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Abstract: In recent years, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become major players in sports communication. In this study, we focus on the motives for athletes' use of social media. Applying a mediatization approach, we conceptualize social media as a possible means to bypass traditional (sports) journalism. For sport disciplines that receive minor media coverage, social media provides the opportunity to increase public visibility. Consequently, our study focuses on indoor volleyball as such a marginalized sport. The online survey results from all players of the 24 either all-male or all-female teams of the German first volleyball leagues are combined with a quantitative content analysis of the players' social media activities. Results indicate that athletes evaluate traditional media coverage of their sport as negative and social media as extremely influential. Still, their postings on social media seem neither to aim at bypassing sports journalism nor to address sports fans directly. Instead, they use social media primarily to connect with friends and family. In conclusion, volleyball players have so far not embraced social media as a tool to promote themselves as sportspersons. At the moment, they do not exploit social media's potential as channels for professional sports communication.

Keywords: Social media, sports communication, mediatization theory, online survey, content analysis

Zusammenfassung: Social Media Plattformen sind in den vergangenen Jahren zu bedeutenden Kanälen der Sportkommunikation geworden. In der vorliegenden Studie legen wir den Fokus auf die Motive für den Einsatz von Social Media durch individuelle Sportakteure. Aus Medialisierungsperspektive konzipieren wir Social Media als einen Kanal, der Sportakteuren die Möglichkeit bietet, sportjournalistische Angebote zu umgehen. Insbesondere medial weniger beachtete Sportarten können via Social Media ihre öffentliche Sichtbarkeit erhöhen. Am Beispiel von Hallenvolleyball analysiert die vorliegende Studie, inwieweit SportlerInnen Social Media dieses Potenzial zusprechen und ob und wie sie Facebook, Twitter und Instagram nutzen. Hierzu kombinieren wir eine Befragung aller SportlerInnen in den Volleyball-Bundesligen der Herren und Damen mit einer Inhaltsanalyse ihrer Social-Media-Accounts und -Postings. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass VolleyballerInnen mit der Berichterstattung über ihren Sport unzufrieden sind. Sie halten Social Media für

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eine einflussreiche Alternative, um Fans über aktuelle Geschehnisse rund um den Sport auf dem Laufenden zu halten. Doch obwohl alle Erstliga-VolleyballerInnen meist mehrere Social-Media-Präsenzen pflegen, nutzen sie diese insbesondere zu privaten Zwecken und nicht dazu, sich den Fans gegenüber als SportlerInnen zu präsentieren. Sie setzen Social Media aktuell folglich (noch) nicht als Kanäle professioneller Sportkommunikation ein.

Schlagwörter: Social Media, Sportkommunikation, Medialisierung, Online-Befragung, Inhaltsanalyse

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become major players in sports communication (Stiehler & Horky, 2018). Individual journalists and media organizations use social media as novel sources and additional channels for their sports coverage (Deprez, Mechant, & Hoebeke, 2013; Nölleke, Grimmer, & Horky, 2017; Reed, 2013; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010, 2013). Sports fans post and discuss sports-related content on social media platforms (Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014) and follow the social media accounts of their favorite clubs and athletes in growing numbers. In doing this, fans gain (the impression of) immediate access to what their idols think and do. This access is provided by sports organizations and athletes who increasingly engage in social media in order to directly address their fans (Grimmer & Horky, 2018). Scholars argue that athletes can be considered "the one sport stakeholder group who has been most significantly affected by social media" (Smith & Sanderson, 2015, p. 343). Consequently, our research focuses on athletes' efforts in social media. However, while most studies deal with famous athletes and well-known sports clubs in popular disciplines such as football (Meyen, 2014; Sinner, 2017) or tennis (Beck & Capt, 2017; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), we investigate how social media is perceived and employed by athletes in rather marginalized sports. Specifically, we analyze why indoor volleyball players engage in social media and what content they provide on their social media accounts. Unlike many previous studies, we relate these social media efforts further, linking them to established approaches in communication studies. In this manner, we contribute to providing explanations for current phenomena in the relation between sports and media and, hence, address a priority goal of current research on sports communication (Vowe & Dohle, 2016).

Social media has repeatedly been described as an opportunity for social actors to directly address their stakeholders without having to rely on journalism (Hull, 2014; Schulz, 2014; Sheffer & Schultz, 2013; Tedesco, 2011). Following this line of thought, we investigate whether athletes' social media activities are indeed motivated by the goal of circumventing journalism. We argue that athletes will only employ social media as an alternative to journalism if they (a) are dissatisfied with the traditional sports media's coverage and (b) perceive social media as equally or even more influential with regard to the athletes' goals of sports communication. From the perspective of mediatization theory, discontent with sports coverage can especially be expected for marginalized sports that only receive minor media attention. Notably, for sports with comparatively little media presence,

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social media provide the opportunity to increase public attention. In this article, we investigate whether actors in such marginalized sports recognize this opportunity. Moreover, we analyze whether these presumptions result in respective social media activities. If social media is perceived as a channel to circumvent the filtering and gatekeeping processes of sports media, one can expect that athletes provide sports-related content on their social media accounts. This reasoning is in line with research on the mediatization of sports (Birkner & Nölleke, 2016; Frandsen, 2016; Heinecke, 2014; Meyen, 2014), which basically argues that athletes have become increasingly dependent on public attention and thus take measures to gain media presence based on their perceptions of different media's influence and logic. We address this issue by focusing on indoor volleyball—a sport that generally receives only minor media attention, in Germany for instance compared to omnipresent football but also compared to beach volleyball during the Olympics.

Our article is organized as follows: First, we address how mediatization theory helps to explain sports' needs for public attention. We briefly introduce facets of mediatization that explain why and how sports actors aim at achieving media presence. We, then, deal with social media's potential for sports and introduce present research on sports actors' social media efforts. After that, we pay particular attention to volleyball as a marginalized sport and discuss the needs and previous attempts to increase public attention. Next, we deduce research questions from our theoretical considerations, introduce our methods, and, finally, present and discuss the results.

2. Literature review

2.1 Reaching out for public attention: mediatization of sports

More than other social fields, competitive sports are dependent on public attention. For sports organizations and sportspersons, public awareness is a basic condition to acquire financial means from sponsors and public authorities (Meyen, 2014). Consequently, it is essential for competing professionally and can be considered a basic condition for the sporting success of individual athletes and sports clubs in competitive sports. Hence, sports federations, sports clubs, and athletes strive to achieve public visibility (Pedersen, 2012). As access to the public in general and sports fans in particular is provided by mass media (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2016), sports actors strive for media presence. This reasoning indicates a close relationship between sports and mass media which scholars have repeatedly highlighted: Already by the late 1980s, Jhally (1989, p. 70) argued that within the "sports/media complex" a sport's survival depends on media money; McChesney (1989, p. 49) described the relationship between sports and mass media as "symbiotic;" and Goldlust (1987, p. 78) referred to the relationship between sports and the media as a "match made in heaven."

Indeed, for some disciplines, media attention and therefore public visibility seem to be guaranteed as sports' attributes such as unpredictability and immediacy perfectly match media (especially TV) demands (Bellamy, 2013; Whannel,

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2013). However, although all sports share these attributes not all sports disciplines receive the same share of media presence. Instead, sports coverage only focuses on some few popular sports, whereas the majority of disciplines receives little media attention (Horky & Nieland, 2013a). In that situation, marginalized sports, sports organizations, and athletes take efforts to heighten their media appeal and, by this means, aim to increase media coverage in order to become more popular (as a discipline) and to improve prospects for sporting success (as a club or an individual) (Heinecke, 2014; Meyen, 2014). Such adaptations of social fields to the media constitute the core of mediatization processes (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Landerer, 2013; Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014). In our present study, we argue that social media have the potential to provide individual and collective sports actors with public attention. Hence, engaging in sports communication via social media can be considered a mediatization strategy. Referring to mediatization as an established approach in communication studies enables us to put individual social media efforts into the wider context of public communication. By this means, we contribute to providing theoretically-informed explanations for current phenomena in sports and sports media.

Mediatization basically describes a growing significance of media for different kinds of institutional and cultural practices across diverse domains of society (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2016; Lunt & Livingstone, 2016). Crucially, two major approaches to mediatization can be distinguished (Birkner, 2017). The "social-constructivist approach" (Hepp, 2013, p. 616) is concerned with media technologies' impact on everyday practices. Applied to the realm of sports, the approach suggests that formerly non mediatized sports such as running or workout have become mediatized by the possibility of using smartphones to directly post one's sporting achievements on social media (Pfadenhauer & Grenz, 2012). Our perspective is rooted in the "institutionalist" (Hepp, 2013, p. 616) tradition of mediatization research. According to that, mediatization occurs if collective and individual actors within social fields actively utilize news media services according to their own needs (Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014). Numerous studies on the mediatization of sports have employed this approach (Birkner & Nölleke, 2016; Dohle & Vowe, 2006; Heinecke, 2014; Meyen 2014). In the course of a pull process (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014), organizations and actors respond to media reality and adapt their operations to what they perceive as the media's logic. Such media-related strategies can be considered indicators for reflexive mediatization (Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014) and constitute the focus of most empirical research on mediatization. Although adaptations to news media can also be defensive and aim at avoiding media coverage (Strömbäck & van Aelst, 2013), most research deals with measures aiming at attracting media attention. As sports strongly depend on media visibility, studies, consequently, have identified numerous mediatization efforts within sports (Birkner & Nölleke, 2016; Frandsen, 2016; Heinecke, 2014; Meyen, 2014). However, disciplines, clubs, and athletes that are marginalized in sports coverage are under greater pressure to adjust their operations towards the media logic than popular media sports.

The point of reference for all mediatization processes is media logic—a term that was originally introduced by Altheide and Snow (1979). Most research that

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relates mediatization to needs for public attention conceptualizes media logic as the "modus operandi of mass media" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 113) and refers to journalism or news media (e. g. Esser & Strömbäck, 2014) because these media allow access to the general public. However, in the Internet era, journalism no longer serves as the only channel to publicly provide information (Schulz, 2014). In particular, social media have turned out to be appropriate channels to address stakeholders. Thus, when discussing media-related measures, mediatization research should also take social media channels into account (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). In terms of mediatization theory, social media can support sports actors to cushion themselves from traditional sports media in two ways: As a defensive means, athletes can use their social media accounts to counter unwelcome sports coverage and try to control the narratives (Sherwood, Nicholson, & Marjoribanks, 2017). As an offensive means, social media provides marginalized sports, clubs, and athletes with a channel to reach out for public attention. This paper's focus is on the latter.

2.2 Sport actors' social media efforts

In the context of sports, social media platforms are employed for a variety of highly different purposes—such as research, networking with colleagues, expanding fan bases, marketing, and creating spaces of intimacy (Grimmer & Horky, 2018). Notably, each platform like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat serves specific purposes and provides different opportunities for sports communication (Burk & Grimmer, 2018; Grimmer & Horky, 2018). However, regardless of the platform, all social media offerings enable users to provide information to a (more or less) general public and, in this way, break journalism's former monopoly (Stiehler & Horky, 2018). Through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, social stakeholders in general (Schulz, 2014; Tedesco, 2011) and sports actors in particular (Hull, 2014; Sheffer & Schultz, 2013) can bypass journalism and directly address their audiences. Thus, social media have turned out to be potential competitors to traditional mass media (Boehmer, 2016; Hull & Lewis, 2014; Nölleke, 2018).

Bypassing sports journalism through social media can be motivated by two reasons: On the one hand, social media can be applied to keep the flow and shape of information under control (Sanderson, 2008; Scherer & Jackson, 2008). In this sense, social media activities would be triggered by dissatisfaction with the *quality* of the reporting on the respective sport, club, and athlete (Birkner & Nölleke, 2016). On the other hand, formerly marginalized disciplines, clubs, and athletes can apply social media to reach out to their audiences. Social media activities would then be motivated by dissatisfaction with the *extent* of reporting on the respective sport, club, and athlete.

Research on sport organizations' social media efforts indicates that social media are indeed occasionally applied to circumvent sports media. In their study on Canadian and U.S. sports media professionals, Gibbs and Haynes (2013) show that in times of social media the relevance of press releases has decreased. Instead, news is published via Twitter. Whereas most studies do not pay attention to par-

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ticular modes of using different social media platforms, Gibbs et al. (2014) found that sports organizations use Twitter and Facebook for different purposes. While Facebook is about creating discussions, Twitter is used for sharing news. This is in line with results from a study on Canadian national sports organizations which use Twitter intensely to provide news updates (Naraine & Parent, 2016). Sport organizations especially appreciate the opportunity to share real-time scores via Twitter (Gibbs & Haynes, 2013; Gibbs et al., 2014; Naraine & Parent, 2016). With their research on Australian sports organizations, Sherwood et al. (2017) show that most organizations still value traditional media coverage and, thus, engage in usual media relations. However, their results also point to the employment of social media as tools to bypass journalism. In the case of sensitive stories that might potentially harm a sports organization the media relations staff wishes to control the narrative and, hence, rather uses in-house channels than traditional media. Furthermore, Sherwood et al. (2017, p. 526) found "that smaller sports organisations used their social and digital media platforms to communicate with stakeholders because they could not gain mainstream and commercial media attention." Knödler (2017) analyzed the Twitter strategies of German handball clubs and found that they tend to use Twitter primarily for one-way communication with their followers. This result hints at the clubs' intention to directly share information and to circumvent traditional sports media.

In contrast to studies on sports organizations, research on individual athletes' social media activities does not usually deal with their assessments of traditional sports media. As an exception, Sanderson (2008) shows how baseball player Curt Schilling used a blog to counter sports broadcasters' and journalists' portrayals of him. Applying content analyses, most of the present research on athletes' social media efforts focuses on self-presentation strategies and the employment of Twitter for (para)social interaction. Studies indicate that sharing sports-related news plays a minor role in athletes' engagements on social media platforms. Sportspersons rather use these outlets (especially Twitter) to interact with fans and to give insights into their personal lives (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Hull, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). Still, a small but significant number of tweets could be categorized as sports-related or -informing. Hull (2014) reveals that, like sports organizations, athletes occasionally use Twitter to share live results. However, as popular athletes' profiles on social networking sites are often managed by external agencies (Grimmer & Horky, 2018), research should be careful not to ascribe social media efforts solely to individual priorities.

2.3 Media-related measures in volleyball

We argue that marginalized sports are under pressure to adapt to the perceived media logic in order to increase their media presence and, as a result, the prospects for professionalism on the level of the individual sport and the prospects for success on the level of athletes and clubs. In Germany, indoor volleyball is an appropriate example of such a marginalized sport. Indoor volleyball has a long tradition as an Olympic sport (since 1964). With 220 affiliated national federations, volley-

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ball's world federation FIVB can be considered the largest international sporting federation in the world (FIVB, 2011). In Germany, the national volleyball federation has more than 430,000 members (DVV, 2016). In the 2016/2017 season, more than 385,000 spectators attended the games of the 24 teams in the first German volleyball leagues (VBL, 2017b). Interestingly, men's and women's games account for similar spectator numbers. Despite tradition and spectators on-site, in Germany, volleyball only receives minor media attention: It does not rank among the top ten sports in print media's sports coverage (Horky & Nieland, 2013b). TV coverage of volleyball continually accounts for less than 2.5 percent of all sports coverage on television (Rühle, 2013). Only occasionally, volleyball experiences peaks in media coverage, but such peaks are widely limited to beach volleyball which—in terms of the "mediatization stairway" introduced by Dohle and Vowe (2006)—can be considered a mediatized variant of volleyball itself. With regard to German TV coverage of the Olympic Games, Heinecke (2016) found that beach volleyball's airtime has increased considerably from 1996 to 2012. However, while beach volleyball occasionally succeeds in attracting media attention, indoor volleyball has not experienced such peaks over the last years. But as volleyball, volleyball clubs, and volleyball players compete with other sports, clubs, and athletes for sponsorship and financial means from public authorities they are dependent on public recognition. Put differently, they experience comparatively great "mediatization needs" (Marcinkowski & Steiner, 2014, p. 81).

With regard to mediatization theory, volleyball could pursue two strategies in order to increase public visibility. On the one hand, it could adapt to media logic and try to increase its appeal for traditional sports coverage. Indeed, volleyball has made such adjustments, e. g. regarding the scoring of the game (FIVB, 2017a, 2017b) and the federations' efforts in media relations (VBL, 2014). Besides adapting to the sports media logic, volleyball could further try to cushion itself from media presence and find new ways to directly address stakeholders. Indeed, in its action plan for the years 2013 to 2017, VBL (2014, p. 70) explicitly introduces that idea and refers to the development of social media offerings as a "vision." Similarly, in its action plan for 2017 to 2021, VBL (2017a) urges the clubs to reinforce their social media efforts.

3. Research questions

We aim to understand the increasing media-related behavior in sports as a facet of the mediatization of sports. We investigate whether the utilization of social media is actually motivated by trying to circumvent mass media, and if so, whether this ambition results in using social media platforms as a tool to provide sports-related content. In doing this, the present study focuses on four aspects of the relationship between athletes, sports journalism, and social media: (1) Athletes will only see the need to circumvent mass media if they assess media's volleyball coverage as negative. (2) Athletes will only use social media in order to circumvent sports media if they perceive social media as equally or even more influential with regard to their goals of sports communication. Additionally, athletes' efforts in social media can only be understood as a means to bypass sports

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journalism if (3) they are motivated by the goal to address volleyball stakeholders directly, and (4) volleyball players actually present themselves as sportspersons by providing volleyball-related content. From these aspects, we draw four research questions:

RQ1: How do athletes evaluate the quantity and quality of coverage concerning volleyball?

RQ2: How do athletes evaluate the potential influence of social media on different audiences?

RQ3: What are athletes' motivations for using social media, and which audiences do they try to address?

RQ4: Do athletes present themselves on social media as volleyball players, or do they present other roles they play in life?

4. Method

We applied a multi-method design to answer the questions posed above. We used an online questionnaire to survey the athletes of all women's and men's volleyball teams in Germany's first volleyball divisions. We further conducted a content analysis of all players' accounts on the social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Generally speaking, the survey focused on athletes' perceptions and motivations regarding (social) media; the content analysis on the question of whether they use social media to present themselves either as sportspersons or as private individuals.

4.1 Online survey

We conducted a whole-population survey of all the clubs which played in Germany's men's and women's first volleyball divisions during the season 2015/2016. This encompasses a total of 24 clubs (13 in the women's league; 11 in the men's league) and a total of 316 players (172 female; 144 male) in the clubs' squads. To increase the prospects for response, we cooperated with the German Volleyball League (VBL). The VBL's press officer contacted executives within the clubs and asked them to forward our invitation e-mail with a brief description of our research and the unique link to our online questionnaire to all the team's players. E-mail reminders were sent twice using the same channels. As German volleyball clubs include international players (172 German players; 144 international players), we provided our questionnaire in German and in English. After data clearing, in total, 71 players took part in our survey during February and March 2016, yielding a response rate of 22.5%. However, not all participants answered each and every question. Still, as this study focuses on descriptive findings, our presentation of results includes each response to the respective questions.

The athletes responded to questions about their evaluation of volleyball coverage, about the estimated relevance of different stakeholders, about what influence they ascribe to different media, and about their motivations to (not) maintain accounts on social media. With regard to the wording of the questions, items, and

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response options we referred to previous work on presumed media influences and evaluations of media coverage (e. g. Allgaier et al., 2013; Amann, Dohle, & Raß, 2012; Kepplinger & Zerback, 2009). However, due to the scarceness of surveys on stakeholders' motivations to use social media, we developed new questions derived from theoretical considerations and results of qualitative interviews (e. g. Browning & Sanderson, 2012). For each of the respective questions we used 5-point Likert scales, from "1 = very negative" to "5 = very positive" regarding athletes' evaluations of reporting on volleyball and from "1 = very dissatisfied" to "5 = very satisfied" regarding their estimations of the extent of media's coverage (of volleyball in general, VBL games, the players' clubs, and the players themselves). With regard to the presumed media influence, respondents were asked how they perceive different media's influence on what people know and think about volleyball on a scale from "1 = very low" to "5 = very strong" and on what kind of stakeholders (e. g., fans, journalists, club officials, sponsors, family, and friends) social media are perceived to have what influence ("1 = very low"; "5 = very strong"). Concerning the motivations of media relations and social media activities, athletes were asked whom they strive to address on a scale from "1 = unimportant" to "5 = very important." To investigate what motivates athletes' social media activities, we drafted statements (e. g., "I use social media to keep contact with friends and family"; "I use social media to provide information directly without having to rely on sports journalism") and asked respondents to what degree they agree, from "1 = completely disagree" to "5 = completely agree." Furthermore, we included questions about the respondents' actual social media usage and socio-demographics.

In our sample, 39 respondents were female (73.6%), and 14 were male (26.4%). A total of 53 respondents (94.6%) maintained an account on at least one social media platform, and 50 respondents (96.2%) used social media at least daily. As not all of our respondents answered the questions on sex and social media usage total numbers are lower than $N = 71$.

4.2 Content analysis

To examine how volleyball players have actually engaged social media platforms to circumvent the gatekeeping processes of journalism we executed a content analysis of their accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Again, we conducted a whole-population investigation as we analyzed the social media activities of all players in the 24 squads of the clubs playing in Germany's men's and women's first leagues. Contrary to previous studies, we did not only focus on one social network, but included the three most popular platforms in our investigation. Like Boehmer (2016, p. 478), we perceive a sole focus on Twitter to be easy but unsatisfactory: "Ease of access and data collection should not determine whether a distribution system becomes a research priority." So, while the importance of Twitter (and Instagram) for sports communication has been underlined repeatedly (e. g. Hull & Lewis, 2014; Sanderson, 2011; Smith & Sanderson, 2015), research rather neglects Facebook. However, Matsa and Mitchell (2014) point to the fact that on Facebook sport is the third most popular topic. Addi-

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tionally, in Germany, Facebook is indisputably the most popular social networking site (Tippelt & Kupferschmitt, 2015). According to recent studies, 31 percent of Germans use Facebook at least once a week. Instagram is ranked second (15%) followed by Snapchat (9%) and Twitter (4%) (Frees & Koch, 2018). Hence, one could expect (German) athletes to especially embrace Facebook in order to directly address their fans. Consequently, research on efforts to employ social media in order to bypass traditional sports coverage should examine more than one platform.

We examined the social media activities of all volleyball players in the men's and women's leagues of the VBL on three different units of analysis (for details on our content analysis see Table 1): (1) The first unit was the individual athlete. Here, we investigated whether volleyball players maintain social media accounts at all. We searched Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for profiles that we could undoubtedly link to the respective player. In the course of investigation, we only searched for clear names. When finding more than one account for a name, we had a closer look and tried to identify the respective player. When coders could not clearly decide whether an account originated from the athlete, we excluded the respective profile from analysis. (2) On the second unit of analysis we examined all accounts of VBL players on the social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. If a player maintained two accounts on one platform, we coded both. On this unit, we examined whether volleyball players set up profiles in which they present themselves as sportspersons. For this reason, we investigated profile pictures as well as general information provided on the account. Furthermore, we had a closer look at their social media savvy with regard to the number of postings. (3) Finally, we analyzed the athletes' social media activities on the unit of the individual posting/tweet/photograph (below only "posting"). Working backward from January 12, 2016, coders collected the five most recent postings that were visible to the public (without having to befriend a player). If less than five postings were visible, a smaller number was coded. We also included status updates into our analysis and coded them as postings. The goal of coding individual postings was to investigate what kind of information volleyball players distribute via social media networks and whether they use the direct connection to their fans to actually interact with them. Categories from previous research on athletes' social media efforts (Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Smith & Sanderson, 2015) were used as guides.

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Table 1. Content analysis: units of analysis, sample size, and categories

Unit of analysis	sample size	(selected) categories*
All players in Germany's men's and women's first (indoor) volleyball divisions	Total: *N* = 316 Female: *n* = 172 Male: *n* = 144	• players' name, gender, nationality, year of birth, and club • account on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (yes/no) • verified account • public account • account as a sportsperson on Facebook
Social media profiles of all players in Germany's first (indoor) volleyball divisions (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)	Total: *N* = 469 Facebook: *n* = 280 Twitter: *n* = 60 Instagram: *n* = 129	• content of the profile picture (the respective athlete, a group including the athlete, animal, landscape, food, art) • recognizability at the profile picture • sports activity in the profile picture (active in volleyball, active in other sport, not active in sport) • reference to sports in the profile picture • naming of the club and/or the profession "volleyball player" • total number of Facebook friends and followers on Twitter and Instagram • total number of posting in the period of one month
Five most recent postings of each player on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram	Total: *N* = 1,801 Facebook: *n* = 1,172 Twitter: *n* = 406 Instagram: *n* = 223	• type of posting • topic of posting (volleyball event, life as a volleyball player, volleyball as a sport in general, sports in general, political/economic issues, culture, everyday life, advertisement) • presence of calls-to-action • links and mentions

Note. *As Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram differ from each other, not all categories and items were applicable on the second and third unit of analysis. Hence, the codebook was adjusted respectively but as slightly as possible.

5. Results

5.1 Evaluations of volleyball coverage and presumed media influences

Data suggest that both qualifications we developed from mediatization theory for athletes in marginalized sports are fulfilled in volleyball. Survey respondents (1) rated the quality of volleyball coverage and the extent of the reporting on different volleyball-related topics as extremely negative and (2) they ascribe to social media the power to influence what stakeholders know and think about volleyball.

73 percent of the athletes stated that they were either "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with the amount of volleyball coverage in general (*M* = 2.2). Furthermore, the majority of respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with the extent of sports reporting on VBL games (*M* = 2.8), on their teams (*M* = 3.0), and on the players themselves (*M* = 3.0). Respondents also rated the quality of volleyball reporting in traditional mass media as very negative. While acknowledging a com-

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paratively good quality of the reporting by the league's and clubs' websites (being channels of public relations) they rate traditional news and sports media with poor marks (Table 2). In conclusion, volleyball players perceive volleyball coverage to be inadequate. Thus, one could assume that these players try to bypass sports journalism. However, this reasoning only makes sense if volleyball players want their sport to become visible and if they see an alternative to journalism with regard to its potential to reach the public.

Table 2. Evaluation of different media's volleyball coverage

Media	Mean
VBL's website (*n* = 62)	4.4
Volleyball magazines (*n* = 58)	4.3
Clubs' websites (*n* = 60)	4.0
Regional newspapers (*n* = 55)	3.4
Sports magazines (*n* = 49)	2.7
National newspapers (*n* = 43)	2.6
Television (*n* = 57)	2.1
Radio (*n* = 47)	2.0

Note: 1 = very negative; 5 = very positive

Results indicate that respondents make efforts in public relations to reach their stakeholders. They refer to sponsors (*M* = 4.3) and the clubs' fans (*M* = 4.2) as the most important target groups of their sports communications. In this connection, they presume social media to be most influential on what people know and think about volleyball. Social media outlets are perceived to have a much higher impact on the public than corporate media and traditional news media (Table 3).

Table 3. Presumed influence of different media

Media	Mean
Social media	4.0
VBL's website	3.6
Volleyball magazines	3.5
Clubs' websites	3.3
Regional newspapers	3.2
Sports magazines	3.1
Television	3.0
National newspapers	2.9
Radio	2.5

Note: *n* = 58; 1 = very weak; 5 = very strong

Survey data show that athletes name fans as the target group on which social media is presumed to have the highest influence (M = 3.8), followed by other volleyball players (*M* = 3.6), journalists (*M* = 3.4), and sponsors (*M* = 3.3).

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5.2 Motivations to maintain social media accounts

Data from both the survey and the content analysis clearly reveal that volleyball players maintain accounts on social media platforms. 95 percent of the survey respondents have an account on at least one social media platform. While one could argue that participants in our survey are especially addicted to social media, results from our content analysis draw a similar picture. A total of 84 percent of all 316 VBL players maintain at least one account on one of the three platforms investigated. As expected, Facebook is the most popular platform (80% of the players have an account on Facebook) followed by Instagram (40%) and Twitter (19%). Social media activities are often not limited to one account: 43% of the VBL players maintain more than one account.

Contrary to our assumptions, findings from our survey reveal that fans are neither the major target group of VBL players' social media activities nor is the maintenance of an account on social networking sites crucially motivated by the intention to circumvent sports journalism. Respondents that were active on social media platforms state that they use social media first and foremost to keep in touch with friends and family. For them, friends and family are the most important target group of their social media activities ("important"/"very important": 89%), clearly more important than possible new (74%) and existing (69%) fans. What is more, keeping in touch with friends and family is named as the most important motive for setting up social media accounts ("important"/"very important": 86%), followed by the goal to keep themselves up to date about volleyball-related issues (74%), and to keep in touch with fellow players (66%). The statement "I use social media in order to bypass media and directly address fans" meets with comparatively little approval (40%). These findings are mirrored in the actual activities revealed through content analysis.

5.3 Volleyball players' social media activities

Even though most volleyball players maintain accounts on at least one of the three platforms (Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram), several indicators reveal that most of them do not present themselves as sportspersons and do not share volleyball-related content, but rather keep accounts as everyday persons sharing (or *not* sharing) private information.[1] Only a minority of the athletes has set up an official account as a sportsperson on Facebook (10%) which matches the players' intention to use social media as a means to keep in touch with friends and family. Still, some players are significantly less reluctant about setting up an official account as a sportsperson than others. Out of the players who are active on Facebook, players aged 27 years and older are more likely (18%) to set up an official account than players aged 24–26 years (17%), 21–23 years (14%), and 20 years and younger (0%), χ^2 (3, N = 280) = 11.40; p = .010. In contrast, sex has no

1 Due to the fact that most of the accounts were obviously not created for the public, we decided not to save them in any way for privacy reasons. Unfortunately, that prohibited a proper test for intercoder reliability.

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significant effect, χ^2 (1, N = 280) = .02; p = .891. What actually makes a difference is the sporting quality of the players' clubs. Athletes playing for a club that finished the division's season 2015/2016 among the Top 3[2] (21%), were more likely (21%) to maintain an account as a sportsperson than players employed by less successful clubs (9%), χ^2 (1, N = 280) = 8.33; p = .004. Despite such differences, the total number of official accounts on Facebook is rather low suggesting that volleyball players' Facebook activities are considered a rather private issue. On other social networking sites, a slightly different picture emerges as 63% of athletes' Instagram accounts and 68% of their Twitter accounts are open to the public. Like on Facebook, accounts of players employed by the Top 3 clubs are significantly more often (78%) public than those of other players (57%), χ^2 (1, N = 189) = 8.93; p = .003. In contrast, sex and age do not significantly affect privacy settings on Twitter and Instagram.

With regard to their social media activities, volleyball players appear to be rather hesitant: In December 2015, players posted 1.8 updates on Facebook, 4.9 photos on Instagram, and 3.8 tweets on Twitter. Apparently, most of the athletes do not use social media as a regular tool to keep fans informed, even though they identified fans as the major target group of their public relations efforts. Most VBL players seem to be concerned about revealing too much of themselves when granting public access to their social media profiles. Strikingly, the most important motive for our respondents not setting up an official Facebook account as a sportsperson is that they wish to act as private individuals on social media ("important"/"very important": 58%). This rather cautious use of social media is confirmed further by the content analysis: On their social media accounts, few athletes identify themselves as active volleyball players through a profile picture (21%), or by referring to volleyball as their profession (44%) or to the club as their employer (36%). Most of the postings are not related to volleyball at all (60%); postings on Facebook (51%) and Instagram (60%) especially deal with the athletes' private lives. In the players' social media activities, volleyball remains a marginal aspect. Neither do they use social media to directly address their fans: In the athletes' postings, calls to action (4%) and the mentioning of people that are not directly related to professional volleyball (5%) remain rare exceptions. In conclusion, the majority of volleyball players employ Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram rather cautiously. However, the content analysis also reveals that some players are more likely than others to use social networking sites as a tool of strategic sports communication. Not surprisingly, profile pictures on official accounts as sportspersons are significantly more often related to volleyball than profile pictures on private Facebook accounts, χ^2 (1, N = 271) = 46.52; p = .000. Similarly, profile information on official accounts refer significantly more often to the players' profession, χ^2 (1, N = 258) = 22.68; p = .000. Moreover, postings on official Facebook accounts are significantly more often about volleyball than postings on other Facebook accounts—even when excluding automatic status updates, χ^2 (1, N = 390) = 59.78; p = .000. On other Facebook accounts, volleyball

2 Women's first division: Dresdner SC, Schweriner SC, Allianz MTV Stuttgart; men's first division: Berlin Recycling Volleys, VfB Friedrichshafen, United Volley Rhein-Main.

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players share significantly more often information about their personal lives, χ^2 (1, N = 391) = 15.34; p = .000. Comparing public and private accounts on Twitter and Instagram, we did not find significant differences with regard to profile information. Regarding the players' self-presentation on profile pictures on all three social networking sites, we found that older players, χ^2 (3, N = 453) = 13.37; p = .004, male players, χ^2 (1, N = 453) = 42.50; p = .000, and players at successful clubs, χ^2 (1, N = 453) = 18.47; p = .000, refer significantly more often to volleyball than younger players, women, and athletes employed by less successful clubs.

Besides profile information, we also investigated whether some players are more likely to share volleyball related information and to directly address fans. For this purpose, we examined the whole sample of postings on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram but excluded automatic status updates on Facebook (such as information about changed profile pictures). Again, the variables "success of club," "age," and "sex" make slight differences: Postings by players employed by successful clubs refer significantly more often to volleyball events than postings by players at less successful clubs, χ^2 (1, N = 1,008) = 30.58; p = .000. The same is true for male as compared to female players, χ^2 (1, N = 1,008) = 32.40; p = .000. In contrast, women's posting refer significantly more often to their personal lives, χ^2 (1, N = 1,010) = 21.41; p = .000. While age does not make a difference with regard to the content of postings on social networking sites, younger players seem to be especially media-savvy as they employ hashtags χ^2 (3, N = 1,022) = 53.26; p = .000, and emojis, χ^2 (3, N = 1,023) = 30.53; p = .000, significantly more often than older players. Concerning the direct addressing of fans through calls to action or mentions, we did not find any significant differences between different groups of volleyball players.

Even though a closer look at our data indicates that some players are more likely to share volleyball related information than others the overall finding hints at a rather reluctant use of social media by volleyball players. However, some individual players have largely embraced social media. For example, at the date of analysis, American player Paul Lotman from the men's VBL champion Berlin Recycling Volleys had more than 50,000 fans and followers on social networking sites. During December 2015, Byelorussian Kristina Mikhailenko from the female VBL champion team Dresdner SC sent 24 tweets which made her the most active player on Twitter. During this period, her team mate Saskia Hippe shared by far the most photographs (64) on Instagram, and Madisson Mahaffey from Volleystars Thueringen posted most frequently on Facebook (79 times). These numbers suggest that some volleyball players are extremely social-media savvy. However, at the moment, these players remain the exception.

6. Conclusion and discussion

We conceptualized the employment of social media as a communication strategy in marginalized sports aiming at circumventing journalism to directly address relevant stakeholders. Based on theoretical considerations, we introduced two basic qualifications: a) dissatisfaction with the extent and quality of volleyball cover-

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age, and b) the perception of social media as influential regarding people's knowledge about volleyball. Both are fulfilled, but strikingly, they do not result in respective social media activities. That is, despite nearly all VBL players maintaining accounts on social media platforms, the athletes are neither particularly motivated by the goal to directly address public stakeholders, nor do they present themselves as sportspersons on social media. While acknowledging the basic potential of social media, most volleyball players use these outlets for private purposes. However, we found some players to be less reluctant than others: Especially older athletes are more likely to share volleyball related information than younger ones. This finding suggests that professional experience affects social media efforts. In this connection, it appears reasonable to assume that efforts in strategic sports communication depend on the players' professional status as well. As many VBL players cannot make a living by playing volleyball and, thus, study or work part-time, it is likely that they do not perceive themselves first and foremost as professional volleyball players. Hence, future research should examine more closely how experience and professional status as a volleyball player affect social media efforts. Furthermore, our results suggest that athletes playing for successful clubs are more likely to employ social media as a tool of sports communication than other players. This finding might also hint at the role of professional status but moreover raises the question how social media efforts are related to sporting success.

Despite some more active players, overall findings do not support our assumption that athletes in marginalized sports use social media to gain direct access to their stakeholders. In fact, survey data suggest that respondents use social media to become more attractive to journalists rather than to circumvent them. Concerning motives in setting up social media accounts, athletes rank the motive "to strengthen media attention" higher than the motive "to distribute news directly without relying on journalism." Thus, social media efforts could, in fact, be conceptualized as an accommodation toward the mass media instead of a form of protection from them. Still, our research clearly indicates the perceived potential of social media as a tool to achieve public attention and therefore the need to integrate social media efforts into mediatization research.

This research has suggested a very specific perspective when focusing on social media as an alternative to sports journalism. Of course, athletes' social media activities do not have to be related to a negative assessment of the amount of coverage on the respective sport. As research has shown, especially popular athletes from popular sports maintain successful accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (e. g. Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Obviously, they do not need a further channel (besides traditional sports media) to achieve public visibility. However, these efforts can also be related to our basic reasoning: When popular athletes assess sports coverage negatively, they can use a direct channel to provide their side of a story. Still, this perspective on athletes' social media efforts is only one among many others: Scholars have shown that athletes' social media efforts can be analyzed and discussed without referring to their evaluations of sports journalism. In conclusion, social media efforts might be related to assessments of sports coverage—but they don't necessarily have to be.

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The present study included three social media platforms: Twitter, Instagram, and—in contrast to most previous studies—Facebook. This decision has proven appropriate. Facebook is the most relevant social media platform in Germany. More importantly, our content analysis has shown that Facebook is the most popular platform among VBL players. However, coding Facebook accounts has turned out quite demanding, as many different privacy settings are used. With regard to our online survey, we can conclude that we achieved a satisfactory response rate. But considering the cooperation with the VBL, we had hoped for an even better response. Discussing our survey results, one should keep in mind that it is probable that only athletes with an interest, perhaps a professional one, in social media responded. As results from our content analysis indicate, not all VBL players are social-media savvy. Thus, survey results might not mirror the whole population of VBL players. Still, the response rate clearly underlines players' reluctance when it comes to social media.

Strikingly, the clubs take a different perspective than their players. In a substudy of this project, social media officers of all 24 clubs completed a questionnaire on their social media strategies. The majority of respondents (67%) stated that they either request or support their players' social media efforts. 39 percent of them "agree" or "completely agree" that their players embrace social media too reluctantly. Obviously, clubs want their players to become more active on social media. At the moment, our theoretical reasoning is better met by the clubs than by their players. Similar to the players, clubs' officials evaluate volleyball coverage negatively. Moreover, they also perceive social media to be highly influential. But in contrast to their players, clubs draw respective conclusions: The most important motive in setting up a social media account is to "distribute information without using sports media" ("very important"/"important": 100%). At present, volleyball clubs (and not the individual athletes) use social media to directly address volleyball fans. But as the clubs increasingly request their players to present themselves on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, research should keep an eye on this development.

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