reliable, accessible, and verifiable sources. Validity and reliability in qualitative research are evaluated with criteria such as credibility, transferability, consistency, and confirmability (Başkale, 2016). In document analysis studies, the source, up-to-dateness, relationship to the research purpose, and confirmability of the documents used are considered important (Özkan, 2023).

Accordingly, official data from ATP, WTA, ITF, and Grand Slam organizations, public reports, athlete income reports, and academic publications were used in the research. Different types of documents were compared to ensure that the data were not based on a single source. Information regarding prize money, revenue distribution, lower-level tournament economics, and career sustainability was evaluated across multiple sources. Thus, source diversity supported the credibility of the analysis, although a formal source-ranking protocol was not established.

In addition, the themes used in the analysis process were developed during document examination, and the extracted information was organized according to these themes and their relevance to the research question. This thematic organization provided a clear account of how the documentary evidence was linked to the study objectives. However, the analysis was conducted by a single researcher; no independent second coding or inter-coder agreement assessment was performed, and no standardized data-extraction matrix was used. Therefore, the consistency of the coding could not be verified through independent coding. Using only publicly available and verifiable documents supported the confirmability of the findings by allowing readers to consult the underlying sources where these were accessible. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted in light of the limitations associated with documentary data and the interpretive decisions of a single researcher.

FINDINGS

In this section, the impact of economic inequalities on career sustainability in professional tennis is presented in line with the four analysis themes determined in the method section. Documents reviewed have shown that revenues are not distributed equally within the professional tennis system, economic advantages are largely concentrated in favor of top-ranked players, and lower/mid-level professional players face high costs to sustain their careers.

Table 2. Summary of findings by themes

Theme	Main finding	Data / document type used
Income insecurity and income distribution	The reviewed sources indicate that prize money and other reported earnings are unevenly distributed across professional tennis, while players outside the highest competitive levels may face income insecurity.	ATP Baseline Program, athlete income reports, academic studies
Prize money structure and tournament levels	The available prize-money information indicates differences in potential earnings across Grand Slam, ATP/WTA Tour, Challenger, WTA 125, and ITF tournament levels.	Grand Slam prize money tables, Wimbledon 2025 data, ATP/WTA prize money information
Lower-level tournament economy	The reviewed sources highlight financial challenges associated with competing on the ITF World Tennis Tour and ATP Challenger Tour, where prize-money opportunities may be insufficient to cover all career-related expenses.	ITF World Tennis Tour 2024 data, ATP Challenger Tour 2025 data
Career sustainability	The literature identifies travel, accommodation, coaching, health care, equipment, and access to sponsorship or player-support programs as relevant factors in the economic sustainability of professional tennis careers.	Academic publications, athlete income reports, player support programs

Theme 1. Income insecurity and income distribution

In the documents examined, it was seen that professional tennis income was not distributed evenly among all players. While top-ranked players can more easily access high prize money, sponsorship income and media visibility, it has been determined that lower and mid-level players' sources of income are more limited. This situation shows that income distribution in the professional tennis system has a hierarchical structure.

Table 3. Findings related to income insecurity and income distribution

Findings	Explanation
Concentration of income among higher-ranked players	Professional tennis income was found to be largely concentrated among higher-ranked players. These players can generate income not only from prize money but also from sponsorships, advertising, and media visibility.
Limited income sources among lower- and middle-ranked players	Lower- and middle-ranked players were found to rely mostly on tournament prize money, while their access to sponsorships and additional income sources remained limited.
Need for minimum income security	The ATP Baseline Program indicated that even players ranked within the Top 250 may need a certain level of income security.
Impact of career costs on income	When travel, accommodation, coaching, health, and equipment expenses were considered, gross prize money did not fully reflect players' actual economic position.
Institutional recognition of income insecurity	ATP's minimum income guarantee initiative showed that income insecurity in professional tennis has become visible at the institutional level.

The documents reviewed indicate that financial opportunities in professional tennis are unevenly distributed across competitive levels. Players who regularly compete in major tournaments may have greater opportunities to earn substantial prize money and attract sponsorships and media attention (Frank & Cook, 2010; Garcia-del-Barrio & Pujol, 2015). By contrast, players competing primarily in lower-level professional events, including the ATP Challenger Tour, WTA 125 tournaments, and the ITF World Tennis Tour, may have more limited opportunities to generate sufficient income to cover their career-related expenses.

The ATP Baseline Program provides a concrete example of the financial security measures introduced within the professional tennis system. According to Tennis.com (2024), the program established minimum income thresholds for 2025 of US$300,000 for players ranked in the top 100, US$200,000 for those ranked 101–175, and US$100,000 for those ranked 176–250. The same report stated that the ATP paid a total of US$1.3 million to 26 players through its minimum-income guarantee in 2024. These figures illustrate that financial support mechanisms extend beyond the very top of the rankings and that income security remains a relevant concern even among players within the top 250. However, the existence of such a program does not, by itself, establish the net financial position of individual players.

Academic research also highlights the uneven distribution of financial opportunities in professional tennis. Balliauw et al. (2023) discuss the difficulties players outside the top 250 may face in covering their career-related expenses. Schöttl et al. (2026) further examine the relationship between ranking position and the financial break-even point, highlighting the possibility that prize money may not cover all the costs associated with a professional career. Grove et al. (2021) suggest that the highly unequal distribution of prize money may influence individuals' decisions to enter or remain in a winner-takes-all market, while Shrom et al. (2023) identify financial pressures and economic uncertainty as important challenges in professional players' experiences.

Taken together, these sources suggest that income insecurity in professional tennis involves more than earning relatively low prize money; it also concerns whether players can meet the recurring costs of competing professionally. Nevertheless, the present study did not calculate standardized net earnings across player rankings or tournament levels. The figures and conclusions reported above therefore reflect the cited sources and should not be interpreted as original net-income estimates produced by this study.

Theme 2. Prize money structure and tournament levels

In the documents examined, it was observed that the prize money structure in professional tennis differs significantly according to tournament levels. While Grand Slam tournaments stand out as the organizations with the highest prize pools, it has been determined that prize amounts gradually decrease at the ATP/WTA main tour, Challenger and ITF levels. This shows that the players' economic earnings depend not only on their sporting success, but also on the level of tournaments they can participate in.

Table 4. Findings on prize money structure and tournament levels

Findings	Explanation
Differences in prize money by tournament level	Prize money was found to vary significantly across Grand Slam, ATP/WTA, Challenger, and ITF tournament levels. Grand Slam tournaments provided the highest economic returns.
Economic advantage of Grand Slam access	Players who qualified for Grand Slam main draws gained access to substantially higher prize money compared with players competing mainly in lower-level tournaments.
Gradual decrease in prize money at lower levels	Prize money decreased as the tournament level moved from Grand Slam and ATP/WTA main tour events to Challenger and ITF tournaments.
Link between tournament level and income potential	Players' income potential was found to be closely related to the level of tournaments in which they were able to compete regularly.
Continuing gap between elite and lower-level tournaments	Although prize money has increased in some lower-level circuits, a significant economic gap between elite tournaments and lower-level professional events remained visible.

Wimbledon 2025 data is one of the key findings showing the economic difference between tournament levels. Wimbledon 2025 total prize pool increased to £53.5 million; The singles champions were awarded £3 million, and the players eliminated in the first round were awarded £66,000. This data shows that players who can reach the Grand Slam main table gain a significant economic advantage. On the other hand, it has been determined that players competing at the Challenger and ITF level earn income within more limited prize pools. Academic studies also show that the prize money structure is decisive in the economics of professional tennis. Deleito Barón (2024) states that in the professional tennis system, player incomes are related to the tournament level and the round reached. Šimić (2021) finds that there are significant inequalities in prize money incomes of tennis professionals, with incomes particularly concentrated at the ATP Tour and Grand Slam levels. Schöttl et al. (2026) state that access to Grand Slam and top-level ATP tournaments is important for players to reach the financial break-even point.

Official figures also show that lower-level circuits distribute substantial aggregate prize money, spread across many events and players. The ATP announced US$28.5 million in total prize money for the 2025 Challenger Tour, compared with US$22.3 million in 2024 (ATP, 2024b). The ITF reported that the 2024 ITF World Tennis Tour distributed approximately US$17.9 million in women's events and US$11.3 million in men's events (ITF, 2024). These totals cannot be interpreted as individual earnings or compared directly, because the number of tournaments, participating players, and competition structures differ (ATP, 2024b; ITF, 2024). Moreover, the amounts reported in pounds sterling for Wimbledon and in US dollars for the ATP and ITF are not directly comparable without currency conversion.

Academic studies further highlight the link between tournament access and financial prospects. Deleito Barón (2024) discusses the relationship between tournament level, performance, and player income, while Šimić (2021) identifies inequalities in the distribution of prize money among professional players. Schöttl et al. (2026) examine the relationship between ranking position and the financial break-even point, emphasizing earning opportunities relative to career-related costs.

Overall, the evidence suggests that prize-money opportunities vary across the tournament structure and that access to higher-level events offers greater earning potential. Prize money alone, however, does not establish whether a player can sustain a professional career, since actual financial outcomes also depend on expenses, taxes, sponsorship income, and other sources of support (Schöttl et al., 2026; Šimić, 2021).

Theme 3. Lower level tournament economy

In the documents examined, it was seen that the ITF World Tennis Tour and the ATP Challenger Tour constitute the lower and middle stages of the professional tennis system. These tournaments have an important function in terms of players gaining ranking points, gaining professional experience and advancing to high-level tournaments. However, it has been determined that the economic returns of players competing at these levels are more limited compared to the Grand Slam and ATP/WTA main tour levels.

Table 5. Findings on prize money structure and tournament levels

Findings	Explanation
Large tournament volume at lower levels	The ITF World Tennis Tour and ATP Challenger Tour were found to include a large number of tournaments and players, representing a broad segment of professional tennis.
Limited economic return	Although these tournaments provide professional ranking opportunities, the economic returns at lower levels remained limited compared with Grand Slam and ATP/WTA main tour events.
Function as a transition level	Lower-level tournaments served as a transition pathway for players aiming to move from the developmental stage to higher-level professional competition.
Prize money increases in Challenger tournaments	The increase in ATP Challenger Tour prize money indicated an institutional effort to improve the economic conditions of lower- and middle-level players.
Continued economic vulnerability	Despite prize money increases, lower-level players continued to face financial pressure due to travel, accommodation, coaching, health, and equipment expenses.

ITF World Tennis Tour 2024 data shows the breadth of the lower-level professional tennis economy. In 2024, 598 men's and 602 women's tournaments were organized within the scope of the ITF World Tennis Tour; $17.9 million worth of prize money was distributed for women and $11.3 million for men. These data show that the ITF level has a large volume of tournaments in the professional tennis system. However, it seems that the prize money distributed is limited considering the number of tournaments and players.

ATP Challenger Tour 2025 data points to a development aimed at improving the economic conditions of lower-middle level professional players. It has been determined that the Challenger prize pool will be increased to 28.5 million dollars in 2025, which means a 135% increase compared to 2022. This increase shows that the importance of the Challenger level within the professional tennis system is taken into account institutionally.

Academic studies also reveal that lower-level tournaments are a critical but economically fragile area for professional tennis careers. Balliauw et al. (2023) state that the imbalance between prize money and player costs in the professional tennis system poses a sustainability problem, especially for lower-level players. Palau et al. (2024) show that ATP Challenger, WTA 125 and ITF level second and third tier tournaments have an important place in the careers of professional tennis players. Schöttl et al. (2026) also reveal that it may be difficult for lower and middle-ranked players to reach financial break-even.

Taken together, the findings suggest that lower-level tournaments serve both as essential pathways for career progression and as settings in which players may face considerable financial uncertainty. In this study, the term "invisible majority" refers to professional players who compete primarily outside the most prominent tournaments and whose financial circumstances receive less public attention than those of leading players. The term is used descriptively rather than as a statistically verified claim that these players constitute a numerical majority. The available documents suggest that prize-money opportunities at lower levels must be considered alongside career-related expenses when assessing the economic sustainability of professional tennis. However, because this study did not calculate standardized player-level net earnings, it cannot determine the proportion of lower-level players whose prize money is insufficient to cover their expenses.

Table 6. Findings on career sustainability

Findings	Explanation
Career-related expenses	Travel, accommodation, coaching, health, physiotherapy, equipment, and tournament participation expenses were found to be major cost items in professional tennis careers.
Difference between gross prize money and net financial position	Gross prize money did not fully represent players' actual economic position because career-related expenses reduced players' net income.
Unequal access to sponsorship and additional income	Lower-ranked players were found to have more limited access to sponsorships and additional income sources compared with elite players.
Role of player-support programs	Player support programs, such as the ATP Baseline Program, were identified as mechanisms that may contribute to career sustainability.
Economic conditions and career continuity	Economic conditions were found to affect players' ability to plan seasons, travel to tournaments, access coaching support, and remain in the professional system.

Schöttl et al. (2026) examine the financial break-even point for professional tennis players and state that this income, not just prize money, should be evaluated in relation to career costs in order for players to continue their careers. Their findings highlight the distinction between gross prize money and the financial resources available to players after meeting career expenses. This distinction is particularly relevant when examining the sustainability of careers at lower and intermediate competitive levels.

Balliauw et al. (2023) emphasize that player costs in the professional tennis circuit are important for career sustainability. The study states that coaching expenses are one of the main cost items, and access to sponsorship and other income sources is related to the player's ranking and visibility. In this regard, it seems that players in the lower ranks are in a more vulnerable position against high career costs.

Varmus et al. (2022) draw attention to travel and accommodation costs among the factors affecting the success of tennis players and the sustainability of sports organizations. More tournaments in a player's home country can reduce travel and accommodation costs; On the other hand, cost pressure may increase for players dependent on the international calendar. This finding suggests that career sustainability is related not only to individual performance but also to tournament access and the economic environment.

Access to sponsorship is another prominent finding within the scope of career sustainability. Procházka et al. (2024) state that sponsorship support is not only a financial contribution for athletes in the early career period, but also a supportive element in terms of performance and career development. However, the documents examined show that sponsorship opportunities in professional tennis are concentrated in favor of the top ranked players; It shows that lower-ranked players have more limited access to such supports.

The ATP Baseline Program provides an example of an institutional mechanism intended to improve financial security for eligible players. Nevertheless, the existence of a support program does not establish that all players facing financial difficulties receive assistance or that the support is sufficient to cover their expenses.

Taken together, the findings indicate that career sustainability in professional tennis depends on the relationship between earning opportunities, career-related expenses, sponsorship access, tournament participation, and institutional support. These factors may influence players' ability to remain in professional competition over time. However, because the present study did not calculate standardized net earnings or directly follow individual players' careers, it identifies the economic factors associated with career sustainability rather than measuring their independent effects on career continuation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This section interprets the findings of the document analysis in relation to existing literature and considers their implications for the economic structure and career sustainability of professional tennis. Rather than repeating the descriptive findings, the discussion focuses on how income distribution, tournament-level differences, career-related expenses, and institutional support interact to shape players' economic opportunities.

Theme 1. Income insecurity and income distribution

Although professional tennis gains public visibility mostly through Grand Slam champions, players in the top 10 or top 50, and high prize money, this visibility does not fully reflect the economic reality of players in the lower and middle stages of the professional system. Their income in tennis is closely related to ranking, tournament level, media visibility, and sponsorship opportunities. For this reason, economic gains are concentrated in a limited group of players at the top, rather than being distributed evenly across the broad player base. Income inequality should therefore be understood in relation to the distribution of both earnings and the opportunities required to sustain a professional career.

Balliauw et al. (2023) discuss the unequal distribution of prize money and the resulting sustainability challenges for players outside the highest competitive levels. Their work highlights the importance of considering the costs of participation, including travel, coaching, and support services, alongside the distribution of earnings. This perspective shifts the discussion from simply asking who earns the most to examining whether players can generate sufficient resources to maintain their professional careers.

Similarly, Schöttl et al. (2026) examine the financial break-even point for professional tennis players, finding that players' ability to sustain their careers on prize money alone varies greatly by ranking level. Their work reinforces the distinction between gross prize money and the financial position of players after career-related expenses. Accordingly, a player's prize-money total alone cannot establish whether their professional career is financially sustainable. In this study, however, player-level net income was not calculated systematically; the findings therefore identify factors associated with financial vulnerability rather than quantify the proportion of players unable to cover their expenses. For 2025, the reported thresholds increased to US$300,000, US$200,000, and US$100,000 for the respective ranking groups. Tennis.com also reported that the ATP paid US$1.3 million to 26 players through the minimum-income guarantee in 2024. These figures illustrate the introduction of a structured support mechanism beyond the very top of the rankings. Nevertheless, the program's existence does not establish that all players experience financial security or that the support fully covers their career-related expenses.

The distribution of income can also be interpreted through Frank and Cook's (2010) winner-takes-all framework, which explains how relatively small differences in performance can be associated with substantial differences in economic rewards. In professional tennis, ranking position may influence access to tournaments, prize-money opportunities, and commercial visibility. These interconnected advantages can reinforce existing differences in earning potential. Grove et al. (2018) also examine uncertainty in the professional tennis career market and the implications of unequal prize-money distributions for career decisions. Together, these perspectives suggest that players' decisions to enter, remain in, or leave professional tennis may be shaped by the economic risks associated with an uneven distribution of rewards.

Income inequality also affects players' access to sponsorship and media visibility. Garcia-del-Barrio and Pujol (2015) draw attention to the relationship between sporting success, media value, and reward policies in professional tennis. Higher-ranked players have easier access to sponsorship deals because they have more media visibility, which allows them to diversify their income sources. In contrast, lower and mid-level players' income mostly depends on tournament prize money. Thus, a cycle is

formed between ranking, income, visibility, and sponsorship. Players who receive greater media attention may have more opportunities to attract commercial partners and diversify their income, whereas those with lower visibility may depend more heavily on tournament earnings. This relationship may create a reinforcing cycle in which ranking position affects visibility and sponsorship opportunities, which in turn influence players' financial capacity to continue competing. However, because individual sponsorship agreements are generally not publicly available, the present study cannot quantify the size of this effect across ranking groups.

Overall, the literature and documentary evidence indicate that income insecurity in professional tennis should not be interpreted solely as a consequence of individual performance. It is also associated with the structure of prize-money distribution, differences in access to tournaments, the costs of maintaining a professional career, and opportunities to obtain additional financial support. The ATP Baseline Program represents one institutional response to these challenges, but its existence alone does not demonstrate that broader inequalities have been resolved. Consequently, evaluating economic sustainability requires attention to the relationship between earning opportunities and the resources needed to remain in professional competition.

Theme 2. Prize money structure and tournament levels

The findings indicate that prize-money opportunities vary across the professional tennis tournament structure, from Grand Slam events and the main ATP and WTA Tours to ATP Challenger, WTA 125, and ITF World Tennis Tour competitions. This hierarchy is economically significant because tournament level affects not only the prize money available but also players' opportunities to accumulate ranking points, gain visibility, and attract commercial support. The tournament structure should therefore be considered an important contextual factor when examining economic inequality in professional tennis.

Balliauw et al. (2023) find in their analysis of the sustainability of the professional tennis circuit that prize money is mostly concentrated in top-level tournaments and among top-ranked athletes. Researchers say that income disparity in the professional tennis system comes not only from differences in players' performance but also from the hierarchical structure of the competition. Grand Slam and top-tier ATP/WTA competitions provide larger prize money, yet the prize money given in lower-level tournaments is sometimes insufficient to pay players' seasonal career expenditures. Thus, the difference in competition levels presents as a structural component that determines players' financial viability.

Similarly, Schöttl et al. (2026), when discussing the financial break-even point for professional tennis players, highlight that access to high-level tournaments is essential for the economic viability of players. High-category tournaments like Grand Slams, Masters/1000s, and the ATP/WTA main tours offer competitors not only more prize money but also more ranking points, more media exposure, and more possibilities for sponsorships. Players vying at the ITF and Challenger level, however, face constrained prize pools as they attempt to amass the required ranking points to further their professional lives. This scenario makes tournaments at a lower level a sportingly vital but financially vulnerable sector.

Deleito Barón (2024) found in his study of the ATP circuit's economic development that while prize money in the professional tennis system has risen over time, this rise is not evenly distributed across all player groups. Specifically, there are major differences between the income generated by lower-level tournaments and the economic benefit of high-category events. This indicates that for players' career development, tournament level access is essential. In essence, financial prospects in professional tennis are tied to both the player's professional standing and the level of event he routinely participates in.

Over Grand Slam events, these disparities in reward money systems become more clear. In this regard, the illustration of Wimbledon 2025 is extraordinary. The growth of the Wimbledon 2025 overall reward fund to £53.5 million illustrates the economic extent at Grand Slam level. Players who can advance to the Grand Slam main table have a substantial earning opportunity as singles winners get £3 million and those ousted in the first round get £66,000. This information also highlights the financial gap between players who can get to the Grand Slam level and those who stay at the Challenger or ITF level. Even joining the Grand Slam main table can yield a larger financial benefit than the annual income that many players who have played in lower-level competitions for years can achieve. These figures demonstrate the substantial range of rewards within a single major tournament. However, they should not be interpreted as directly comparable with the annual earnings of players competing at lower levels, because the figures refer to different competitive contexts and do not account for career expenses, taxes, or the number of tournaments played.

The broader implication is that the tournament hierarchy may reinforce existing economic differences. Players who gain access to high-level events can benefit from larger prize-money opportunities and greater visibility, while those competing primarily at lower levels may face financial constraints as they seek the results and ranking points needed to progress. This relationship may create a cycle in which access to financial resources supports competitive progression, while limited resources make progression more difficult. The present study, however, does not empirically test this causal relationship; it identifies a structural connection suggested by the documentary evidence and the literature.

Overall, the tournament structure is relevant to economic inequality because it shapes the distribution of earning opportunities across professional tennis. The distinction between Grand Slam and main-tour events, on the one hand, and Challenger, WTA 125, and ITF competitions, on the other, is therefore not merely competitive. It also reflects differences in the financial opportunities available to players at different stages of the professional system. Assessing career sustainability

consequently requires attention to both the prize money offered at each level and the costs players incur while attempting to progress through the tournament pyramid.

Theme 3. Lower level tournament economy

The economic conditions of lower-level tournaments are important for understanding career sustainability in professional tennis. The ITF World Tennis Tour, ATP Challenger Tour, and WTA 125 tournaments provide competitive opportunities through which players can gain ranking points and progress towards higher-level events. However, these tournaments also represent a financially vulnerable part of the professional system because players must meet recurring career-related expenses while competing for comparatively limited prize-money opportunities. Lower-level tournaments therefore serve both as pathways for career development and as settings in which economic inequalities may become particularly apparent.

Balliauw et al. (2023) found in their study of how sustainable the professional tennis circuit is that while lower-level tournaments are essential for bringing players into the professional system, the prize money given out at these levels is often not enough to pay for their career expenses. Researchers found that in the professional tennis system, prize money is mostly concentrated in high-level tournaments and among top-ranked players. Although they are members of the system sportingly, this condition makes the players competing in lower-level events the weakest link of the system financially.

Schöttl et al. (2026) find in their study on the financial break-even point for professional tennis players that it is challenging for players in the lower and middle ranks to keep their careers going with only tournament prize money. Players vying at these levels must compete in several competitions throughout the year, travel abroad, pay for their own food and lodging, and have access to coaching and health care. But early elimination may result in rather modest prize money. Therefore, participating in smaller events presents players with both a chance to earn ranking points and a financial risk.

The ITF World Tennis Tour here stands for the “invisible majority” of professional tennis. ITF’s 2024 data indicates that among the World Tennis Tour, 598 men’s events and 602 women’s tournaments took place. Furthermore, $17.9 million was awarded to women in prize money, while men received $11.3 million. These numbers illustrate the ITF level’s sizable volume of events and players within the professional tennis structure. But the large number of competitions doesn’t directly translate into financial stability for the participants. On the other hand, the per player equivalent of prize money given out inside the large volume of tournaments may be constrained, therefore making it challenging for lower-level professional players to pay their career expenditures.

Data from the ATP Challenger Tour also indicates that measures are underway to support the lower-middle-income professional tennis industry. The rise in the ATP Challenger Tour 2025 prize pool to 28.5 million dollars, a 135% increase from 2022, can be seen as a corporate move to boost the financial status of lower and mid-level players. But this growth does not fully fix the structural weakness in the tournament economy at the lower levels. The Challenger level still offers limited prize money, reduced media visibility, and fewer sponsorship opportunities in comparison to the Grand Slam and ATP main tour events.

Deleito Barón (2024) discovered in his study on the financial growth of the ATP circuit that although the lower levels of the ATP system are crucial for the professional growth of players, financial returns differ depending on tour levels. Challenger tournaments in this perspective represent a crucial stage for players to move to the main ATP tour. But this limit depends on the player’s capacity to pay for his engagement in these events over the season as well as on his athletic results. This explains why the finances of smaller competitions are so important for career stability.

Palau et al. (2024) discovered in their analysis of ATP Challenger, WTA 125, and ITF level events that the second and third stages of the professional tennis system include fierce rivalry and significant physical stress for the participants. This outcome indicates that financially, physically, and athletically, smaller tournaments are demanding. Reaching high-level events requires players to compete at these levels for a protracted period. But in terms of financial revenue, this approach is not always sustainable. Here the basic paradox of the economics of lower-level competition appears: These events are vital to the continuity of the professional tennis system as they enable new players to gain ranking points, acquire experience, and progress to higher-level competitions. But the career becomes hard if the same events do not provide adequate financial security for the players. Therefore, in professional tennis, lower-level competitions may be viewed as a framework whereby both opportunity space and financial vulnerability are generated simultaneously.

In this study, the term “invisible majority” is used descriptively to refer to professional players who compete primarily outside the most prominent tournaments and whose financial circumstances receive less public attention than those of leading players. It is not used to claim that these players have been statistically established as a numerical majority. The findings suggest that the economic significance of lower-level tournaments lies in this dual role: they provide essential opportunities for competitive development while potentially exposing players to financial vulnerability.

Overall, the ITF World Tennis Tour and ATP Challenger Tour should not be viewed solely as intermediate stages in the professional tennis pathway. They are also important settings in which the relationship between sporting progression and economic sustainability becomes visible. Although increases in aggregate prize money may improve earning opportunities, they do not by themselves establish that players can cover travel, accommodation, coaching, health care, and equipment expenses.

The economics of lower-level tournaments therefore remains central to understanding the financial challenges faced by players competing outside the most prominent events.

Theme 4. Career sustainability

Career sustainability in professional tennis involves more than achieving high rankings or participating in tournaments. It also depends on players' ability to finance a competitive schedule, access coaching and medical support, manage injuries and recovery, obtain sponsorship or other financial assistance, and remain in professional competition over time. Career sustainability can therefore be understood as a multidimensional issue involving financial, physical, psychological, and sporting conditions.

Schöttl et al. (2026), in their research on the financial break-even point for professional tennis players, stress that simply earning prize money is not enough to sustain a career. According to research, whether the prize money gained pays the required career expenses directly influences the continuation of a professional tennis career. Travel, lodging, coaching, physiotherapy, equipment, and medical expenditures all restrict the financial sustainability of a professional career, particularly for athletes in the lower and middle levels. This illustrates how income-expense balance in professional tennis is critical for career continuity.

Balliauw et al. (2023) find in their research on the viability of the professional tennis circuit that differences in award money distribution immediately impact players' chances to keep their careers. Lower-ranked athletes are sometimes compelled to pay greater expenses with constrained competition revenues, whilst higher-ranked players can reach larger prize money, sponsorships, and visibility benefits. This influences players' support team development capacity, tour selection, and season planning. Therefore, economic inequality does not just cause income disparities; it also distinguishes the sports development circumstances of the athletes.

Important components in terms of career longevity are access to sponsorship. According to Cary and Stephens (2023), sponsorship chances are not equally given among professional tennis players, and sponsorships for low-ranked players are sometimes inadequate to pay the expenditures. This demonstrates that sponsorship revenues, like prize money, are tied to ranking, exposure, and market value. Players in the higher ranks have greater access to sponsorship income, which helps them pay for their careers, while players in the lower ranks have less access to these income sources. Consequently, a cycle of disparity between ranking, exposure, support, and professional stability develops, therefore strengthening each other.

In their research on the mental health and lifestyle challenges of professional tennis players, Shrom et al. (2023) find that the tennis profession entails not just financial but also psychological and social difficulties. The career experience of athletes can be difficult due to frequent travel, loneliness, unstable income systems, performance pressure, and worries about the future. This discovery indicates that career sustainability should be assessed based on the player's physical and psychological health in addition to financial rewards. Fragility of the economy can heighten these psychological tensions, therefore complicating job continuation.

Brouwers et al. (2015), in their research investigating the elite tennis player development pathways, noted that player development is more than just natural talent; It claims that it is linked to the resources supplied by several parties, including clubs, federations, sponsors, coaches, and family support. Though his professional tennis career appears to be a personal triumph, he requires a solid support system behind him. Players who have little support may be at a disadvantage in terms of getting into and staying in the professional system.

The ATP Baseline Program can be seen right now as an institutional attempt to improve employment stability. The program defines certain income thresholds for the top 250 players, which shows that the problem of career sustainability in professional tennis cannot be solved with individual efforts alone. Setting several incomes guarantees for the top 100, 101–175, and 176–250 rank ranges shows that some effort is made to balance the income composition of the players based only on their tournament performance. But the truth that this initiative is only open to the first 250 participants also illustrates the ongoing economic vulnerability of the large group of players further down the rankings.

In their study looking at the life events of tennis players at various levels of success, Oršolić et al. (2023) He says that travel, coaching, physical preparation, and sponsorship support are very important for his tennis career. This result reveals that financial and institutional circumstances around the professional career as well as the player's ability to win games determine career stability. For intermediate and low-level players in particular, financial resources as well as athletic performance usually decide their career length.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that career sustainability in professional tennis is associated with the distribution of prize money, access to tournaments, career-related expenses, sponsorship opportunities, institutional support, and players' physical and psychological circumstances. These factors may shape players' capacity to continue competing and developing within the professional system. However, because this study is based on publicly available documents and does not track individual career trajectories or calculate standardized net earnings, it identifies factors associated with career sustainability rather than measuring their independent effects on career duration.

Overall, the findings suggest that economic inequality in professional tennis extends beyond differences in prize money. It also concerns the unequal resources and opportunities available to players as they seek to sustain their careers. Initiatives such as the ATP Baseline Program and increases in the Challenger Tour prize pool indicate efforts to address aspects of this problem,

but their existence alone does not establish that economic vulnerability has been eliminated. Career sustainability therefore remains an issue that requires consideration of income security, tournament access, sponsorship opportunities, career-related expenses, and the wider support available to professional players.

Conclusion

In this study, the impact of economic inequalities on the career sustainability of athletes in professional tennis was examined through document analysis. Within the scope of the research, prize money tables, player support programs, athlete income reports, academic publications and public reports of ATP, WTA, ITF and Grand Slam organizations were evaluated. The findings showed that although professional tennis appears to be a high-income and elite sports field from the outside, the economic gains are not evenly distributed among all players.

The main result of the research is that economic inequalities in professional tennis cannot be evaluated only as income differences between players. When the imbalance in income distribution, the differentiation of prize money structure according to tournament levels, the limited economic return of lower-level tournaments and the high career costs are taken together, it is concluded that economic inequality is a structural problem that determines career sustainability.

The study shows that top-ranked players have easier access to high prize money, sponsorship income and media visibility; It has been observed that lower and mid-level players are mostly dependent on tournament prize money. This shows that income insecurity in the professional tennis system is especially evident for lower and mid-level players. Although practices such as the ATP Baseline Program reveal that income insecurity is institutionally recognized within the system, it has been understood that such supports do not eliminate the entire problem because they cover limited player groups.

It has been concluded that there are significant economic differences between Grand Slam and top level ATP/WTA tournaments and Challenger and ITF level tournaments in terms of prize money structure. While players who can reach the Grand Slam main table gain a significant income advantage, it has been observed that players competing in lower-level tournaments try to continue their careers within more limited prize pools. This shows that the tournament level directly affects the income potential and career planning of professional tennis players.

Lower-level tournament economics is one of the important results of the study. ITF World Tennis Tour and ATP Challenger Tour provide the opportunity to compete for a wide range of players in the professional tennis system and constitute an important step towards the transition to high-level tournaments. However, it has been concluded that the income earned at these levels may be limited against travel, accommodation, coaching, health and equipment expenses. For this reason, lower-level tournaments have been considered an area that represents the “invisible majority” of professional tennis but is economically fragile.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study’s methodological limitations. The analysis relied on publicly available documents, and detailed player-level financial information was limited. Monetary values reported in different currencies and years were not converted into a common currency or adjusted for inflation. Furthermore, players’ net earnings after career-related expenses and taxation were not systematically calculated. Consequently, the findings provide a descriptive account of economic conditions in professional tennis rather than a standardized assessment of individual players’ net financial outcomes.

Future research should examine player-level income and expenditure to distinguish gross prize money from net earnings after expenses and taxation. Comparisons across gender, tournament level, and national support systems could also provide a more detailed understanding of economic inequalities within the professional circuit. In addition, interviews with players, coaches, agents, and federation representatives could help explain how financial constraints shape tournament participation and career decisions. Such research would provide a stronger empirical basis for evaluating institutional support programs and developing policies to improve the economic sustainability of professional tennis.

Recommendations

It is suggested that prize money should increase at the ITF and Challenger levels to help lower and mid-level tennis players sustain their careers. Income support programs, like the ATP Baseline Program, could be expanded to include more than just top-ranked players. Lower-level tournaments should plan regionally to cut travel and accommodation costs for players. National associations can provide ongoing support for coaching, health, physiotherapy, and equipment costs. Support funds for players with limited sponsorship should be established, and financial data on players’ expenses should be made more transparent.

Limitations and strengths

This study is based solely on publicly available documents, reports, and academic publications. Therefore, direct opinions of athletes, coaches or tennis administrators have not been included. Additionally, since players’ private income information, sponsorship agreements, and personal expenditure items are not publicly available, the analysis is limited to accessible data. The study examined the general economic structure of the ATP, WTA, ITF and Grand Slam systems; it did not make detailed comparisons based on country, gender, age group or individual career examples. Although this approach provides a general framework for the professional tennis system, it limits its ability to explain individual player experiences. The limited availability of direct evidence on players’ actual expenses also restricts the extent to which the financial burden of maintaining

a professional career can be assessed. Furthermore, gross prize money and net income after taxes and career-related expenses were not calculated systematically.

Another limitation concerns the documentation and selection of sources. Although the study draws on publicly accessible materials from tennis organizations, reports, and academic publications, the analysis does not provide a fully itemized inventory of every document examined or establish explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria for all source types. The dates of data collection and individual document access were also not systematically reported. These factors may limit the reproducibility of the documentary analysis.

In addition, monetary values reported in different currencies were not converted into a common currency, and figures from different years were not adjusted for inflation, exchange-rate fluctuations, or differences in taxation. Consequently, monetary figures across currencies and periods cannot be interpreted as directly comparable measures of purchasing power or net financial benefit. The findings therefore provide a descriptive overview of the economic conditions reported in the sources rather than a standardized calculation of players' net earnings.

Finally, although the study discusses implications for improving the economic sustainability of professional tennis, the feasibility and potential effects of the resulting policy recommendations were not empirically tested. These recommendations should therefore be regarded as implications derived from the documentary analysis rather than as interventions whose effectiveness has been demonstrated.

One of the strengths of the study is that it considers economic disparities in professional tennis in the context of career sustainability, not just through prize money differences. In addition, the joint examination of ATP, WTA, ITF, Grand Slam prize money tables, player support programs, athlete income reports and academic publications has provided a multi-faceted view of the issue. The evaluation of the data under four themes in the study contributed to the systematic presentation of the findings. In addition, the use of up-to-date data such as the ATP Baseline Program, the ATP Challenger Tour and the ITF World Tennis Tour has strengthened the correlation of the study with the current economic discussions in the professional tennis system.

Ethical statement

This study employed a qualitative document analysis design and relied exclusively on publicly accessible secondary data, including official institutional records, prize money tables, income reports, statistical data, and published academic literature. No human participants were recruited, and no interviews, surveys, interventions, or direct data collection were conducted. The study did not use private, sensitive, or personally identifiable information. All sources were appropriately referenced and interpreted within their original context. Therefore, ethics committee approval and informed consent were not required for this study.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kılıçkaya O.: Conceptualization, Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation; **Şahinler Y.:** Methodology, Software, Investigation, Project administration; **Çavunt A. B.:** Resources, Writing – Review & Editing, Funding acquisition. All authors have seen and approved the final version of the article.

Data availability

The data used in this study were obtained from publicly available documents, reports, and databases, including ATP, WTA, ITF, and Grand Slam official publications. All sources used in the analysis are cited in the reference list and are publicly accessible.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the study reported in this paper.

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Generative AI use statement

Artificial intelligence–based tools, including ChatGPT (version 5.2), were used in this study solely for language editing purposes, such as improving grammar, clarity, and readability of the manuscript. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation of results, or generation of scientific content.

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