

ZLATIBOR KNITTERS IN THE SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA MEDIA DISCOURSE

In the first half of the 1970s, a beautiful, young, modern and well-groomed urban woman was the dominant figure in the media discourse of the Yugoslav women's magazine "Bazar". The characters of rural women appeared only sporadically. One of the few were Zlatibor knitters — rural women employed in the fashion production Sirogojno Style, which in the second half of the last century created a recognizable identity in the domestic and foreign fashion market. The aim of this paper is to compare the way in which the major and minor female characters were presented in the media discourse of the mentioned women's magazine and to provide an answer to the question of whether (and to what extent) their media images are compatible. In terms of methodology, the paper relies on the analysis of textual and visual messages published in issues 129–285 of the women's magazine "Bazar".

Keywords: *women, socialism, media discourse, Zlatibor knitters, "Bazar".*

For citation: Bogdanović, B. 2022. Zlatibor Knitters in the Socialist Yugoslavia Media Discourse. *Herald of Anthropology (Vestnik Antropologii)*. 3: 89–98.

Introduction: Media image of the „new” Yugoslav woman

The media at all levels are instrumentalizing and exploiting the female character in order to give a self-satisfied and unquestionable image of a society that confirms order.
(Iveković 2000: 17).

It is common that all countries of the socialist system use the media / media spaces as extremely effective instruments of regime propaganda serving the ruling structures to promote their ideological programmes. Thus, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (later the League of Communists of Yugoslavia), through the press and other means of communication, propagated its own political views, promoted socialist cultural values and regulated new social relations. One of the topics considered important in the Yugoslav media discourse was the role of a woman in the new political / social reality. The goal of the executive authority of that time was to construct a media image of the “new” Yugoslav

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* The text is the result of work in the Ethnographic Institute of SASA, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of RS, and based on the Agreement on realization and financing of scientific research work of SRO in 2021 number: 451–03–68 / 2022–14 / 200173 from February 04, 2022.

woman before whom, after the war, „new spaces were opened — the women were given the right to vote, significant collective and reproductive rights and institutional support to pursue professions that were considered exclusively male up to then” (Popović 2015). The socialist media — primarily daily press and periodicals, and especially women’s magazines (such as Belgrade’s “Bazar” and “Nada”, Zagreb’s “Svijet” and “Arena”, Slovenia’s “Jana”, etc.) — brought stories about textile workers, peasant women attending literacy courses, clerks and their daily lives along with with fashion recommendations, tips for every day, and educational texts about events in the country and abroad. At first glance, it seems that in these (and such) public narratives, the socialist woman is presented as one who is ready to transcend her traditional role and order, go beyond the normative framework and (bravely) step into the world of economic progress, gender egalitarianism and individual progress that socialism as an ideology promised. However, many theorists dealing with the media, “women’s” issues and / or socialism as an ideological construct¹ draw attention to how women, femininity and sexuality were constructed and presented in the public, media discourse of socialist Yugoslavia.² For example, Žarana Papić believes that within the Yugoslav political system, which was not devoid of traditional patriarchal relations, “the mass media most often reproduced civic stereotypes about the place and the role of a woman and thus nurtured the ideal of a satisfied, capable, hardworking housewife and her world which did not go beyond family existence” (Zaharijević et al. 2012: 105). The same opinion is shared by Isidora Jarić, who concludes that the socialist media had „mythical power to keep women in their homes” and thus contributed to the preservation of stereotypical (traditional) gender roles and slowed down the process of emancipation of Yugoslav women (Jarić 2013). According to Neda Todorović, the “ideal” socialist woman was portrayed in the Yugoslav print media (especially during the 1960s and 1970s) as a beautiful, likeable housewife who took care of the house, cooked, dreamed of love and raised children (Todorović 1987: 2012). If the observations of other authors are added to these opinions (Isanović 2007; Stojaković 2013; Vujović and Prokopović 2018), it can be concluded that the media discourse of socialist Yugoslavia was undoubtedly very stereotypical, shaped and rooted in traditional patriarchal patterns. In other words, the *female figure* in the Yugoslav media space was constructed on the basis of cultural, social and natural remnants of traditionalism which socialism — as a doctrine of equality — could not (or did not want to) eradicate in practice.

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In light of the above, the aim of this paper is to reconstruct the media image / images of Zlatibor knitters – rural women who were employed in the production system of fashion production Sirogojno Style, which in the second half of the 20th century created a recognizable identity in Yugoslav and foreign fashion market – in the domestic print media and in that way discuss some of the issues that arise in connection with socialist gender stereotypes. The research included the so-called women’s press that “represents a haven for tra-

¹ The number of studies in which authors of multilateral professional orientation and engagement consider various aspects of media (re)presentation of women in the context of Yugoslav socialism is constantly growing (primarily within the theoretical framework of feminism, culture and communication studies and other academic disciplines that consider various gender, political and/or communication aspects of society as a whole), and on this occasion refers only to some of them: Todorović Uzelać 1987; Isanović 2007; Jarić 2013; Stojaković 2013; Vujović and Prokopović 2018 etc.

² “Socialist Yugoslavia” refers to the period of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (“second” or “Tito’s” Yugoslavia) from 1943 to 1991.

ditional women's values, occupations and trivial interests" (Zaharijević et al. 2012: 105). The research corpus includes editions of the high-circulation women's magazine "Bazar"¹ in the first half of the seventh decade of the last century, i.e. magazine articles about Zlatibor knitters published in issues 129–285. The seventies of the last century were taken as a reference for two reasons: it was the time when fashion production Sirogojno Style was clearly positioned in both domestic and foreign fashion markets, and it was also the period when the image of a beautiful, young, modern and well-groomed woman became dominant in the domestic media discourse. The analysis of textual and visual messages in selected magazines should point to some of the discourse aspects of the construction of media image(s) of Zlatibor knitters and also try to answer the question whether (and to what extent) media images of Zlatibor knitters are consistent with official, public image of the "ideal" Yugoslav woman.

Zlatibor knitters: fashion production Sirogojno Style

In 1962, a home industry workshop "Zlatiborka" was established in the Zlatibor village of Sirogojno within the Agricultural Cooperative. Its aim was to develop a production system without large financial investments, within which rural women, based on centuries-old tradition of wool processing would make useful items of this material in their homes (Bogdanović 2016: 13–17). The exhibition of handicrafts made by Zlatibor knitters after the designs of Dobrila Vasiljević Smiljanić², organized in Belgrade the same year, was followed by a short and very successful way of affirming the knitters and their professional team. The first works of knitters from Sirogojno, Drenova, Trnava and Gostilje – which were highly appreciated by fashion experts – soon appeared on the domestic market.³ Due to the nature, structure and scope of work, in 1969 the domestic industry developed into an independent professional organization and became part of the large foreign trade house "Interexport" from Belgrade (Bogdanović 2016: 16). In 1979, "Inex-Zlatiborka" grew into a professional organization "Inex" with two organizational units "Sirogojno" – domestic handicraft products with 125 workers and 2,000 subcontractors and "Zlatiborka" – light women's clothing with 200 workers). According to the law on companies, in 1986 the company transferred into "Socially owned company Sirogojno". The domestic handicraft workshop, which revitalized knitting as a centuries-old traditional

¹ "Bazar", which has been published since 1964 by "Politika", is the oldest women's magazine in Serbia. In addition to Zagreb's "Svijet", it was one of the most widely circulated women's magazines on the Yugoslav market.

² Dobrila Vasiljević Smiljanić (1935, Radobuda) – creator of the fashion production Sirogojno Style, initiated the establishment of a production system of handmade woollen garments and marked the Yugoslav fashion scene with numerous works of high artistic value. An artist of wide imagination, a master of drawing and form, she has won numerous domestic and international awards: the Golden Peacock (1972), the great international AMMA award for contribution to European haute couture (1977), the Order of the Golden Wreath (1979), Vuk Award for the Development of Rural Culture (1980), two Golden Hinds of the Belgrade Fashion Fair (1983 and 1984), the Seventh July Award (1987), the ULUPUS Lifetime Achievement Award (1997), UNESCO Lifetime Achievement Award (1999), Belgrade Fashion Week Honorary Award for Contributing to the Development of Fashion as an Art (2012) and many others.

³ Distribution to the former republics of SFRY went through representative offices in Slovenia, in Croatia through "Rukotvorina" from Zagreb, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina through "Folklor" (Bogdanović 2016: 17).

occupation of rural women, started its activity with about 40 female subcontractors, and as the colorful handicrafts of Dobrila Vasiljević Smiljanić soon became recognizable in quality on the national and international market, by 1991 this production system included about 2,500 women from 22 villages in five municipalities of the Užice region, promoting this “women’s industry” into the primary one in this area in terms of number of employees (Bogdanović 2016: 16–17). The distribution of handicrafts on the foreign (European and Japanese) market began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, through Jugoexport’s Genex’s Glob Hermes networks. During the thirty years of operation of this production system, the handicrafts of Zlatibor knitters were exhibited in all republics of the former SFRY, and then in Paris, Brussels, Copenhagen, Dusseldorf, Moscow, Rome, Lyon and Munich (Bogdanović 2016: 18). The items were awarded on several such occasions.

However, the time of success lasted until the beginning of the civil war in Yugoslavia – international sanctions imposed in 1992 on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia caused the loss of the market and stopped further foreign distribution of domestic products. In order to prevent the bankruptcy and the termination of the authentic programme, in December 1997, according to the Law on Privatization, the company was sold to Rade Ljubojević, a manager from Sirogojno (Bogdanović 2016: 19).¹ Since 1998, the family owned company “Sirogojno Company” (whose main activity is the production and distribution of fruit) continues, to a lesser extent, the production of hand-knitted clothing (named Sirogojno Style) in line with the already set high standards of the quality of material, workmanship and design.

Media images of Zlatibor knitters

In the women’s magazine “Bazar” in the period from January 1970 to December 1975, i.e. in the issues no. 129–285, a total of four articles about Zlatibor knitters were published, as follows: report by D. Protić about 750 rural women employed in the production plant “Inex – Zlatiborka” (“Poor but skilled”, issue 173, year VIII, September 11, 1971); M. Savić’s announcement about the “Golden Peacock? award, received by the designer Dobrila Vasiljević Smiljanić for the collection “Ice and Fire” at the Belgrade Fair “Fashion in the World? in 1972 (“Golden Peacock – Zlatibor”, issue 203, year IX, November 4, 1972); short report by S. Erić on the visit of Jeanne Augier, the owner of Le Negresco Hotel in Nice, to the village of Sirogojno and the Zlatibor knitters (“Madame Jeanne in the Zlatibor Village”, issue 247, year XII, July 26, 1975) and an extensive article (four pages long) about the development of the production system of handmade woolen garments, Zlatibor knitters and creator Dobrila Vasiljević Smiljanić written for the readers of “Bazar” by Z. Mutavdžić (“I knit... You knit... They knit...”, issue 283, year XII, November 27, 1975). On the front pages of the issues covered by the research, Zlatibor knitters and their handicrafts appeared once – on the front page of issue 283 (year XII, November 27, 1975), where Nikica Marinović posed in a knitted black and white seven-eighths coat of the current Sirogojno Style collection, announcing the story of “One thousand and three hundred knitters of Zlatibor”.

Upon insight into the content of the mentioned articles, i.e. analysis of textual and visual messages, the following media images of Zlatibor knitters can be distinguished:

¹ After the privatization of SOE Sirogojno and the sharp decline in the amount of work during the 1990s, about 1,000 Zlatibor knitters were out of the organized production system.

1. *Zlatibor knitters — artists of their craft*

In the first place, Zlatibor knitters are presented as successful, respected and widely known artists of their craft. They are shown as women who knit “the most modern garments”, who “know neither holiday nor sleep” due to multiple orders arriving from all over the world, and whose “golden hands” using fine Icelandic wool make real artistic masterpieces and set fashion standards — “it has become chic to wear soft, nonchalant gray or milk-white light wool sweaters”. Although “illiterate, or more often semi-literate, peasants who did not go further than Titovo Užice”, spread the fame of Sirogojno in and outside the borders of former Yugoslavia with their skills, effort and uninterrupted work. Their wonderful collections also fascinated the famous Pierre Cardin, who was carefully watching every interweaving of handmade sweaters, jackets and scarves under the spotlight of Parisian catwalks.

2. *Zlatibor knitters — active subjects in the Yugoslav economic system*

Zlatibor knitters are portrayed as active subjects in the Yugoslav economic system. Actually, contrary to socialist constructs and collective notions of gender in which women are mostly presented through the traditional role in the patriarchal family, knitters employed in the fashion production *Sirogojno Style* are presented as egalitarian participants in the economic development of Zlatibor region. This is illustrated in the media discourse with the phrase “female” and “male” dinar (*dinar is used here as Serbian monetary unit — translator’s note*). The “female” dinar, as one of the articles states, “is woven by small and strong hands of women farmers and stockbreeders, hands full of inevitable, dark splashes”, while the male dinar “is made by strong hands of their husbands employed in a nearby quarry”. “The men use drills, mines and dynamite — the women work with needles and Icelandic wool,” reads one of the articles. These two dinars are equally important: the husband’s dinar from the quarry “is used to buy flour and wheat, pigs and beef, fattening food for animals and rubber shoes”, and the wife’s dinar “buys a washing machine, a painting on the wall, an electric stove, washing powder, curtains...”. Considering the fact that the annual income of “Inex — Zlatiborka” amounted to billions of dinars and that the reddish-yellow stones were used to pave the new squares in Titovo Užice and Kruševac as well as the banks of the Ušće in Belgrade, it can be said that “female” and “male” dinars collectively took part in electrification of the village, building Cooperative Home, bringing running water to each house...

3. *Zlatibor knitters — rural women on their way to emancipation*

The third narrative is placed within the wider social community / traditional rural family and follows the change in the social / family status of rural women employed in the fashion production *Sirogojno Style*. In other words, Zlatibor knitters are portrayed as women on their way to emancipation. Employed rural women “raise loans without participation and guarantors” with *their* money, while traders “rub their hands” when they see them in their stores, because “knitters do not buy a hundred grams of sugar or coffee, but washing powder, the best scarves, better fabrics for their dresses...” The fact that the development of the handmade clothes production system in Sirogojno initiated the process of emancipation of rural women at the wider community level is shown by magazine stories about Zlatibor knitters walking the catwalks (followed by “applause unremembered on similar occasions”) and rural women attending film screenings at the Cooperative House, which suggested that the hitherto clear division into private / public, i. e. female / male spheres began to fade. Zlatibor knitters, until then exclusively related to home and house-

hold space, were slowly “entering” the public sphere — the one that, within the traditional value system up to then, was intended exclusively for men. However, through magazine articles, it can only be guessed that there were some shifts in the established family relations, which is mentioned, for example, by Zlatiborka Kića Čaldović, boasting that “she no longer has to ask her husband for the money for washing powder, but can now buy it on her own”. Yet, she also notes that her husband blames the fact she knits a lot, for, in that way he “loses his life”. Some Zlatibor knitters complain that their husbands ‘throw needles into the fire, but it isn’t helping” — for they like to work, and “earning money has become enchanting”. Anyway, the more dominant representation of Zlatibor knitters is as “the wives of strong husbands who break reddish-yellow stones in a nearby quarry”, mothers who often pick up knitting needles only when they “settle” children, women who cook and knit, keep cattle and knit, wait in shop queues and knit... It is clear from newspaper articles that the traditional division of labour within the (then still) cooperative family did not disappear with the employment of rural women. The established division into “men’s” and “women’s” jobs was still present, i. e. the entire burden of household responsibilities was still exclusively on employed rural women.¹

Presentation of a Zlatibor knitter in the media discourse of socialist Yugoslavia

Searching for an answer to the question whether (and to what extent) the media depictions of Zlatibor knitters match the official image of the modern Yugoslav woman, it is necessary to reconstruct the main female character in the narratives of „Bazar“ magazine². Looking at over 150 issues of the mentioned women’s magazine, it seems safe to conclude that in the first half of the 1970s, the image of a *beautiful, young, modern and well-groomed woman* was dominant in the media discourse of Yugoslav magazines for women. A brief glance at the front pages and headlines of magazine articles is enough to see that the imperative was to be *beautiful and young*. This is supported by the fact that the columns of the mentioned magazine were continuously filled with reports from the beauty contests that were organized every year in all republics of SFRY — they told stories about candidates, their beauty, education, hobbies and the like. The articles were written permanently, and the beauty contest winners often had front pages. The central events, followed by “Bazar” enthusiastically, included the election for Miss Yugoslavia, and then the election for Miss World, which was regularly monitored and reported by local journalists on the course of the competition and the ranking of the beauties. When it comes to the age criterion, it seems that the forties were set as the upper “acceptable” limit — this is perhaps best illustrated by the article titled “For your 40th birthday”, which literally says: “Caution is never superfluous. Be careful at least from today. Here are ten tips on what to pay attention to!” In the text that follows, the readers are advised not to allow themselves to gain weight, to be careful about their hips not to widen, to pay close attention to the quality of cosmetic products, etc. (“For your 40th birthday”, issue 269, year XII, May 17, 1975, un-

¹ For more about the process of emancipation of Zlatibor knitters see: *Bogdanović* 2017.

² It is necessary to emphasize that the narratives of the women's magazine “Bazar” included, of course, male characters who are not in the focus of this research. In this women's magazine, a special fashion section was dedicated to men — Men's Bazar, as well as a series of articles revising some of the problems faced by modern men (“Fathers and Children”, issue 224, year X4, year X, August 25, 1973, M. Savić; “Poor them”, issue 225, year X, 8. IX 1973, unsigned; “I raised my daughter”, issue 171, year VIII, 14. VIII 1971, D. Protić, etc.).

signed). Accordingly, articles dedicated to older women are much less present than those focusing on the younger female population — they primarily give readers advice on cosmetics that can “postpone” aging, while articles about love or male-female intimacy in adulthood are extremely rare (for example, “There is time for love”, issue 247, year XI, July 13, 1974, unsigned). Furthermore, the main female characters “keep in step with the times” — they primarily follow fashion trends (in which, fashion designer Čedomir Čedomir helps them through his regular column by providing information about news in the world of fashion — current colours, cuts, designs, materials, collections...), but they are also diligently informed about cosmetics, places where they could spend a “nice family vacation”, new recipes, contraceptive pills, ideal sink height, current nail polish colours, personal hygiene... Main female characters are given several roles, and there seem to be three main ones — they are wives, mothers and successful business women. When it comes to defining them *through a relationship with a man*, it is enough to mention the text that tells the story of a young and promising Belgrade actress Vesna Malohodžić, who got “her most important role in life” by marrying the famous basketball player and coach Dragutin Miško Čermak — the role of the wife (“Her loveliest role”, issue 225, year X, September 8, 1973, K. M.). There are few articles in which partnership relations are not emphasized, such as the text about the young newly divorced doctor Marica Stevanović, who is happy and satisfied even after the collapse of her marriage (“I’m fine”, issue 254, year XI, October 19, 1974, Lj. Binićanin). The role of *the mother* is also clearly accentuated — the most illustrative is the article in which two photos are shown next to each other: the first one shows famous London models posing in “hot” swimsuits, and in the second one, they are “modestly” dressed with their children. The text published along with the photos carries a clear message: “These are the same six girls, but they are no longer posing in flattering swimsuits, but with their children. Six mothers from the front page say that the profession of photo model does not prevent them from raising children.” (“From bikini to reality”, issue 234, year XI, January 12, 1974, unsigned). Also, in addition to being wives and mothers, the main characters are also shown as *successful in their professions*, and domestic and foreign actresses, athletes, architects, painters, fashion designers, etc. were continuously portrayed. The regular column “Known and Unknown” was an opportunity to introduce anonymous, but in their branches recognizable and successful young, beautiful Yugoslav women to the readers of “Bazar”.

In that (and such) media discourse, the characters of *rural women* appear only sporadically. As a rule, they were presented as tragic characters — their lives were shaped by difficult material conditions, disturbed family relationships, tragic events, unhappy loves... Such is, for example, the character of Đula Alibašić, an illiterate peasant from Suvi Do on Pešter, who, as a barren woman, experiences a “bitter fate” in her marriage. She was physically and mentally abused, replaced by another woman and eventually evicted from the house (“I was looking for a wife for my husband”, issue 213, year X, year X, March 24, 1973, M. Blečić)¹. Thus, Zlatibor knitters, like other rural women, are just sporadic female characters in the analyzed narratives of the women’s magazine “Bazar”. They are portrayed as *artists of their craft, active subjects in the Yugoslav economic system and rural women who are (slowly) entering the process of emancipation*. If this (and such) image is compared to the image of the main female characters, it can be concluded they

¹ Due to the limited work length, on this occasion it is not possible to compare the characters of rural women in the analysed public narratives.

are only partially harmonized. On the one hand, their compliance can be read on two levels. Primarily, Zlatibor knitters, like other female characters in public socialist narratives, are portrayed as “superwomen”— women who are successful at work, at home, as wives, mothers, and housewives at the same time. According to Isidora Jarić, “at the level of ideology, the new socialist state consistently promoted the image of a woman who could do anything, unlike the bourgeois concept where the woman’s social and personal life was limited by the social construction of her biology“ (Jarić 2013: 411). Accordingly, Zlatibor knitters are shown as women who raise children and knit, cook and knit, learn and knit, travel and knit, fantasize and knit... At the second level of compliance, Zlatibor knitters, together with housewives from the city, teachers, workers in industry, etc., are presented through traditional partnership and family relations inherited by Yugoslav society from the period that preceded socialism. Specifically, despite the consistent development of positive legal regulations and official egalitarian discourse that was dominant in public life, gender inequality was part of women’s daily lives even in the 1970s (Jarić 2013: 414), which is evident in “Bazar’s” depiction of Zlatibor knitters. However, there are some discrepancies between the portraits of Zlatibor knitters and other female characters in the narrations of the women’s magazine “Bazar”. Namely, the character of a Zlatibor knitter was assigned not only the above-mentioned typical female gender roles, but also those that were entrusted (exclusively) to men during the 1970s, under the further, primarily economic, development of Yugoslav society. In other words, rural women employed in the production system of fashion production *Sirogojno Style* were presented as egalitarian bearers of economic development, in this case, of the Zlatibor region, unlike other female characters — extremely hardworking and dedicated female workers — whose position in the overall economic system of socialist Yugoslavia was not sufficiently emphasized by the magazine narrative. In that sense, the media presentation of Zlatibor knitters conceptually corresponded more to the way in which the active role of women in creating a new socio-economic reality was presented in the Yugoslav media discourse in the period 1945–1950, i. e. in the years preceding the introduction of the self-government (compare: Milinkov 2014). Furthermore, the rapid modernization, urbanization and industrialization of the country in the years after World War II led Yugoslav society to moving away from the villages and tradition / traditional values (Dimić 1988; Ivanović-Barišić 2021), and similarly, in the public socialist media discourse built the character of the “new” Yugoslav woman — an urban woman, having her place in the new consumer society, consuming the products of mass culture, being sexually educated, etc. In addition to such a woman, “Bazar’s” narratives also included a directly opposite female character — a Zlatibor knitter living in the village, engaged in traditional occupations and projecting her future within the inherited value system. Last, but not least, Zlatibor knitters did not fit into the socialist criteria of femininity — they looked heavy, wore scarves around their heads, their appearance reflected a hard rural life. They were the opposite of the beauty ideal of young and well-groomed women, the ideal which the readers strived for.

The answer to the question why the presented media images of Zlatibor knitters were not fully harmonized with the official / desirable / expected media depictions of women / femininity / sexuality in the media discourse of socialist Yugoslavia, can be found in the broader economic-social-political context within which the fashion production *Sirogojno Style* operated — in the first place, it generated huge annual revenues and, in the economic sense, was one of the important subjects of the Yugoslav economy; in the cultural context,

handmade woolen garments, as a recognizable fashion brand on the national and international markets, were part of a broader communication system through which communication with *Others* was realized, while in the context of the political circumstances of that time, the handicrafts of the Zlatibor knitters represented a convenient link between Yugoslav society (which was basically grounded on anti-traditional ideology) and a tradition which socialism in practice never completely “gave up”.¹ Bearing in mind that the production system of *handmade* clothes was assigned these (and such) roles, it was to be expected that the character of the Zlatibor knitter — a modest, headscarf dressed, hard-working and talented peasant — would be “introduced” into the public media narratives of socialist Yugoslavia, a state large and strong enough to be versatile and heterogeneous.

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¹ For more on the features of *Sirogojno style* fashion products, see: *Bogdanović* 2016.

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