

Game Changers:
Navigating the Digital Transition of South African Soccer Journalists

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions of South African soccer journalists regarding the digitalization of the South African sports media industry. New media and digital mediums have globally transformed journalism and ways of reporting. The sports media industry has grown undeniably within the digital world; however, this has not been studied at length outside of the West. This study makes use of in-depth, expert interviews with highly experienced South African sports journalists to gather insights into their feelings towards digitalization. This resulted in a nuanced understanding of the different opinions, viewpoints, and stances expressed by South African soccer journalists on different facets of the digitalized media industry. Research finds that South African soccer journalists perceive digitalization to have created a more competitive, impersonal, commercialized, and less specialized soccer media industry in South Africa. Journalists see themselves as facing more demanding but less rigorous professional demands, pressure to use metrics, and sometimes harmful social media spaces. Journalists do perceive improvements to diversity in the industry and innovations that increase digital access, however, the overall perception of South African soccer journalists of digitalization in their industry is negative, and most maintain a belief that traditional journalistic values are at risk in the new media space. The results of this study imply that there is a need for media organizations to better support South African soccer journalists in addressing the concerns generated by an evolving digital landscape. These included growing workloads, social media abuse, increased commercial pressure, and a threat to investigative reporting.

KEYWORDS: *Soccer, journalism, media, sport, digitalization*

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Introduction

The importance of journalistic commentary and reporting in sports media is particularly evident in soccer. Soccer is a highly emotional sport, especially for soccer fans who are known for their team loyalty and enthusiasm (Brooks, 2023, para. 8). Soccer journalists are key in shaping narratives around developments, controversies, players, and teams within the sport. In the broadcast of televised soccer, commentators play a significant role in audiences' emotional responses to sports and add value (Lee et al., 2016, p. 146). Through "dramatic embellishment of plays" (Lee et al., 2016, p. 146), commentators and soccer pundits enhance the enjoyment of games, going beyond the distribution of information.

Sports journalists go beyond the simple reporting of match facts and transfer news, providing important insight into the personalities, social issues, and cultural and background context around different sports (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019, p. 4). The role of soccer commentary has been studied concerning the influence of historical, gendered, racial, nationalistic, and ethnic discourses by unpacking linguistic analysis (Barnfield, 2013, p. 329). The power of soccer journalists to shape the representation of soccer players is explored by van Sterkenburg et al. (2012) in the context of Dutch newspapers' representation of non-Dutch players (p. 422). The impact of journalistic narratives and voices has been studied within Europe, however, the subject is comparatively under-researched within the Global South where technological and social developments differ.

While the important role of soccer journalists is established, it is vital to consider how this role is changing in light of new technologies and media in the industry. Duncan (2020) considers the media landscape at present more dynamic and diverse than ever before, discussing the undeniable growth of the sports media industry in the digital world (p. 39). Digital technology has resulted in the movement of audiences and journalists from traditional media forms such as print and broadcast media to digital mediums (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019, p. 6). Evidence reveals that sports journalism is globally transforming as traditional journalistic values encounter 'digitalization,' a general term for the process of transformation from traditional media to digital media. The consequences of this transformation in sports media have been studied, with business leaders like Giorgio et al. (2018) stating that digitalization can drive fan experiences, engage sponsors, and generate new revenue (p. 4). Perspectives on the digitalization of sports journalism, what Wiske and Horky (2021) consider the transformation of sport into "media sport" (p. 28), have been studied within a global and American context. Journalistic perspectives about changes to sports journalism by digitalization have been studied in Europe by Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke (2023, p. 856) and from a job loss perspective in Australia by Marjoribanks et al. (2021, p. 3). Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke (2023) find that digitalization has challenged the status and legitimacy of sports journalism and created new actors in the industry (pp. 853-856). Marjoribanks et al. (2021) find that within the Australian journalistic experience, job loss is traumatic, it creates uncertainty over journalists' futures, and that blurring between journalism

and other professions is taking place (p. 10). However, journalists' perspectives on digitalization have not been studied sufficiently outside of a Western context.

A significantly under researched context, both from a digitalization perspective and a journalistic perspective, is the South African soccer media context, which offers a novel case study for understanding journalistic perspectives. South Africa's unique economic landscape, technological infrastructure, and the nation's relationship with soccer sets it apart from Western contexts. South Africa differs economically from the West, marked by both affluence and persistent inequalities. South Africa and Nigeria make up one-third of Africa's economy, but the nation faces several financial and infrastructural challenges (Adebajo, 2023, p. 1). In South Africa, online access is marked by a "digital divide" (University of Chicago Law School, 2020, p. 7), and inequality in access to digital information is a symptom of larger socioeconomic inequality in the country. This poses a relevant challenge to Western conceptions and perceptions of digitalization in sports media, as technological advances and accessibility within South Africa vary and this may affect journalistic perceptions of the digitalization of the field.

The dynamics of soccer within South Africa are particular and should be understood in historical and current contexts. The sport is popular in South Africa with close links between soccer and African urban society (Alegi & Bolsmann, 2010, p. 4). In 2010, South Africa held the FIFA World Cup, the biggest "mega-event" (Swart et al., 2013, p. 1976), ever hosted on the African continent. In South Africa, sports acted as a tool for national identity and post-Apartheid transformation (Booth, 2012, p. 8). The 1995 and 1999 Rugby World Cups are examples of this phenomenon (Farquharson & Marjoribanks, 2003, p. 27). Similarly, the 2010 World Cup had great political, economic, and symbolic significance in globalizing South Africa (Alegi & Bolsmann, 2010, p. 1). South Africa has excelled at rugby on a global level, with the South African national team, known as the Springboks, winning the last two consecutive Rugby World Cup titles. Rugby was introduced in South Africa during British colonial rule. The Springboks and the game itself were perceived as symbols of white, Apartheid South Africa and received prominent government investment (Taonga, 2020, para. 4).

On a global level, rugby success is commonly found amongst Commonwealth nations, while soccer is considered the 'world's sport,' as it is the "most popular mass spectator sport in the world" (Bandyopadhyay, 2024, p. 385). In South Africa, soccer has been more popular amongst the black majority than rugby or cricket, offering an alternative to rugby and cricket, traditionally associated with the white minority. Development within the sport is currently and historically underfunded by the government. Structural issues persist, with school-level rugby being considered "dead" by sports opinion writers like Mothuloe (2023, para. 3). Alegi and Bolsmann (2010), note that the literature on South African soccer is underdeveloped (p. 4). Reasons include academics seeing soccer as a "low culture" (Alegi & Bolsmann, 2010, p. 4) distraction from pressing socioeconomic issues, lack of resources, and scholars' focus on cricket and rugby in South Africa. Although local and national

development is criticized (Mothuloe, 2023, para. 3) and South Africa has not been studied at length academically (Alegi & Bolsmann, 2010, p. 4), it is worth noting that South African journalistic and media content around soccer is prominent. The sport has huge social relevance within the nation (Agence Française de Développement, 2024, para. 1). The South African PSL (Premier Soccer League) is considered one of the wealthiest leagues in Africa (Akindes, 2017, p. 284) and there are far more broadcasting channels dedicated to soccer than rugby or cricket on DSTV, the largest cable service in South Africa. These factors place South African soccer media in a unique social position.

To gain insight into the nuanced viewpoints of South African soccer journalists and media professionals, this study seeks to answer the research question, “How do South African soccer journalists perceive the digitalization of sports journalism?” Harnessing a targeted focus on soccer journalists ensures that research remains specific and assists in identifying appropriate participants for this research. By answering the broader research question of how journalists perceive digitalization, findings as to how South African soccer journalists perceive their reporting practices, journalistic values, the soccer media landscape, the demands of their work, and audience consumption in a digitalized South Africa can be established. This qualitative research study seeks to unpack the nuanced viewpoints of soccer journalists, going beyond general understandings to gain specific knowledge through in-depth, expert interviews.

By filling an academic gap regarding South African sports journalism and the perspectives of said journalists in the face of digital advancement, this thesis enriches the academic understanding of South African sports journalism and explores the subject considering a pressing issue, namely technological change. In terms of academic relevance, gathering information regarding journalistic perspectives is valuable as journalists intrinsically shape narratives and audience experiences, however, the field of sports journalism has been academically overlooked. English (2016) explains that sports journalism falls within contemporary media, however, it is an under-analysed subset of media that has been “overlooked for its triviality” (p. 1004) despite its prominence in print and digital media. By applying an academic lens to soccer journalism and unpacking the topical issue of digital media that affects all sports audiences and professionals, this thesis undoubtedly breaks new ground. By focusing on soccer media in South Africa instead of rugby or cricket, this research further peruses an academic gap as these two sports in South Africa have been explored by scholars due to their role in building national identity following the end of Apartheid (Booth, 2012, p. 8). Understanding how soccer journalists adapt to digitalization offers insights into the evolving media landscape, exploring the evolution of sports media from an academic and journalistic perspective.

This research undertakes an inquiry with social relevance as the findings of the research reveal the lived experiences and personal narratives of South African soccer journalists, whose work directly affects the personal lives of soccer fans and media audiences. By focusing on the accessible and popular sport of soccer, this study grounds itself in a sport that has major cultural, identity, and social relevance for fans and members of society (Bandyopadhyay, 2024, p. 385). Particularly in

Africa, soccer has been credited for its unifying characteristics, the ability to impact “health, education, social cohesion, and gender equality” (Agence Française de Développement, 2024, para. 6) and its role as a mirror of the socioeconomic state of African nations. This study provides valuable social insight into the dynamics of digitalized media spaces within South African society and journalistic spaces, particularly on the individual level. This research reveals the role of digitalization in post-Apartheid South African soccer journalism, providing insight into how social issues manifest themselves in new sports media. Additionally, soccer journalists can act as watchdogs, holding sports organizations accountable and promoting transparency. This focus is particularly relevant in South Africa, where soccer journalism reflects and contributes to the nation’s socioeconomic and cultural landscape, making the study of soccer journalists’ perspectives both academically and socially significant. As job layoffs in journalism have been accelerated by digitalization (Marjoribanks et al., 2021, p. 3), this research also holds social relevance to South African sports media organizations and sports journalists as they make sense of a changed media landscape and their job roles.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Defining Sports Journalism

To provide context to this research, it is necessary to define sports journalism and provide context to the current state of the field. Sports journalism focuses on reporting on sports; however, authors have established how sports journalism goes beyond what happens within sports and has dimensions relating to economics, lifestyle, and entertainment. English's (2016) work maps sports journalism within the broader journalistic field per the work of Bourdieu (p. 1001). Sports journalism is a component of contemporary journalism found by English (2016) to be less prestigious than 'serious' news but possessing economic capital (p. 1014). It should be noted that within industry discussions of journalistic excellence, sports journalism is often left out of the conversation and sidelined (Weedon et al., 2018, p. 640).

However, English (2016) finds that sports journalism does hold an important place within journalism and even alongside other forms of journalism, such as news (p. 1001). Sports journalism has an entertainment dimension, affirmed by more recent research from Kunert and Kuni (2023) who explore how live broadcast commentators of soccer perceive tensions between the journalistic and entertainment dimensions of their work (p. 631). The authors find that sports journalists are primarily concerned with informative content, relayed in a neutral and precise manner, however, "providing entertainment and relaxation to the audience" (p. 632) is a significant priority for sports journalists (Kunert & Kuni, 2023). In recent times, broadcast television of sports has been one of the most consumed forms of sports journalism by audiences and one of the most coveted by networks and advertisers in addition to being a popular genre of televised content (Lee et al., 2016, p. 145).

For sports journalists, there are several functions and roles as well as demands expected from the profession. Bradshaw and Minogue (2019) reflect on the increasing demands of being a sports journalist, stating that workloads are greater than ever (p. 4). English (2016) discusses the different positions of individual sports journalists, identifying the roles of sports managers, senior writers, specialist reporters, online staff, and subeditors according to capital possession (pp. 1011-1012). However, this research is relatively old and later sections in this chapter explain how new demands have developed within sports journalism because of digitalization and new actors ushered in through social media.

Traditionally, the tasks of sports journalists included sports events and press conference coverage and coverage of stories obtained from sources including insiders like media managers, players, and coaches (McEnnis, 2020, p. 1421). Within sports journalism, beat journalism also plays a role. Beat journalism is considered by Magin and Maurer (2019) as marking the beginning of modern journalism (p. 1). Beat journalists cover a specialized 'beat' or area of focus, differentiated from general assignment reporters (Magin & Maurer, 2019, p. 1). Regarding sports journalism, beat journalists may cover a specific team, league, sport, or aspect of sport, as opposed to writing and researching sports in general. The articles, research, and reporting of sports journalists were

historically published in print or broadcast through radio or television. As the research question of this study reflects, this has changed over time and through technological advances. Later sections of this chapter map how new media has entered the field of sports journalism, the context of the digitalization of the field and the results of these changes.

2.2. Providing Context to the Sports Media Industry

It is necessary to ground this research within the sports media industry within which the sports journalists interviewed operate. While English (2016) discussed the economic capital of sports journalism (p. 1014), the sports media industry has proved desirable from an advertiser perspective. Sports media drives audience metrics and advertisement sales and has a significant entertainment dimension for audiences (Kunert & Kuni, 2023, p. 632). Solberg and Helland (2011) find that various forms of business integration have taken place in the sports media industry, resulting in price increases of sports broadcast rights (p. 17). In addition, technological advances have enabled the production and transmission increases of sports media and allowed for newspapers, Internet, and telecommunications companies to enter the sports media market (Solberg & Helland, 2011, p. 17). These new actors as well as the advertising appeal of sports broadcasts result in a “hyper-commercialized world” (p. 631) of sports television (Kunert & Kuni, 2023).

Özsoy (2018) identifies sport and sports media as a culture industry product, a term originating from the Frankfurt School scholars who focused on critical theory and the application of Marxism to social and philosophical studies (p. 180). Özsoy (2018) discusses how reporting on the political and economic facets of sports has become more popular and how a celebrity culture has developed within the sports industry, with players becoming sports stars (p. 181). This stance is affirmed by other authors who argue that today sports journalism encompasses not only factual reporting on live events and player updates, but also the “personalities behind sport” and deeper societal, structural, and contextual issues related to sport (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019, p. 4). Therefore, the sports media industry has come to encompass dimensions beyond simple match reporting, including lifestyle, social issues, and the economy as part of its scope of discourse.

By examining changes to the roles of actors within sports media, context to the current state of the soccer media industry is provided. Research around the changing role of sports managers in soccer from Carter (2007) explores how television took over from print as the dominant medium framing the public image of soccer managers, leading to the transformation of soccer managers as celebrities and the “tabloidization” (p. 217) of soccer media. More recent research by Giangreco et al. (2021) found that, regarding professional soccer players from the top five European leagues, players’ celebrity status has a positive effect on play levels (p. 7). Weedon et al. (2018) reflect on claims that sports journalism has become intrinsic to the incomes and audiences of media organizations and acknowledge that sports journalists offer a significant promotional service for the teams and leagues that they report on (p. 640). Building on this, Perreault and Bell (2022) find that new threats to sports

journalists come in the form of team and player media, actors that can now report directly to consumers, bypassing sports journalists as intermediaries (p. 1). Șerbănică and Constantinescu (2016) acknowledge the sophisticated role of public relations (PR) in sports and how the relationship between spectators and the community as stakeholders can be addressed through the public relations of sports teams (p. 30). These economic developments and new dynamics within the sports media industry undoubtedly pose a challenge to sports journalists in balancing high-quality reporting, journalistic values, and the tabloidization and commercialization of the industry. However, a factor that has coincided with the growth of the economic value of sports media has been a global shift to online mediums and publications. This facet will be discussed in detail, outlining new media as a whole and the digitalization of sports journalism in the context of media ecology theory.

2.3. Media Ecology Theory and New Media Theory

Media ecology theory and study is a broad theory group that explores how media, technology, and communication affect human perception and how new media forms change societal perceptions. The theoretical concepts were introduced by McLuhan (1964, p. 9), while media ecology was formalized by Postman. This sphere offers a starting point to frame how new technologies have altered the media environment of sports journalism. McLuhan (1964) argues that the medium of media, as opposed to the content it carries, should be studied (p. 9). To understand changes to the media ecology of sports, namely soccer, a distinction between old and new or ‘hot’ mediums can be established, per McLuhan (1964, p. 24). Traditional or old mediums refer to those distributed on the platforms of broadcast, radio, cable and satellite television, while new mediums include computers and mobile devices (Gantz & Lewis, 2014, p. 761).

This definition has expanded to include distinctions between traditional media and new media, also referred to as digital, online, or ‘non-traditional’ media. Due to technological advances, definitions are not fixed and subject to evolution, however for the sake of clarity it can be understood that traditional media is usually distributed through the medium of television, radio or print and new media is distributed and accessed through digital mediums including internet-based platforms. In sports media, a migration from analogue to digital platforms or mediums has taken place (McEnnis, 2023, p. 430). Streaming of live sports through an internet-based platform and the dissemination of sports news via apps or online news channels are examples of new media and mediums that have replaced the traditional media of television and radio for many fans, afforded by technological innovation and new methods of media dissemination.

New media values and theories of new media are relevant in the context of a digitalized soccer media industry. O’Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) see tensions between traditional journalism which is rooted in “old media” and new expectations and pressures set by digital journalism and media systems (p. 357). The values of traditional journalism have been discussed by different authors but most share commonalities of maintaining integrity, credibility, objectivity, and truth (Kovach &

Rosenstiel, 2021, p. 12). Digital media has been seen as creating evolving news values (Bivens, 2008, p. 114). However, the extent to which traditional values have been made obsolete is not specified by research conducted by O’Sullivan and Heinonen (2008, p. 368). More recent research acknowledges that traditional news values are continually contested and Harcup (2023) argues that news values should be viewed through a collaborative and dynamic lens to avoid digitalization rendering values obsolete (pp. 913-914). In the context of soccer journalism and these changing values, the role of fans is important to discuss. Gantz and Lewis (2014) speculated that television will remain the medium of choice for fans watching live sports, however, technological change affords new media that is more interactive (p. 760). New media also allows fans to follow the activities of their favourite sports, teams, and athletes without interruption, threatening the popularity of traditional media.

2.4. Digitalization and Innovation Theory

The process by which changes from traditional or ‘old’ media to digital or ‘new’ media take place can be defined as digitalization. Digitalization is a generic term that refers to the digital transformation of society and the economy and the process of adapting systems to be operated using computers and the internet (Innolytics, n.d., para. 1). Digitalization is afforded by technological innovation, namely new and improved technological processes. Innovation theory is a broad umbrella that explores the way technological advances can drive social and cultural change. Christensen’s (2013) concept of disruptive innovation refers to new methods and inventions that change the rules of the game and industry norms at a lower cost level than before (p. 79). Digitalization and new media are clear examples of disruptive innovations. Foundationally, McLuhan’s (1964) theory that the “medium is the message” (p. 11) suggests that technology shapes the way humans think and act while we create these tools or mediums, which in turn shape us. Social media, a new media, is a disruptive innovation that has shaped society and human behaviour significantly. The diffusion of innovation theory, popularized by Rogers (2003), offers insights into the rate at which new ideas and technology spread in society and can be applied when considering the global spread of new media adaptation (p. 202). Innovation and digitalization can be exemplified concurrently through iterations of web development and innovation found in Web 1.0., Web 2.0., and Web 3.0. (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 5). The new capabilities found in Web 2.0., which are increasingly platform-based and user-centric, form part of digitalization and the characteristics of new media that influence journalism.

This research seeks to discover how South African sports journalists perceive the digitalization of sports media, with a special focus on soccer reporting. This section details, according to the authors, how sports journalism has been digitalized and some of the implications of this disruptive innovation. Digital technology has resulted in what Bradshaw and Minogue (2019) call “networked media sport” (p. 6), a term that refers to the movement from traditional media forms such as print and broadcast media towards digital mediums. Online and social media have come to dominate sports media, leaving other forms of media, namely paper-based forms such as newspapers

and magazines, in the background (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019, p. 6). Sports media has shifted to a space where new media allows for a multitude of voices to be made public, creating a plentiful environment that is regarded as more chaotic, ‘always-on’ and constant (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019, p. 6). Sports media can now be consumed through mobile phones, laptops, tablets, digital radio, podcasts, and streamed television (Weedon et al., 2018, p. 662). A significant development due to digitalization has been media convergence, with it no longer being viable for media organizations to produce only one form of media, and media convergence is typical of traditional organizations (Duncan, 2020, pp. 39-41). Traditional media organizations now include content on digital and social platforms, either producing additional, complementary, repeated, or even exclusive content for online mediums (Duncan, 2020, p. 39). Examples could include websites, digital apps, and social media (Duncan, 2020, p. 40).

Digitalization has ushered a challenge to established media, namely competitors from the periphery of sports media (Rojas-Torrijos & Nölleke. 2023, p. 853). Digitalization birthed digital-only sports media organizations, a direct competitor to traditional, mainstream media (Duncan, 2020, p. 41). These often produce niche media products, with a far lower threshold to enter the industry than sports journalists in traditional organizations face. Digital-only sports media can include blogs, social media channels, podcasts, and streaming services (Duncan, 2020, p. 42). These emergent forms have changed the journalistic ecosystem, reinventing what is understood as ‘digital journalism’ (Sixto-García et al., 2023, p. 1322). This new media form has been credited with being innovative, allowing for new narrative formats and a different relationship with its audience than traditional media, however, it has also been criticized for not following the formal editorial procedures of traditional media (Sixto-García et al., 2023, p. 1324).

Digital content threatens not only traditional media organizations but also traditional sports journalists. Today, sports journalists are expected to cover match reports, interviews, commentary, and social media content as part of a constant digital news cycle (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019, p. 4). Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke (2023) argue that it can seem as if social dependence on professional journalism has been reduced and that the Internet has enabled anyone to perform journalistic practices (p. 853). As mentioned before, digital media has allowed for team and player media to reach audiences directly, with team media considered an ‘insurgent’ or rebellious new facet within sports media (Perreault & Bell, 2022, p. 2). The accessibility of social media and this new dimension has reduced what is known as ‘gatekeeping’ within sports journalism, which will be evaluated in detail from an academic and industry perspective in the next section of this theoretical framework. Digitalization has also impacted the financial structures of media organizations, with revenue being generated differently by major news outlets that have moved to digital content. Weedon et al. (2018) discuss this in the context of news stories being assessed according to digital hits and clicks as opposed to journalistic quality or the reputation of the media organization (p. 640). It is acknowledged by Lindblom et al. (2022) that studies on journalism readily discuss technological innovation but often

neglect a focus on the areas within the journalistic field where journalists find technology to have an impact and how they make sense of the digitalization of their work (p. 1). The extent to which this is felt by journalists will be evaluated through the interviews this research conducts with sports journalists, appearing within the interview guide under questions related to participants' experience of new media and the new demands of digitalization.

2.5. Gatekeeping Theory in Sports Journalism and Social Media

The digitalization of sports media has altered the gatekeeping role of sports journalists. The academic theory of gatekeeping theory is found in communication and journalistic studies and argues that information passes through a “gate” (p. 22) guarded by parties with the authority to decide which information reaches the public and gains media attention (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Online platforms, social media, and user-generated content threaten traditional gatekeepers, such as sports journalism firms and broadcasters. These parties now share their influence with more decentralized networks of actors, for instance, online sports websites, apps, social media platforms, and online journalists. Challenges to mass media dominance are outlined by Bagdikian (2014), who highlights the decline of corporations controlling media in the United States and the rise of the Internet, which has a significant influence on traditional mass media (p. 56). In the case of soccer reporting, new technologies, emergent actors, deregulation, and political liberalization have increased audience access to sports programming. This section deals specifically with social media as a new medium that has introduced new actors that reduce the gatekeeping of sports media.

Social media has reduced gatekeeping in sports journalism globally. Instead of fans waiting for traditional media to report on player transfer news via television channels, magazines, or newspapers, Twitter (now renamed as X) serves to deliver fast-paced updates. Fabrizio Romano, a freelance, Italian soccer journalist, is a topical example of a new media actor who delivers breaking news on transfer deals. Romano has built up relationships with credible sources within soccer clubs and acts as an alternative news source via X, reaching audiences more quickly than mainstream media gatekeepers and representing a new wave of influencer-sports journalism. McEnnis (2023) finds that Romano has professionalized soccer journalism on social media, adding esteem to social media as a journalistic medium (p. 440). Romano prioritizes objective news over opinion and acts as an example of journalists moving beyond and even surpassing media outlets in terms of reach.

Romano, as an influencer-sports journalist, reflects the migration to digital platforms and gatekeeping decline within soccer reporting. According to McEnnis (2023), these factors are a source of anxiety for sports journalists who aim to both “protect and adjust” (p. 430) their practices and values in new media environments. McEnnis's research on influencer journalists echoes Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke's (2023) findings that the qualifying characteristics and definition of what encompasses a sports journalist are becoming “increasingly messy” (p. 853). The extent of whether and how these findings resonate with sports journalists who have worked in sports media, both before

and after the availability of social media, will be evaluated through the in-depth, expert interviews conducted for this study. Questions within the interview guide related to sports journalists' perspectives on new actors like influencer-journalists and social media personalities offer room for a better understanding of how sports journalists see professionalism, skills, and values related to their profession, within the context of a digitalized sports media industry.

In addition to the emergence of new digital actors within the sports media sphere, social media has changed how sports fans and audiences engage with sports journalists. Cleland (2011) explains that we have entered an interactive era of media-audience engagement (p. 299). An increasing number of active fans interact and even produce content, as opposed to passive fans who primarily consume sports media content (Cleland, 2011, p. 299). New media affords message boards, forms, games, and apps as a means for sports fans to create content in a manner that was not possible in traditional, old media (Gantz & Lewis, 2014, p. 765). The authors argue that call-in sports talk shows and radio can no longer compete with the unlimited access, global audience reach, immediacy, and interactivity for sports fans looking to share their views that new media forms such as websites, blogs, and Twitter provide (Gantz & Lewis, 2014, p. 763). Related to the earlier discussion on how PR can be facilitated by social media, social media is also used for the brand positioning and communication objectives of soccer clubs (Romero-Jara et al., 2023, p. 2). Moreover, fans can voice their support for teams online and easily relay feedback to media organizations, journalists, and sports teams via social media channels.

Research on the impact of how social media has impacted soccer reporting for sports journalists is fragmented. Early research on the effects of Twitter on sports journalists from Sheffer and Schultz (2010) exists and finds that some reporters view Twitter as a way to interact with the public and to develop a relationship with their audiences, especially important as sports journalists may have dedicated fans of their own and an established reputation (p. 475). In addition, the authors find that Twitter is popular with athletes, reinforcing the value of the platform for sports journalists (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010, p. 475). English (2014) evaluates how Twitter has been adopted or rejected by sports news desks in India, Australia, and the United Kingdom (p. 484). The site is an example of a social media platform where sports journalists can break news, conduct research, promote stories, and discuss topics directly with their audience (English, 2014, p. 485). The diffusion of innovation theory is discussed in a journalistic context by English (2014), who finds that online journalists are likely to be innovators and that, in the case of traditional sports media organizations, large newspapers are more likely to be early adopters than small organizations (p. 487). The lack of well-rounded research on how sports journalists and the different functions of their work have been directly affected by social media and a reduction in gatekeeping due to social media reinforce the necessity of answering the research question of this study. Within the Topic Guide (see Appendix A), questions related to fan engagement, different social media platforms, interactive technologies, and how social media enables the sharing of journalistic work are asked to gain insights into this underserved area of scholarship.

2.6. Journalistic Values and Professionalism in Sports Media

The parallels between traditional and digital media have been extended to discussions regarding traditional and digital journalism and their values. McEnnis (2020) uses boundary work and sociology to explain how journalists, through the norm of objectivity, gain authority and legitimise their expertise (p. 1416). The professionalism of sports journalists is criticized by news journalists, leading to what McEnnis (2020) calls the “toy department claim” (p. 1417), which can serve to enhance news journalists’ legitimacy. This claim is generally rejected by sports journalists and studied by McEnnis (2020) in the context of the emergence of online sports journalists (p. 1418). To study the professional legitimacy of online sports journalists, McEnnis (2020) divides sports journalists into two typologies for his research, namely online and traditional, and evaluates their positioning within the understandings of journalistic professionalism (p. 1417). These typologies echo the polarization between traditional journalistic mediums and new, digital media found in research by Gantz and Lewis (2014, p. 760) and O’Sullivan and Heinonen (2008, p. 357). McEnnis (2020) defines online journalists as those who work directly with online platforms and traditional journalists as those who work in ‘newspaper-oriented’ practices, engaging with digital media as supplementary practices (p. 1421). For example, sports writers, editors, field reporters, and specialized ‘beat’ journalists (Magin & Maurer, 2019, p. 1). McEnnis (2020) found that traditional sports journalists use boundary work, considering online sports journalists as a “toy department within a toy department” (p. 1428), to enhance their legitimacy. This reduces the perceived professionalism of online sports journalists, regardless of their contributions to innovation within sports journalism. The values of traditional journalism discussed by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021, p. 6), and professionalism discussed by McEnnis (2020, p. 1417) are therefore undermined in the case of online journalists and new media.

For this thesis, the typologies of traditional sports and online sports journalists established by McEnnis (2020, p. 1421), and the definitions of traditional and newer digital media established by Gantz and Lewis (2014, p. 760) assist in developing a distinction between tradition and online mediums, to which they will be subsequently referred. The values associated with new mediums and online journalists will also be explored within the research of this thesis. These distinctions help inform the appropriate sample group needed to answer the research question, specified in the methodology section.

2.7. New Journalistic Capabilities Afforded by Technological Innovation

In addition to the new media that digitalization has afforded, new journalistic capabilities have been introduced from this transition, which impact journalists practising in both traditional and online media. Examples of this include real-time reporting, increased global reach, interactive multimedia content, and data-based journalism. Articles and different media can be disseminated and published

more quickly due to technological advances. Language translation and automatic captioning have increased accessibility for deaf audiences and audiences who speak other languages. Photojournalists can capture high-quality images and video which have new capabilities for distribution and multimedia engagement in articles. Interviews can take place remotely using video conferencing services like Zoom. Artificial intelligence (AI) has impacted journalistic capabilities regarding automation and productivity but also poses new challenges regarding adaptation and implementation (Noain-Sánchez, 2022, pp. 112-114). Both fact-checking and misinformation have been impacted by digital tools (Walter et al., 2020, p. 370).

Specifically, regarding sports journalism, technological advances have implications and can present new capabilities. Direct access to players and teams has been afforded by technological advances. Social media allows for direct and dedicated management of communications by teams, specifically soccer clubs, as stated by Romero-Jara et al. (2023, p. 2). The brand image of clubs and players has also become increasingly important and commercialized, with this image being mediated and communicated through social media (Romero-Jara et al., 2023, p. 3). Within soccer, VAR (video assistant referee) has impacted the sport and offers a new consideration for soccer journalists as studies indicate VAR has a remarkable influence on match variables (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 3). Regarding broadcast, technology has allowed for the broadcast of different advertisements shown within football stadiums depending on the channel or country of broadcast, known as virtual replacement perimeter technology (Mishra, 2021, para. 2). These new capabilities may afford sports journalists greater opportunities; however, this research also seeks to investigate how technological advances have impacted the profession and its demands, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the sports journalists who are interviewed.

2.8. Ethical and Social Considerations in Sports Journalism and Media

Given that this research relies on the personal experiences of interview subjects, there are certain ethical considerations and issues, specific to the sports media industry, that must be outlined. Gender disparity regarding the number of women compared to men working in sports journalism exists, the field has been traditionally male-dominated (Tamir et al., 2017, p. 448). This study includes a female soccer journalist in its sample group and reflects on this in its findings. Global sports media has also traditionally focused on providing visibility to sports traditionally practised by men as well as on male athletes. A recent document from the European Parliamentary Research Service did reflect an increase in female presence in both sports newsrooms and sports governance structures, with an increase in how many women were present in the total press accreditations at the Beijing Olympics in 2022 as opposed to the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 (Zamfir, 2024, p. 2). However, this percentage of women, 23%, is still very low compared to the 77% male press that were present at the 2022 Olympics (Zamfir, 2024, p. 2). Concerning this social issue within sports journalism and the primary topic of this research study, Zamfir (2024) found that the growth of digital sports media and streaming

does contribute to increasing coverage of women's sports (p. 2). In addition, issues around diversity in sports media organizations have been studied by van Sterkenburg et al. (2021, p. 31) who find that Dutch sports media professionals acknowledge a lack of ethnic diversity within their organizations.

Ethical considerations concerning sports journalism have been discussed by Domeneghetti in conjunction with the impact of digitalization (2021, p. 3). Domeneghetti (2021) reflects on how sports journalists face ethical dilemmas due to greater audience interaction on social media, considering online abuse and the support that may need to be provided by media organizations considering this factor (p. 3). In the same book, Bradshaw (2021) confronts how sports journalists increasingly confront ethical questions in society, including abuse, discrimination, corruption, gambling, addiction, abuse, and mental health in sports, raising concerns about ethical training (p. 19). Noain-Sánchez's (2022) work on AI in sports journalism points to a need to conduct ethical studies related to the effects of AI implementation on journalistic values (p. 113). Building on ethical considerations, Oates and Pauly (2007) stress the moral obligations of sports journalists as sport is a form of cultural representation, which often intersects with social issues (p. 342). This counters McEnnis' (2020) "toy department claim" (p. 1417) and reinforces the social relevance of a focus on South African soccer journalists.

2.9. Soccer Media Landscape in South Africa

This section provides context to the South African soccer media sphere, reviewing the prominence of traditional and online media and the current state of play of the soccer media industry within the nation. Regarding traditional media, the availability of television accompanied political decolonization in Africa, but in South Africa, national television broadcasting started in 1974 under the Apartheid regime (Akindes, 2017, p. 277). Today, South African conglomerates Multichoice and its subchannels under SuperSport dominate in the African Anglophone sports media arena regarding broadcast sports (Akindes, 2017, p. 280). South Africa's SuperSport is called the "giant of African sports content" (Ogunnubi, 2019, p. 16) and dominates across the continent. SuperSport features domestic soccer leagues such as the Premier Soccer League (PSL) and the national team and extensive coverage of European soccer leagues, including the English Premier League, UEFA Champions League, LaLiga, and Serie A, other African leagues, international competitions, and different contests related to the FIFA World Cup (Supersport, n.d., para. 1). Notably, where most African national teams at the 2024 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) relied on players based in Europe, South Africa boasted a nearly entirely home-based squad (Agence France-Presse, 2024, para. 1).

A form of traditional media, radio, that has decreased in popularity in the West is 'thriving' within South Africa, with researchers finding that 80% of South Africans had listened to a radio station within the last week of being surveyed in 2021 (Bosch, 2022, para. 6). Print media in the form of newspapers and magazines have declined in popularity in South Africa, however, Mdlongwa et al. (2023) speculate that print newspapers retain their appeal for older South Africans and will continue to

do so (p. 515). South African consumers choose newspapers based on credibility, quality, coverage, and reporting on different issues and sports news specifically is a motivation for certain South African consumers to read newspapers (Mdlongwa et al., 2023, p. 515). Although these traditional media actors are still popular within South Africa, emergent technologies and new media forms have increased within the developing nation.

While Bagdikian's (2014, p. 56) work introduces gatekeeping decline in the West, exploring this theory in the Global South and specifically South Africa is vital to this research. In South Africa, the rise of online mediums, such as digital platforms and social media, challenges traditional gatekeeping structures. However, in South Africa, online access to communication is unequal and a symptom of larger socioeconomic inequality in the country (University of Chicago Law School, 2020, p. 7). The research of Tustin et al. (2012) reflects low Internet penetration levels in South African youth (p. 9144), however, more recent research does reflect positive changes in Internet access and an emerging digital ecosystem within South Africa. In the South African context, online digital media use has spread slower than within Western nations due to infrastructure and accessibility differences, therefore the diffusion of innovation is slower. Nonetheless, there is a growth of digital sports media and forms of soccer-related consumption that can be classified as online media and new technologies and strategies are being implemented to allow for cheaper access. For example, mobile telecommunications provider MTN partnered with online streaming service Showmax to release a streaming package that includes all English Premier League football games at a low price (Brederode, 2024, para. 2).

As digital access grows, so has the presence of online media including streaming platforms, interactive applications, social media, and esports within the South African sports media ecosystem. FIFA, the leading soccer video game, is the third most played e-sports game in South Africa (Nedbank, 2023, para. 10). Research by Scholz and Nothelfer (2022) found a correlation between e-sports fans and fans of traditional sports, regarding football and national leagues (p. 31). Similarly, many sports fans within South Africa have taken to online sports betting, an industry that has surged in South Africa in recent years, facilitated through advancements in technology and the advent of online betting platforms (SABC Sport, 2023). Although Akindes (2017, p. 277) and Ogunnubi (2019, p. 1) discuss the dynamics of South African soccer media in conjunction with politics and business, there is a glaring gap in scholarly research around digitalization and the South African sports media industry, particularly with a focus on soccer. The next chapter of this research outlines the appropriate methodology for gaining insights into this underserved topic.

3. Methods

This study seeks to gain insights into how South African sports journalists perceive the digitalization of sports journalism, specifically in soccer media, through answers regarding their lived experiences, personal opinions, thoughts, and views. This research is qualitative, which is suitable for the topic as it emphasises depth and context.

In-depth, expert interviews are the primary data collection method to capture the perspectives of South African sports journalists in this study. To gain insight into the perspectives and opinions of participants, it was essential for participants to feel comfortable and respected. This is a facet of in-depth interviewing involving a degree of social and interpersonal interaction (Johnson, 2001, p. 104). The methodological decisions taken to ensure this are outlined in this chapter.

The interviews were long and involved greater involvement from the interviewer than other interview forms. The length of the interviews was appropriate as this study seeks ‘deep’ information and insight into perspectives. In-depth interviewing is considered a highly appropriate method to use in qualitative research by authors in the field (Johnson, 2001, p. 107). The details of how interview subjects were chosen, the topic guide was formulated, the interview process, and data analysis were undertaken are provided within this chapter.

3.1. Sampling Strategy

The inclusion criteria are extensive for this study, as it relies on expert interviews and the perspectives of participants that fit specific criteria. The target population is soccer journalists who are working or have previously worked for South African sports news outlets and worked with both traditional media and digital mediums or new media. Participants did not have to be exclusively soccer ‘beat’ writers or soccer specialists. Beat writers cover a specialized area of focus, differentiated from general assignment reporters (Magin & Maurer, 2019, p. 1). Participants were required to have worked as sports journalists within South Africa for at minimum 10 years and to have written, reported on, or covered soccer at length within their work, therefore justifying their classification as experts. All participants interviewed had worked in sports journalism for over 15 years and therefore fit this criterion.

The selection of participants fitting these criteria was afforded by purposive and snowball sampling as a strategy. Purposive sampling also allowed for the selection of a diverse group of journalists in terms of experience and the type of media or outlet they work for. As participants had over 15 years of experience in the field of sports media, they had experience before and after the popularization of social media and interactive technologies within sports media. This facilitated a sample with experience in both traditional journalistic mediums and digital organizations or platforms, for example, blogs, podcasts, and social media, also understood as digitalization (Gantz & Lewis, 2014, p. 761).

Johnson (2001) also sees in-depth interviewing as building on intimacy and relationships (p. 104). Initial access to potential participants came about through my network or their connection to my immediate circle per purposive sampling, building on an existing connection or relationship. Snowball sampling took place to reach more participants and a question at the end of the interview asked the interviewee whether there were any other sports journalists who they thought would also like to help with this research and who fit the criteria, and these were approached (Boeje, 2010, p. 40). Therefore, through a snowball sampling strategy, additional potential participants were identified and contacted. Participants that were found via snowball sampling were typically the initial participants' colleagues or friends, which added to the degree of comfort and a feeling of connectedness and trust as per Johnson's (2001) understanding of in-depth interviewing as building on intimacy (p. 104).

The table below includes participants' names and corresponding numbers, the approximate number of years of experience in sports journalism of the participant, the gender of the participant, and the interview type conducted with the participant.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant Number	Name	Years of experience in sports journalism (approximate)	Gender	Interview type
1	Clinton	30+ years	Male	In person
2	Joe	26+ years	Male	In person
3	Rob D	18+ years	Male	In person
4	Eddie	15+ years	Male	In person
5	Firdose	17+ years	Female	Online (Zoom)
6	Kevin	32+ years	Male	In person
7	Craig	30+ years	Male	Online (Zoom)
8	Rob H	40+ years	Male	Online (Zoom)

3.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured, expert interviews with the target sample of soccer journalists were conducted to gather in-depth insights and narratives from participants. Eight interviews took place as per the Methodological Guidelines which specified 7-10 in-depth interviews with experts from the field. Interviews took between 45-60 minutes, as per the Methodological Guidelines, which allowed for a detailed exploration of the participants' experiences. A semi-structured interview topic guide based on the theoretical framework and review of the literature served as a flexible tool to ensure

consistency while allowing for the exploration of emergent themes. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, perspectives, and expertise on the topic. The topic guide can be found in Appendix A. The identification of these areas and research gaps can be found in the theoretical framework chapter of this study and a breakdown of how the questions measure the perspectives of South African soccer journalists is provided under the operationalization of the research question section of this chapter.

Participants were informed via a consent form and during the interview that there were no right or wrong answers. Participants were informed that the research is concerned with their perspectives and views, not those of their employer or organization. The material from the interviews is used exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings, and publications and participants were informed of this. The study collected data related to the name, professional experience, and gender of participants. Although the questions did not pertain to a sensitive nature and there were minimal risks regarding participating in the study, participants were allowed to specify whether they consented to the use of their name within the study.

The in-depth interviews were conducted both in-person and online. Several sports journalists were able to be interviewed in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and online via Zoom over the period between the 5th of April and the 8th of May 2024. For in-person interviews, the locations were chosen by participants to ensure comfort and willingness to participate. These primarily took place in quiet offices, coffee shops, and restaurants. Online interviews were recorded via the Zoom recording feature with participants' consent and in-person interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. In-person interviews were recorded using a mobile phone and the audio files were securely stored using iCloud. These interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis using the Dovetail transcription tool and manual correction of transcripts for errors. Any specific needs and vulnerabilities of participants were considered, with allowances made for technological issues during online interviews and consideration for participant comfort.

3.3. Operationalization of Research Question

The operationalization of this research question provides information about how the topic list was constructed, which theoretical concepts were important during the analysis of findings, and what was used as evidence to support substantiating themes. The key terms within the research question and different indicators of perception are outlined.

South African soccer journalists are journalists who primarily cover or have covered at length soccer (also known as football) in South Africa. Digitalization is the adoption of digital technologies and platforms in the field of journalism. In the context of this research, digitalization also refers to the change from traditional sports media mediums (primarily print, broadcast television, and radio) to new media platforms, which include the internet and mobile channels (Gantz & Lewis, 2014, p. 761). Perception is journalists' subjective attitudes, beliefs, and feelings towards digitalization, which can be

measured based on the answers provided by journalists to questions about their opinions, viewpoints, and stances within the topic guide.

The topic guide was formulated based on research reviewed in the theoretical framework section that identified existing gaps within the literature, namely areas of change due to digitalization in soccer journalism within which the perspectives of South African soccer journalists were underdeveloped academically or not available at all. The topic guide begins with an introduction to the researcher, the study, the nature of the interview, the consent form, and whether participants would prefer to be anonymous. Warm-up questions ask participants about their career path and experience, which allows for confirmation that they are suitable choices and fit the sampling criteria of the study. This includes “What is your experience with sports journalism?” and “What is your soccer reporting?”

Questions on traditional journalism allowed participants to contextualize traditional media in their own words, their awareness of shifts to digitalization, and how they perceive value change in new media. One question asked, “How would you describe the relationship between traditional and new mediums in sports reporting?” These were informed by research on new media values from Harcup (2023, p. 913) because of digitalization and the foundational principles that have historically guided journalism, commonly defined as integrity, credibility, objectivity, and truth (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, p. 12). This assists in revealing the general attitudes of participants towards the digitalization of the sports media industry and new media values in South Africa.

Also, participants were asked how they perceived the skills and values needed for soccer journalists to have evolved, in their opinion. These included “In your opinion, what are the skills a sports journalist needs?” and “In your opinion, what are the values a sports journalist needs?” These questions were also designed to reveal how participants perceive the dynamic and changing nature of the interaction between traditional journalistic values and the digital age. This can develop an understanding of how participants see these two aspects intersect, complement, or potentially conflict with one another and how they make sense of this in their professional and social lives. While the work of Akindes (2017, p. 277) and Ogunnubi (2019, p. 1) identifies sports media as having a clear impact on political and economic values in South Africa, little research has explored this from a journalistic value perspective in South Africa, which these questions facilitate.

In addition, participants were invited to share their perceptions of the benefits and challenges created by digitalization. These were identified through open-ended questions focusing on aspects like reach, audience engagement, and new capabilities; this included asking participants if they could “recall situations where technology has positively or negatively contributed to your experience as a journalist?” This allows for an exploration of how participants perceive digitalization as having impacted their day-to-day work practices and professional lives. This question was informed by Cleland’s (2011) stance that digitalization has ushered in an interactive era of media-audience engagement (p. 299) and McEnnis’ (2023) research on the dynamics and professionalization of soccer journalism on social media (p. 440).

Questions specific to the South African soccer media landscape were included to identify participant perspectives on the state of the industry. Perceptions were identified through open-ended questions about access, comparisons with other nations, and general questions about online reporting within South Africa. This includes “How do you describe the online soccer mediums in South Africa?” and “How do you understand access to digital channels in South African sports media?” These questions were important as South Africa has a different sports media arena than other nations and unique socioeconomic factors and population demographics, which may result in different perceptions of digitalization, digital access, and societal issues in soccer. This was informed by a review of literature about access inequality in South Africa (University of Chicago Law School, 2020, p. 7) and evidence of technological innovations in the South African soccer media industry (Brederode, 2024, para. 2).

Closing questions asked whether participants could recommend others fitting the criteria to facilitate snowball sampling, whether they had feedback to provide, and any additional thoughts they would like to add to the interview. This afforded improvement for future interviews and a space to express any other pressing concerns or perspectives that may be important to participants.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

This study involves in-depth interviewing, which relates to “deprivatizing” participants’ lived experiences and therefore requires careful consideration of research ethics (Johnson, 2001, p. 115). This study adheres to the ethical stipulations of the Methodological Guidelines to uphold the consideration of ethical issues and measures were taken. The student status of the researcher was communicated, and the Erasmus University Rotterdam logo was not used at any point in the research study or final paper. Emphasis was placed on minimizing discomfort or harm to participants, participants were informed of their ability to choose which personal data was collected, and that they could stop the interview at any point. No minors were interviewed. Information about any potential risks to participation was also disclosed to participants.

The principles of informed consent were upheld strictly. There was clear communication about the study's nature, and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and could be retracted. An informed consent form was provided to all participants before the start of the interview. If participants were not comfortable with their names being used within the study, pseudonyms would be used to refer to said participants. Participants’ preference regarding anonymity was recorded at the end of the consent form, and participants were offered the option to change this preference later. The informed consent forms can be found in Appendices C and D. At the time of submission, all participants were comfortable with and consented to the use of their real names in this study. Although the interviews were transcribed verbatim, any personal or compromising information about participants or anyone mentioned within the interviews was redacted, and these transcripts are not publicly available.

3.5. Data Analysis

A thematic content analysis was applied to the transcriptions of the interviews. Thematic content analysis helps describe the meaning of the qualitative data and make sense of the interviews (Boeije, 2010, p. 93). Thematic analysis is reflective and inductive, affording an analysis of data without preconceived categories or theories and the researcher's flexibility to change, remove, and add codes as the data is worked through. Thematic analysis consists of open, axial, and selective coding. In open coding, the data is read and fragmented into codes (Boeije, 2009, p. 96). For example, a data fragment from Participant 1 states, "If an athlete knows that a story is coming, it might even be a damaging story. He can just pump it out on his socials," and this was assigned the open codes: PR, social media, players on social media, and damage control.

During axial coding, the data is reassembled in new ways, making connections between different groups and developing sub-groups (Boeije, 2009, p. 108). The open codes assigned to the example data fragment were sorted into the sub-group PR by Athletes and Clubs during axial coding. In the selective coding process, core categories are united and major themes are identified to develop a narrative and answer the research question (Boeije, 2009, p. 114). The sub-group PR by Athletes and Clubs became part of the main theme Perceptions of the South African Sports Media Landscape within the selective coding process. Throughout this process, openness to emergent themes was maintained, contributing to theoretical sensitivity (Boeije, 2009, p. 117). This process was assisted using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti, particularly during the open and axial coding process.

The thematic content analysis revealed four selective codes, namely: perceptions of immediacy, perceptions of the South African sports media landscape, perceptions of demands, perceptions of audience communication, and perceptions of social media. These and their corresponding major theme are discussed at length and substantiated within the results chapter of this study. The coding tree of this study can be found in Appendix B which shows the sub-groups, major themes, and exemplar quotations found in the data analysis process. Open codes were not included as these were too lengthy to include in the code tree.

3.6. Credibility and Validity

This study holds credibility and validity based on an evaluation of its reliability and transparency. Silverman (2011) states that transparency is an important component of reliability (p. 360). This research is transparent in clearly documenting the research strategy and data analysis methods, the coding tree of which can be found in Appendix B. In addition, details were provided regarding participants' years of experience in sports media to ensure their classification as expert interview subjects and to reinforce the credibility of the findings of this research. Quotes from

participants included in the findings of this study were smoothed to ensure readability, however, no changes to their meanings were made, only the removal of repeated and filler words. The informed consent forms for both in-person and Zoom interviews are provided in Appendices C and D, strengthening the transparency of this study. Theoretical transparency is a component of reliability (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). In the Theoretical Framework chapter of this study, the theoretical stances from which the interpretation takes place and the direction from which the formation of questions in the Topic Guide are outlined.

Regarding credibility in qualitative research, qualitative credibility can be achieved through practices including “thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). This study employs different sources of data, namely eight different interview participants, to achieve triangulation and multivocality, finding themes that were common amongst different participants’ experiences of digitalization in their industry. Thick description was employed to imbue this study with additional credibility and validity. Concrete detail and extensive substantiating quotations allow for the ‘showing’ of evidence and for readers to come to conclusions about the perspectives of participants. By exploring the rich details of participants’ experiences, beliefs, and emotions, the thesis not only provided a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation but also ensured the authenticity and trustworthiness of the findings. The use of direct quotations serves as evidence and enhances the transparency and persuasiveness of the research outcomes. This methodology facilitates the establishment of credibility and validity, reinforcing the rigour and significance of the thesis as an academic contribution.

4. Results

In analysing the interview data through open, axial, and selective coding, four selective codes emerged that are discussed in the following sections. The selective codes are as follows: perceptions of immediacy, perceptions of the South African sports media landscape, perceptions of demands, and perceptions of audience communication. These selective codes culminate into the four major themes discussed below, concerning substantiating quotations, relevant theories, and literature. The research question is answered, and this study finds that African soccer journalists perceive digitalization to have created a more competitive and commercial soccer media industry in South Africa. Journalists see themselves as facing more demanding but less rigorous professional demands. While soccer journalists do positively perceive improvements to diversity in the industry, innovations that increase digital access, and a benefit in accessing statistics, the overall perception of South African soccer journalists of digitalization in their industry is negative.

4.1. Perceptions of Changes to the Journalistic Experience through the Immediacy of New Media in South Africa

Participants described how they became aware of the shift to digitalization within the South African soccer media industry. Most concurred that their awareness occurred around the popularization of Twitter, around “2006, 2007” (Participant 6) and the Beijing Olympics. By 2012, Participant 6 “started live tweeting a lot of stuff.” Many participants see a clear division between the current state of sports media and a pre-digitalized era, often referring to this as the “old days” (Participant 8). New technologies and digitalization were embraced by many of the participants interviewed, however, some acknowledged how their colleagues did not all embrace digitalization. In addition, many commented that they initially underestimated how significantly digitalization would impact their profession. Those who worked in traditional also noted how their industry was required to adjust to the growth of digital distribution, stating, “If you did not adapt to change, it meant print was ultimately going to die.” (Participant 2).

The stance that there is a necessity for traditional mediums to adapt to digitalization is echoed in research from Bradshaw and Minogue (2019), who established that online and social have emerged as the dominant forms of sports media, leaving print in the background and downsized (p. 6). Christensen’s (2013) concept of disruptive innovation, which refers to new inventions that change industry norms at a lower cost level than before (p. 79), is relevant to the findings of this study, where the perception of adaptation to innovation by journalists reflects the disruptive nature of new media in the South African soccer media context.

4.1.1. Adaptation to Online: Speed of Dissemination

The faster pace of news production and dissemination was indicated by all participants as a major change to their experience as sports journalists, which many defined as increased “immediacy”

(Participant 2). In terms of demands, Participant 1 states that “online demands that you tell the story quickly.” Participants had varied perspectives on whether they enjoyed the increased immediacy of new media. Participant 2 describes online as “challenging,” “pacey,” and “immediate.” He stated he likes “the immediacy that something happens. It’s now.” He works for a major broadcast organization and feels that online and traditional sports media can complement one another, with the ability to push out facts and news quickly and then provide “detailed reporting at a much later stage.”

By comparison, some participants found the immediacy of online has ‘cheapened’ the profession through the speed at which articles are published and audiences receive content. “Social media and online media can be quite knee-jerky and things can just appear on there without a lot of deep contextual analysis” (Participant 5). In addition, Participant 4 finds that social media is “screwed up for us” in the sense that “people read headlines and think they’ve got the full story.” Participant 8 believes that online sports journalism can put out damaging narratives with emotional, reactionary writing, which he calls “a lot of, sort of, shoot from the hip stuff,” unlike print media, which had more time for tweaking and editing before publishing.

The variation in whether participants prefer or struggle with an increasingly fast industry offers new insight into existing research, which primarily focuses on changing values, audience experience, and new actors because of digitalization, rather than the journalistic perspective. An evaluation of perspectives ties into media ecology theory, which studies how media, technology, and communication affect human perceptions (McLuhan, 1964, p. 9). This study therefore reinforces the relevance of McLuhan’s theory by exploring how digitalization affects the sample groups’ perceptions of their industry. Specifics of how the participants’ perceptions have been changed by digitalization are expanded upon below.

4.1.2. Checks, Balances, and Cowboys

Certain participants indicated concern over the fast pace of online media. Participants felt that fast dissemination results in less time for journalists to research their subject and fewer checks and balances within the industry. Participant 2 finds that, “with a lot of today’s generation they want to be first with their story, get the numbers, you know, get the likes, but then they don’t check the accuracy.” Participant 1 likened citizen journalists to “cowboys,” and Participant 3 discussed how digitalization can dilute “the quality education of a journalist” with shortcuts being introduced by new actors. This stance is somewhat echoed in prior research, with Torrijos and Nölleke (2023) agreeing that the qualifying characteristics and definition of what encompasses a sports journalist are becoming “increasingly messy” (p. 853).

Participants found that the order in which the journalistic process took place before digitalization has changed and “the publishing of the story is part of the process now” (Participant 6). Participant 6 sees this as having changed journalistic values and says, “If you’re looking to tweet, blog, story, you’re not looking to gather the information, check it, sort it out.” Participant 5 believes

that this has also impacted journalistic rigour, as “unless somebody's taken a screenshot, which happens, of course, generally you can fix the mistake quickly, which means that you're gonna be a little bit less rigorous because, you know, if it's wrong, I'll just go back and fix it.”

Participant 3 expressed how he sees the lines between the press and bloggers untrained in journalism as blurring within the online sphere. He stated that “technology has changed the industry completely,” regarding how pre-digitalization at events there would be clear ‘press’ signage. Online, “if somebody is popular, creates a blog, enough people click on it, people start calling them a journalist, you know, just because they're writing about factual or semi-factual things” (Participant 3), and as a result, bloggers have crossed over into the mainstream. Many participants showed concern and even contempt for ‘influencer’ journalists in soccer media, with the example of Fabrizio Romano being provided during the interview questions. Participant 6 believes that there are “a fair amount of South African journalists, particularly broadcasters, who are basically influencers.”

In comparison to new media, Participant 3 stated he still believes in traditional media as, “the people working there are still normally trained correctly and still, normally, follow all the ethics and principles of journalism.” Media ecology theory studies how new media forms change societal perceptions (McLuhan, 1964, p. 9). These findings indicate that sports journalists with traditional journalistic training do draw professional and social boundaries between them and untrained journalists such as citizen journalists or influencer journalists. Participants’ concern over untrained journalists entering the industry as new actors reinforces the finding of McEnnis (2023), who states that traditional sports journalists aim to both “protect and adjust” (p. 430) their practices and values in new media environments.

In this study, it was revealed that traditionally trained South African soccer journalists do emphasize training to protect their perception of necessary journalistic values and use traditional training as a criterion for drawing a boundary between themselves and new actors. Participant 5 believes that there is “not a lot of training or mentorship that goes on anymore. So, the lines between sports journalist and sports fan are very blurred.” A lack of traditional journalistic training within the digital sphere was considered a reason for new actors, fewer checks and balances, and inaccuracy. Participants also expressed concern over misquoting and Participant 3 recounted an experience where his organization was quoted misleadingly, leading to clubs being angry with him. Participant 3 believes misquoting and lack of verification increase in new media practices and that “this is the reason why journalists should be at events because when somebody says something, context is key.” These viewpoints support research from O’Sullivan and Heinonen (2008), who see tensions between traditional journalism and new digital journalism and media systems (p. 357) and authors’ viewpoints that misinformation has been impacted by digital tools (Walter et al., 2020, p. 370). Participants’ perception that the value placed on accuracy within the sports media industry and by digital audiences has decreased can be linked to literature from Bivens (2008), who finds that digital media has been seen as creating evolving news values (Bivens, 2008, p. 114).

4.1.3. Aggregators and the Decline of Breaking News

In addition to an increase in misquoting, participants perceive the growth of aggregators and the decline of breaking news in a digitalized South African soccer media industry. Participant 8 identifies what he calls “the sort of piggybacking phenomenon.” By this he means that “as soon as somebody breaks a story, somebody else then goes and aggregates it.” (Participant 8) Participant 7 found that increased demands to produce stories even resulted in him, “basically aggregating news from other sources to do that.” Certain participants perceive the commonality of breaking and exclusive news to have decreased within sports media through these aggregators and the speed of online dissemination, which is supported by research on the decline of gatekeeping in sports media by McEnnis (2023, p. 440). Participant 3 explains, “Now, if somebody tweets and breaks the news, you are guaranteed that 200,000 people are gonna do their own version almost immediately after,” and within minutes everyone has the story.

When asked about whether technology has positively or negatively impacted his experience as a sports journalist, Participant 6 stated that it has negatively impacted his experience regarding “breaking a story and then everybody else picks it up because you can't break a story anymore.” Participant 6 cited “realizing they can't win the breaking news war” as the reason for traditional media moving over to long-form content. Other participants agreed that digital platforms are ideal for breaking news, however, not all participants found that the increased competition for breaking a story was always negative, with Participant 4's perspective being that “if you're able to break news, you are a front runner” within the South African soccer media industry.

Torrijos and Nölleke (2023) found that digitalization challenged established media, bringing forth competitors from the periphery of sports media (p. 853). This concurred with research findings, as participants reflected on the increasingly competitive sports media market because of digitalization and new actors. Participant 1 remarked that the sports media landscape in South Africa, “but print journalism particularly, has contracted.” An increase in actors through digitalization has increased competition for reporting. Different participants have dealt with this in different ways; however, all acknowledged that increased competition has affected them as journalists and perceive an increase in the demands of the profession.

4.2. Journalistic Perceptions of a Changed Media Industry Due to Digitalization

Many participants were disillusioned with the current state of the South African sports media industry. Participants detailed how they perceive their journalistic role as intermediaries as having decreased and a stance that the South African soccer media industry has become smaller and more competitive. The subsections below discuss how participants described how these changes have altered their daily activities and how they perceive the industry in its current state of play.

4.2.1. A Sanitized Media Industry: PR by Athletes and Clubs

The research found that digital media has allowed team and player media to reach audiences directly, with team media considered a new facet within sports media (Perreault & Bell, 2022, p. 2). The interviews conducted revealed how participants perceive how this has changed their role and how this impacts their experience as sports journalists on a personal level. Participant 8 states that, “You have very sanitized, what they call media opportunities, these days.” Agreeing with the viewpoint that the industry has become increasingly “sanitized,” Participant 7 stated that in the current South African football media industry, “it's really about organized press conferences. Everyone sits in a room, everyone gets the same answer.”

Participant 5 finds that hard-hitting journalism has been impacted as social media allows athletes and their PR teams to control narratives, and this limits journalists’ access. This has limited the role of journalists as “they can now tell their own stories and they don't actually need us” (Participant 5). This stance was agreed with by Participant 6, who sees technology as changing the intermediary role of journalists, regarding teams, he says that before digitalization “media were the DTC [direct to consumer]. Yeah, we were the guy in the middle. So, we were the DTBC, probably.” These findings reveal that the theory of gatekeeping is applicable within the South African soccer media landscape and that journalists are aware that new media actors have reduced the role of sports journalists as gatekeepers.

Participant 3 sees PR enabled by social media and digitalization as having changed the media landscape “as a whole because people who used to use us as a tool now have a Swiss army knife in their pocket of their own,” referring to mobile access to social media and the internet. The declining role of journalists as gatekeepers or intermediaries between the public and athletes or teams is supported by authors Șerbănică and Constantinescu (2016), who acknowledge how the relationship with spectators and the community as stakeholders can be addressed through the public relations of sports teams (p. 30). This change was primarily perceived as negative and detrimental to journalism by participants. Participant 1 felt that clubs “can massage the message” and “the message you want to get out, whether it's about team selection, whether it's about some controversy” can be effectively pushed out by clubs before any other actors in the media. In addition, in the case of damaging stories, athletes can “put the story to bed, he can lay a rumour” (Participant 1). This poses a challenge to traditional journalistic values, which include maintaining integrity, credibility, objectivity, and truth (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, p. 12). It is not surprising that participants trained according to traditional media values perceive PR as detrimental to investigative journalism and the unveiling of truth, however, this finding offers new insights into the PR capacities of teams and athletes, as the journalistic perspective on the phenomenon has not been established within existing research.

Gatekeeping theory, as understood by Shoemaker and Vos (2009), argues that information passes through a “gate” guarded by parties with the authority to decide which information reaches the public (p. 22). Digitalization has been credited by participants as challenging journalistic value and

authority and, in the context of this study, provides a reason for these new dynamics as understood by participants. Therefore, this study supports the stance that participants perceive a decline in gatekeeping within South African soccer media due to aggregators and new actors brought about by digitalization and social media PR which has reduced access to players, coaches, and teams.

4.2.2. A Fractured Landscape: Disillusionment amongst Certain South African Sports Journalists

Participants were somewhat divided regarding their perception of the South African soccer media industry. Many participants see the South African soccer media landscape as both competitive and diverse, with Participant 5 seeing it as “tough,” “getting smaller and smaller,” but also as “more diverse now than certainly it ever has been.” Regarding diversity, Participant 2 meant this in the context of the variety of media actors while Participant 5 discussed diversity concerning representation in the workforce and a greater coverage of marginalized sports, such as women’s soccer. However, she also finds that “because pay is low and because, you know, the jobs are so scarce, we’ve got a lot of people entering the journalism profession without the necessary skills.” Participant 1 similarly found it to be “a frustrated space” due to resource constraints and a lack of experience in younger journalists.

Certain participants were more critical and disillusioned with the landscape, which is seen as “fractured” and “confused” by Participant 6, who agreed with Participant 5 that certain actors are “fans masquerading as journalists.” By contrast, Participant 8 sees the South African sports media industry as “very well established” and sees encouraging changes following the end of Apartheid. These discrepancies in perspectives are not unexpected, as the questions and research topic require participants to pull from their own experiences and opinions and cannot be generalized across all South African soccer journalists. Perceptions of the industry as “fractured” reinforce the findings of Bradshaw and Minogue (2019), who discuss how new media affords a multitude of voices to be made public, creating a plentiful environment that is regarded as more chaotic (p. 6). This indicates that the South African environment is also more chaotic and diverse for some and that the phenomenon of a plentiful landscape due to digitalization is also present in South Africa.

4.2.3. Growth of Lifestyle and Death of Beat

Participant 8 felt that digitalization has resulted in a less specialized sports media landscape in South Africa and found that “digital media is kind of less departmentalized or compartmentalized.” When reflecting on how in his early career beat writers were assigned to specific sports, he notes that today journalists are expected to be “more versatile” (Participant 8). By comparison, Participant 6 sees limited resources as the reason for less specialization amongst sports journalists today, stating “Now, if you’re lucky you got one guy doing five beats. So that’s how much that’s changed, the resources have gone.” Specialized beat journalists were one of the journalistic types identified by Magin and Maurer, and beat reporting is credited by the authors as marking the beginning of modern journalism

(2019, p. 1). The ‘death’ of the beat within South African sports journalism can indicate a new era of journalism, which may be ushered in by a combination of digitalization and a strained economy.

Özsoy (2018) discusses how reporting on the political and economic facets of sports has become more popular and how a celebrity culture has developed within the sports industry, with players becoming sports stars (p. 181). This stance is affirmed by other authors who argue that today sports journalism encompasses not only factual reporting on live events and player updates but also the “personalities behind sport” and deeper societal, structural, and contextual issues related to sport (Bradshaw & Minogue, 2019, p. 4). Participants perceived a significant growth in the presence of lifestyle-related content in soccer media.

Participant 8 described how he did not initially intend or anticipate his work going into digital or lifestyle content, and Participant 1 explained how in soccer, “it’s shifted from the news or the match report into lifestyle.” This is an example of the shifts to long-form content, one of the reasons for which is that match reports, for many media sports organizations, have “almost become redundant because people are getting the live scores off of Google, off a live score app” (Participant 4). In addition, the lifestyle offering was credited by Participant 1 as “because the soccer players lead like often incredible lives.” This affirms that the celebrity culture within sports media identified by Özsoy (2018, p. 181) is present within the digitalized soccer media ecosystem in South Africa and that South African sports journalists do perceive their industry as being less specialized or departmentalized than before the growth of digital media.

4.2.4. Challenges to Journalistic Mentorship and Learning

Participants saw traditional mentorship opportunities within soccer journalism as more challenging and scarce in a digitalized media landscape. Participant 1 finds that in the online sphere, mentorship opportunities are often “not available,” and Participant 5 states that “There’s not a lot of training or mentorship that goes on anymore.” Participant 1 also expressed concern over mentorship due to the young age of the junior organization of newsrooms, which relates to the increasingly chaotic and diverse sports media landscape discussed above.

However, most participants expressed a positive perception of greater ease of communication and the increased ability to reach actors due to digitalization. “Online I’ve introduced people, but they all seem to have more access than I did. I think because of the ease of social media and finding numbers and WhatsApp” (Participant 6). Participant 2 discussed how he gains insight from soccer journalists across Africa through a WhatsApp group called Football African Arena and finds that he gains access to other journalists more easily in the “global village” of digital connectedness that digitalization has enabled.

Participant 1 expressed that learning opportunities can be limited by remote work enabled by digitalization, as he feels that “you learn by, uh, by watching and by witnessing by listening, those kinds of things.” This has the potential to affect the development of younger journalists who enter a

digitalized landscape, present in the organization of Participant 4 where “We had a few youngsters come in the last few years, they’ve been digital first.” Prior research discussed the new capabilities that technology has afforded sports journalists; however, these findings provide substantial insight into the perception and concern of participants about mentorship and learning as impacted by technological advances and digitalization.

4.3. A ‘Double Job’: Perception of Expectations and Demands of Journalists in Current South African Media Landscape

Certain participants found that digitalization has increased the demands of their job as sports journalists, however, this was somewhat organization and role-dependent. Participant 4, whose organization does deal with breaking news, finds journalistic work “a lot more demanding than it was 20 years ago” as journalists are required to be “on the ball 24/7,” writing breaking stories or content pieces if sources contact them after hours.

Social media has also increased the demands of sports journalists to have an online presence. Participants agreed that “having an online presence means that I can get my story out to a lot more people than I could” (Participant 5) and they “need an online presence” (Participant 1). This was seen as an additional expectation placed on professional sports journalists. Participant 5 described how online “demands more skills of us, but we have not yet seen equal compensation for those skills,” particularly with “the second part of your job,” which is to “remember to post the link, remember to make sure you have something for social, put up a reel” on Instagram. This was not universal, as Participant 7’s organization has employees dedicated to search engine optimization and online reach.

The perspective that new media has resulted in more tasks, but less rigour and accuracy links to theories of new media from Harcup (2023), who finds that traditional news values are continually contested (p. 913). Harcup (2023) also argues that news values should be viewed through a collaborative and dynamic lens to avoid digitalization rendering values obsolete (p. 914). In combination with the findings of this research, Harcup’s stance can suggest that sports journalists with traditional backgrounds and digital-native sports journalists could make use of collaborative conversation to explore how to negotiate the digitalized landscape and make sense of a sphere that is simultaneously more demanding and less rigorous, a seeming contradiction.

4.3.1. New Consideration of Writing with Metrics in Mind

Participants indicated the increased commercialization of the soccer media industry, noting that digital sports media presents advertising and sponsorship appeal and that “advertising is part of the industry” (Participant 4). In addition, journalistic organizations are required to be commercially aware for survival. Participant 4 finds that “as a publication, what we do very well is we monetize our content, we know how to monetize it, we have to commercialize it.” Access to metrics such as reader demographics, views, and data-based indications of content most interacted with by audiences has

introduced a new dimension to the experience of South African sports journalists. These metrics provide insight into which content is most viewed and interacted with, thus generating more revenue from advertisements.

There was a discrepancy between participants who embrace writing with audience metrics and interest in mind and participants who prioritize other values. Participant 4 strongly believes that “from a journalist perspective, we need to write for the audience” and believes that while journalists “are trying to fight it and trying to be purists,” their desire to report on what “they believe is newsworthy” can lead them to neglect what their audience wants to listen to or read about, and finds that changing the minds of fellow journalists is a challenge he faced in the new media landscape. Participant 2 sees audience demographics and metrics as a positive attribute of new media, stating that data analytics can be “very key because it helps you to stay in touch with your audiences” revealing “who's your audience, what are they consuming, how much time are they spending on your platforms,” and whether you are “serving your audience with what they want.”

By contrast, Participant 6 believes that there is a danger when journalists “rely too much on the metrics instead of the added value” or writing the way “they want to write.” Participant 5 reflects on experiences where she has been asked to “bear in mind what will be interesting for social” and finds that experienced journalists, including her, sometimes “push back against it.” While certain participants found match and player-related statistics to be an “enormous boost” (Participant 1) for their work, there is a clear divide over the perception of participants regarding writing for metrics. Research revealed only that metrics and statistics were increasingly available to journalists due to digitalization and that sports media can drive audience metrics and advertisement sales (Kunert & Kuni, 2023, p. 632). Therefore, this research provides a new understanding of how different soccer journalists perceive writing for metrics and the commercialization of the industry, demonstrating two divided schools of thought as to whether this should be embraced or cautioned against.

In addition to concern over writing with metrics in mind, Participants 5, 6 and 8 mentioned increasing commercialization pressure in soccer journalism to credit teams and sponsors. Participant 5 fears this can result in an “embedded” landscape, particularly in broadcast, and Participant 6 discussed how journalists getting paid sponsorships from brands can compromise their impartiality. However, this concern relates more to participants’ perceptions of the economic state of soccer journalism in South Africa than to the digitalization of the industry. Nonetheless, an emphasis on sponsorship has been furthered through digital sports media and a digitalized soccer industry.

4.3.2. Expense of Data and Access Considerations

Participants demonstrated awareness of the cost of mobile data and the digital divide present within South Africa, which was established in prior research. Most do not “consciously think about it” (Participant 1), however, they were aware of and felt positively about different examples of low data innovations and increasingly accessible forms of internet access being developed within the country.

This indicates that disruptive innovation, as per Christensen (2013, p. 79), is taking place within the digital media landscape in South Africa and that journalists are aware of this. Due to the nature of their work, journalists may even be early adopters of disruptive innovations within the media landscape. This is supported by Participant 6, who stated he was an early adopter of Twitter.

A surprising finding was that one participant sees the high cost of data as having the potential to foster community. Participant 5, while acknowledging the challenge that audiences face to cheap televised access to broadcast media, remarked that “you get people congregating in bars and shebeens and pubs and other people's homes where they can watch stuff. And so, there's a great communal aspect to it.” In addition, Participant 7, who has experience in radio, sees “the power of radio to reach the corners of South Africa that TV is not reaching,” particularly rural areas. This indicates that journalists perceive access to be attainable in both traditional and new media and feel that technological advances can close digital access gaps within the nation.

4.4. How South African Sports Journalists Perceive the New Dynamics of Communication with Their Audience

One of the most dramatic changes that participants perceive is the new dynamic of communication with their audiences through digitalization and the advent of social media, which is primarily perceived as having both positive and negative components. Participant 7 sees technology as having “totally transformed” engagement with fans, and Participant 4 finds that there is now a “direct relationship” between journalists and fans. Participant 1 described a far greater depth of interaction with audiences. Participants 2 and 5 found that immediate feedback on their work and what audiences are interested in has enhanced the relationship, however, both found that there have been negative repercussions to their experience and mental health, which are discussed in the next subsection. Participants noted that some sports media organizations have incorporated interactive technologies, Participant 4's organization introduced a gamification model that rewarded readership, which increased engagement.

Although seen as transformative, direct feedback is not consistently perceived as positive. Participant 6 does find that he reads the comments of audiences online, however, he critiques the fact that comments and interactions are largely unregulated, thinking that “in the comment section, our good sense goes to die” and there is often “a bunch of people just like shouting into a screen.” Participant 3 elaborated that fan interactions on social media are often emotional due to the “emotional and subjective” nature of the soccer industry, stating that comments can come from “fan fanatics.” In addition, anonymity and sensationalism on social media can result in occasions where “the commenter is louder than the news” (Participant 3). These findings reflect what Cleland (2011) calls an interactive era of media-audience engagement (p. 299) within the sports media industry. Comments and instant feedback are representative of research that argues that this era of media-audience engagement consists of active fans who actively interact (Cleland, 2011, p. 299). Participants' viewpoints offer a

practical example of McLuhan's (1964) theory that the "medium is the message" (p. 11). This research reveals how technology has changed the way fans and journalists interact and act. McLuhan's theory suggests that technology shapes the way humans think and that mediums, in turn, shape us, as echoed in this new dynamic.

4.4.1. A 'Darker' Social Media Space: Journalists' Mental Health

Many participants initially perceived the advent of social media, particularly Twitter, as an exciting digital development, however, explained that this perception has changed over time and negative aspects of social media were identified. Participant 1 found Twitter to initially be "a very dynamic space," and Participant 6 explained that "there was almost like a wild west when social media started, the Twitter days." However, Participant 1 sees that Twitter or X has "changed now. It's a bit darker. It's not so much fun."

Regarding the negative impact on mental health, participants perceived social media to be "incredibly detrimental to the mental health of everybody involved because the levels of abuse on social media are insane" (Participant 5). Participant 2 explained that after a while he could not "deal with the negative comments." Participant 5, who was the only female soccer journalist interviewed, also expressed the prevalence of violent threats made against her and how online "the misogyny is amplified. The sexism is amplified." This is significant given the nature of soccer and sports reporting as a male-dominated industry and indicates that soccer journalists do not perceive prejudice as having decreased due to digitalization or within new media. In fact, the anonymity provided by social media can lead to greater abuse online.

Participant 3 sees social media as a "sometimes toxic" space where "good things don't always get retweets" and expresses how the drive for followers and engagement can lead to new media actors deliberately being controversial. Most participants found that today they do not struggle to maintain professionalism on social media and, while they do see its value as a professional tool, they remain cautious about sharing opinionated stances online and "don't feed the trolls" (Participant 6). Domeneghetti's (2021) stance that the online abuse faced by sports journalists may require media organizations to provide greater support (p. 3) should be considered in conjunction with these findings, and an argument for the importance of support from media organizations can be furthered based on the evidence provided by this study.

4.4.2. Humanization and Social Awareness

Participants expressed that access to athletes has become more restricted in the digital landscape, communication often takes place remotely and they perceive an 'impersonal' dimension to new media. Participant 7 finds that video conferencing systems and digital communication are "far less personal than it used to be. And I think that's probably for the worst." Participant 7 explained how, at the start of his career, he would go to each training session of the clubs he covered, and his

work was “far more personal.” He finds that a trade-off has occurred, journalists have gained fast story production and writing in exchange for “real person contact” (Participant 7). Given that all participants expressed the importance of interpersonal relationships and networks for their work, this poses a challenging and marked difference from the traditional era of sports journalism.

Participants expressed how, through close relationships with athletes and sportspeople, “you see a different side of them, you see the human” (Participant 7). Participant 6 feels that an important part of his work as a sportswriter is humanizing athletes and “creating a sense of place” for audiences while Participant 5 as a sports interviewer and profiler sees a great deal of her work as “learning the personalities of sports people.” Participant 1 sees enjoying people as intrinsic to journalistic work because you have “to work with people all the time.” The finding that participants perceive the ‘human aspect’ of their work as highly important and the notion that their work has become less human offers a nuanced stance on the challenges introduced by digitalization. Participant 3 feels that first-hand experience affords better information and teaches journalists to “learn to respect who you are writing about and remember the fact that we're dealing with humans.” This is particularly important for Participant 3, given that often young South African soccer players do not speak English as a first language or have media training.

However, participants positively perceived new media as having made soccer journalists “more aware of societal issues now” (Participant 6), amplifying previously marginalized sports, such as women’s soccer, due to greater audience feedback and autonomy. Nonetheless, certain journalists see the investigation into social issues as “superficial” and the industry as lacking “in-depth investigative stuff” (Participant 5). This is a new finding that has not been established in previous literature and may be informed by the specific context of South Africa. Considering concern over fewer specialized beat writers, increased immediacy, the negative aspects of social media, and a lack of rigour, these aspects are important and can provide insight into the substantial extent to which new mediums and media have affected journalists’ professional and social perception as well as the interpersonal relations occurring within the South African soccer media industry. The results of this study imply that there is a need for better support for South African soccer journalists to address the concerns generated by an evolving digital landscape and South African soccer journalists perceive new media values as present in their industry due to digitalization.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Overview of Findings

This research studies the phenomenon of digitalization within the South African soccer media industry and delivers a nuanced argument about how South African soccer journalists perceive the digitalization of sports journalism. It finds that South African soccer journalists perceive digitalization to have created a more competitive, impersonal, commercialized, and less specialized soccer media industry in South Africa. Journalists see themselves as facing more demanding but less rigorous professional demands, pressure to use metrics, and sometimes harmful social media spaces. Journalists do positively perceive improvements to diversity in the industry, innovations that increase audiences' digital access, and access to statistics through digitalization, however, the overall perception of South African soccer journalists of digitalization in their industry is negative, and most maintain a belief that traditional journalistic values are at risk in the new media space.

South African soccer journalists perceive digitalization and digital mediums as creating a faster pace of news production and dissemination in South African soccer media, identifying immediacy as a perceived new media value. There were mixed findings on whether greater immediacy is embraced or negatively perceived by participants; however, the majority perceive immediacy as having negatively impacted journalistic values. Immediacy as a new media value was perceived by South African soccer journalists as reducing journalistic rigour, checks, balances, and verifications because less training takes place, and online mistakes can be fixed after publishing. This offers a practical example of theoretical research on the tensions between traditional and digital journalistic values. Findings also indicate that participants use traditional journalistic training to draw a perceived boundary between themselves and aggregators, citizen and influencer journalists, who are enabled to break news within the immediate digital landscape. While maintaining the perception that the rigour and accuracy of soccer journalism in South Africa have reduced, participants see digitalization as simultaneously increasing the demands of their jobs. By this, they referred to digital-based work practices requiring constant availability and responsiveness and additional social media-related tasks. Journalists noted that the increased demands of digitalization were without corresponding increases in compensation or resources and perceived this negatively.

In addition, South African soccer journalists perceive digitalization as having led to a less specialized sports media landscape due to new media. Participants perceive digital media as less compartmentalized, requiring journalists to be more versatile. Certain participants also attributed this decline in specialization to limited resources, new actors, and financial constraints in South Africa. In addition, participants observed a significant increase in lifestyle-related and long-form content in soccer media due to digitalization.

Participants perceive a decline in gatekeeping within South African soccer media as their intermediary role decreases due to team PR and new actors brought about by digitalization. The introduction of these new actors through digitalization is perceived by participants as increasing

competition within the South African soccer media landscape. The application of gatekeeping theory reveals that journalists' role as gatekeepers has diminished, and this study finds that participants perceive this negatively. Participants also see the South African soccer media industry as impersonal and more sanitized due to digital media limiting their access to players and teams. Participants are concerned over the impact of this on investigative journalism within South African soccer and perceive player and team PR as harming their ability to access players and unveil the truth behind PR narratives from industry actors. South African soccer journalists perceive the digitalization of sports journalism as leading to the loss of personal connection within their work and writing. This shift poses a difficult challenge as participants see the human aspect of their work as highly important, and this finding highlights a perceived difference between new media values and traditional sports journalism.

While participants perceive digital communication as impersonal, they value traditional journalistic values and first-hand experience because they provide accurate information and foster respect for the subjects being covered. In the context of South Africa, humanization is seen as especially important by the experienced journalists interviewed, given that language and a lack of media training are barriers for young South African soccer players. Despite challenges, participants acknowledged that new media sheds light on social issues and previously marginalized sports like women's soccer, driven by greater audience feedback and autonomy.

South African soccer journalists primarily perceived a positive increase in diversity in South African soccer journalism following digitalization, with diversity interpreted both in terms of mediums, workforce representation, and coverage of marginalized sports. However, there were concerns over low pay and insufficiently skilled entrants into the soccer media landscape, linked to their perception of a contracting and competitive digitalized sphere. Criticisms emphasized new media actors who lack traditional journalistic training. Despite this, some do see the industry as well-established and improved post-Apartheid. However, concerns remain about how the commercialization of the industry creates superficial investigations into social issues and a lack of in-depth investigative reporting within the industry. The varied perceptions of the South African media landscape, influenced by digitalization, reflect broader global trends identified in the previous research of Bradshaw and Minogue (2019), who discuss how new media creates a more plentiful and chaotic environment (p. 6) and reflects participant perceptions of digitalization as having both negative and positive impacts on the landscape.

South African soccer journalists perceive the digitalization of sports journalism as having both positive and negative effects on learning opportunities and mentorship. Traditional mentorship opportunities are seen as challenging and scarce in the digital age. Concern over the young age of junior newsroom staff and their ability to mentor relates to feelings about the chaotic and diverse sports media landscape. However, participants also recognized the benefits of digitalization, particularly regarding ease of communication and access to contacts. Despite these advantages, there are negative perspectives about the limitations of remote work on learning opportunities. Overall,

participants perceive digitalization as a cause for concern about the future of training and growth for South African soccer journalists.

Soccer journalists perceive digitalization as significantly changing their communication dynamics with audiences, both positively and negatively. Participants noted a direct relationship between journalists and fans, with technology taking fan engagement to a deeper level of interaction. Certain participants see immediate feedback as valuable for enhancing their relationship with fans and increasing engagement with their work. However, direct feedback was also perceived as negative, as interactions can be unregulated, emotional, and subjective. Participants perceive social media as potentially damaging to their mental health, and this study supports the stance that media organizations should provide greater support to sports journalists regarding the issue. While recognizing its value as a professional tool, most participants remain cautious about sharing opinionated stances online and reading comments. Findings that technology has changed the interaction between fans and journalists show how media ecology is applicable in the South African soccer media context.

South African soccer journalists perceive digitalization as increasing the commercialization of their industry. Participants perceived digital sports media as attracting advertising and sponsorship and felt that journalistic organizations need to be commercially minded in the competitive landscape. Participants were divided on the benefits of writing with audience metrics in mind. Certain participants argue that journalists should use data analytics to understand and cater to audience interests or preferences. Conversely, certain participants perceive a danger in compromising journalistic values of integrity and truth for metrics and sponsorships. Participants revealed they face commercial pressure to maintain relationships with teams and sponsors, and some see risks of compromised impartiality due to paid sponsorships. While this concern is linked to the financial state of soccer journalism in South Africa, digitalization has amplified the focus on sponsorship within the industry.

South African soccer journalists show awareness of the digital challenges posed by the high cost of mobile data and the digital divide in the country. Participants recognize and feel positive about innovations aimed at increasing internet accessibility. A surprising finding was that one participant perceived the digital access challenge as having the potential to encourage communal viewing. Participants perceive traditional media, namely radio, as being accessible to rural areas. This indicates that journalists perceive access to be attainable in both traditional and new media and feel that technological advances can close digital access gaps within the nation.

5.2. Theoretical Implications of Findings

The main theories used to answer this research question were media ecology theory, new media theory, theories of journalistic values, gatekeeping theory, and disruptive innovation theory.

These theories were suitable for analysis and developed the argument further, with the findings of the study linking to these theories. Stances on digital accessibility improvements revealed that disruptive innovation is taking place within the digital media landscape in South Africa and that journalists are aware of this. Findings reveal that South African soccer journalists perceive new media values, such as immediacy, emerging in their industry due to digitalization. New media theory in conjunction with findings suggests that sports journalists with traditional backgrounds and digital-native sports journalists could make use of collaborative conversation to explore how to negotiate the digitalized landscape and some of their concerns about digitalization per Harcup's (2023) argument that news values should be viewed through a collaborative and dynamic lens to avoid digitalization rendering values obsolete (p. 914).

The impact of technology and digitalization on the personal experiences and interactions of journalists demonstrates that media ecology theory is applicable within the South African soccer media industry. Participants' perceptions of the South African soccer media industry as fractured and increasingly competitive reinforce the findings of Bradshaw and Minogue (2019), who discuss how new media affords a multitude of voices to be made public, creating a plentiful and chaotic environment (p. 6). In conjunction with the discussion on the applicability of Bivens' (2008) findings that digital media can be seen as creating evolving news values and participants' perceptions that the value placed on accuracy within the sports media industry and by digital audiences has decreased, this study supports the relevance of theoretical literature within a new context, namely the South African soccer media industry as perceived by sports journalists.

This study finds that certain findings on digitalization in sports media in a Western context are relevant within the South African context. The findings of Rojas-Torrijos and Nölleke (2023) that digitalization challenges established media by introducing new actors from the periphery of sports media (p. 853) concurred with research findings, as participants reflected on the increasingly competitive sports media market. Gatekeeping theory as understood by Shoemaker and Vos (2009, p. 22) is applicable, and participants perceive a decline in gatekeeping within South African soccer media as their intermediary role decreases due to aggregators and new actors brought about by digitalization. This emphasizes that gatekeeping theory is not only highly applicable within discussions on the digitalization of journalism but also in the specific context of the study. In addition, the argument of Domeneghetti (2021) that media organizations should provide greater support to journalists around social media abuse (p. 3) can be supported by this study, as participants perceive a significant impact of online abuse on sports journalists' mental health in South Africa.

However, the South African context of this study voiced participants' concerns about how the commercialization of the industry creates superficial investigations into social issues and a lack of in-depth investigative reporting within the industry. This is a new finding that has not been established in previous literature and may be informed by the specific context of South Africa. The nation faces a host of political and socioeconomic issues outlined in this research, and while participants positively

perceive improvements to diversity and digital access, this finding can provide a basis for future research on the challenges posed by digitalization to in-depth investigative reporting in sports journalism. Moreover, participants' perspectives that traditional journalistic values such as integrity, credibility, objectivity, and truth (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, p. 12) are challenged by social media and PR offer new insights into the journalistic perspective of the PR capacities of teams and athletes, which has not been established within existing research.

5.3. Practical Implications of Findings

The method of in-depth, expert interviews that was used to answer the research question was appropriate as it facilitated the communication of the genuine beliefs, lived experiences, and perspectives of participants. The findings of the study reflect rich and detailed data on how digitalization has changed the industry, their roles, and the expectations they face in their own words, as well as their overall perceptions of both positive and negative features within the space. However, the findings of this study, namely opinions and perceptions, are intrinsically personal and therefore offer practical insight into the lived experiences of individuals. Nonetheless, this study provides valuable social insight into the dynamics of digitalized media spaces within South African society and journalistic spaces, particularly on the individual level. The perceived dynamics of diversity in the South African soccer media industry and the digital access of South African audiences increasing due to digitalization offer insight into the role of digitalization in post-Apartheid South African soccer journalism and how social issues manifest themselves in new sports media. This study suggests that this takes place through a collaborative and dynamic lens to avoid digitalization rendering values obsolete (Harcup, 2023, p. 914).

Additionally, the focus of this study is particularly relevant in South Africa, where soccer journalism reflects and contributes to the nation's socioeconomic and cultural landscape, making the study of soccer journalists' perspectives socially significant. As job layoffs in journalism have been accelerated by digitalization, this research is socially relevant to South African sports and soccer journalists as they make sense of a changed media landscape and their job roles. The findings of this study offer relevant consideration for soccer media organizations. Participants' remarks about increasing workload demands due to digitalization without corresponding increases in compensation from employers are an economic and work-related implication of this study. Participants perceive commercial pressure to maintain relationships with teams and sponsors, and some see risks of compromised impartiality due to paid sponsorships and link this to the financial state of soccer journalism in South Africa and digitalization. Moreover, the findings of this paper support the argument that media organizations should provide greater support to journalists regarding social media abuse, which is an important consideration for soccer media organizations in South Africa. This implies that there is a need for better support for South African soccer journalists to address the concerns generated by an evolving digital landscape.

5.4. Limitations and Further Research Implications

The findings of this study speak to the perceptions of eight professional sports journalists within South Africa and cannot be generalized to all soccer journalists within South Africa, especially as newer, digital-native journalists emerge in the industry who will have significantly different journalistic backgrounds from the experienced sample group. Further research could be conducted to explore whether there are differences between the perspectives of digital-first journalists or journalists who have been trained outside of traditional journalism and the sample group of this study. Research could be conducted on how best this process can take place and on what developments regarding more productive audience engagement on social media journalists would like to see.

The study focused primarily on the perceptions and experiences of the participants, which may not fully capture the broader landscape of South African soccer journalism. The study did not explore the perspectives of athletes or other stakeholders in the sports media industry, which could provide additional insights into the impact of digitalization on sports journalism in South Africa. Further research could be conducted to explore the perspectives of these actors on digitalization within the South African soccer media industry to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, this study offers a striking starting point.

Certain findings within this study have not been established in previous literature, namely participants' concerns about how the commercialization of the South African sports media industry creates superficial investigations into social issues and a lack of in-depth investigative reporting within the industry. This finding could be explored in greater detail by further research, which could offer insight into whether this is a global concern for sports journalists or specific to the South African context. In addition, participants' perspectives that traditional journalistic values are challenged by social media and PR offer new insights into the journalistic perspective of the PR capacities of teams and athletes, which has not been established within existing research and could be studied at greater length, exploring how other actors in the industry perceive this new phenomenon enabled by digitalization.

Only one female soccer journalist was interviewed, and this is a limitation of the sample group, however, justified as access to female soccer journalists in South Africa is limited due to the historical nature of the field as a male-dominated industry. As the findings of this paper support the argument that media organizations should provide greater support to journalists regarding social media abuse and the female participant in this study remarked on the sexist abuse she faces on social media, further research undertaken could explore the gender-based dimension of social media abuse faced by female sports journalists.

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Appendix A: Topic Guide

Introduction

- Welcome + Thank You
- Short introduction about me
- About this interview
- Desired level of identification and ability to rescind participation → Do you want your name included or excluded?
- No good/wrong answers
- If you want to stop, you can let me know
- If you don't want to answer a question, let me know
- Length of interview (45-60mins)
- Consent form
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

Warm-up

- How would you describe your career path?
- What is your experience with:
 - Sports journalism?
 - Soccer reporting?
- What is your experience with:
 - Traditional journalism?
 - Online journalism?

Traditional Journalism

- At the start of your career, how would you describe your work as a journalist?
- How would you describe traditional journalism in your own words?
- In your opinion, what are the skills a sports journalist needs?
- In your opinion, what are the values a sports journalist needs?
- How has this definition evolved for you personally?

Online Journalism, Digitalization

- How would you describe online journalism in your own words?
- How would you describe the relationship between traditional and new mediums in sports reporting?
- How/when did you become aware that something was changing?
- How/do you see values changing because of online mediums?
- Does your reporting style depend on different platforms?

Online Media

- What impact has new media had on shaping soccer media narratives?
- From your perspective, have technological advancements enhanced or transformed the engagement between sports journalists and sports fans?
- Are there instances where you've incorporated interactive or immersive technologies to engage with audiences?

Online Media: Experience and Values

- Can you recall situations where technology has positively or negatively contributed to your experience as a journalist?
- Could you share your insights on the challenges and opportunities you've encountered while adapting to online mediums and new technology?
- How does online media help you share your journalistic work?
- How do you maintain professionalism when doing online work?

South African Soccer

- How would you describe the sports media landscape in South Africa?
- How do you describe the soccer landscape in South Africa?
- How do you describe the online soccer mediums in South Africa?
- How do you understand access to digital channels in South African sports media?
- How do you see the future of soccer reporting in South Africa? If you had to compare South Africa with other countries, are there differences in soccer reporting?

Closing

- Are there any things you'd like to add to our conversation that you haven't had a chance to do before?
- Do you have any feedback for me?
- Are there any other sports journalists you think would also like to help with this research?

Appendix B: Coding Tree

Sub-group	Theme	Exemplary quotation
Speed of Dissemination	Perceptions of Immediacy	“But generally, online digital, it's immediate. I like the immediacy that something happens. It's, it's now” (Participant 2).
Lack of Checks and Balances		“you know, some major errors in headlines and in accuracies, names being misspelled and so on. And, that's one area that I think, you know, digital media still needs a little bit of further development” (Participant 8).
Aggregators and the Decline of Breaking News		“if somebody tweets and breaks the news, you are guaranteed that 200,000 people are gonna do their own version almost immediately after, whether it be copying directly, whether it be following up. So within minutes everybody has it” (Participant 3).
PR by Athletes and Clubs	Perceptions of the South African Sports Media Landscape	“As the media gets smaller and they realize they can bypass the traditional media and go straight to the consumer. The consumer is the fans” (Participant 6).
Disillusioned Perceptions		“I think we're in a very, very difficult, problematic place, not just sports media in South Africa, probably worldwide, but it's amplified here because of the, the financial situation” (Participant 5).
Growth of Lifestyle and Death of Beat		“So you probably had 10 or 12 sports reporters and they all had a beat. So like they were always on top of that team and that, that region. Now you've got three writers covering, covering 15 different sports” (Participant 7).
Challenges to Mentorship and Learning		“So you will have people with experience in that space. And for me, mentorship was incredibly important. It could be such a help. And I was very fortunate, not everyone is” (Participant 1).
Audience Analytics Considerations	Perceptions of Demands	“Data analytics, it's very key because it helps you to stay in touch with your audiences, because then it tells you who's your audience, what are they consuming, how much time are they spending on your platforms” (Participant 2).

Expense of Data and Access Considerations		“They're very mindful of their data, they're extremely mindful. It's a currency for them” (Participant 4).
Social Media	Perceptions of Audience Communication	“But I also think it's been incredibly detrimental to the mental health of everybody involved because the, the levels of abuse on social media are insane” (Participant 5).
Humanization, Social Issues		“You learn to respect who you are writing about and remember the fact that we're dealing with humans” (Participant 6).

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form for In-Person Interviews

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Melina Christodoulou Preston, melinapreston1@gmail.com

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in research about digitalization in sports media. The purpose of the study is to understand the perspectives of South African sports journalists on the digitalization of sports media and football reporting.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to South African sports media, journalistic perspectives and shifts to digitalization in sports journalism. There are no right or wrong answers within the interview and **I am interested in collecting data pertaining to your perspective and views.**

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

ANONYMITY

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research as the topic is not of a sensitive nature. I plan to collect data related to your name, professional experience, and gender. If you are not comfortable with your name being used, I can use a pseudonym to refer to you in my thesis. You can enter your preference at the end of this document and are free to change your preference later.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take 45-60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

REWARDS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation. However, if you are interested, the results of this research and the final thesis can be sent to you once complete.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time. You are always free not to answer any question, and/or stop participating at any point.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Carmen Longas Luque, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, longasluque@eshcc.eur.nl.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

I give consent to be audio recorded during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

I consent with my name, information about my professional experience, and my gender being revealed in written data resulting from this study:

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form for Zoom Interviews

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Melina Christodoulou Preston, melinapreston1@gmail.com

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in research about digitalization in sports media. The purpose of the study is to understand the perspectives of South African sports journalists on the digitalization of sports media and football reporting.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to South African sports media, journalistic perspectives and shifts to digitalization in sports journalism. There are no right or wrong answers within the interview and **I am interested in collecting data pertaining to your perspective and views.**

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make a Zoom recording of the interview.

I will use the material from the interviews exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

ANONYMITY

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research as the topic is not of a sensitive nature. I plan to collect data related to your name, professional experience, and gender. If you are not comfortable with your name being used, I can use a pseudonym to refer to you in my thesis. You can enter your preference at the end of this document and are free to change your preference later.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take 45-60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

REWARDS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation. However, if you are interested, the results of this research and the final thesis can be sent to you once complete.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time. You are always free not to answer any question, and/or stop participating at any point.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish– Carmen Longas Luque, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, longasluque@eshcc.eur.nl

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

I give consent for the Zoom interview to be recorded during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

I consent with my name, information about my professional experience, and my gender being revealed in written data resulting from this study:

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.