How do German Amateur Handball Players Perceive Their Team's Social Media Output?

The professionalization of the amateur media landscape

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to answer the following research question: How do German amateur handball players perceive their team's social media output? In the context of a professionalizing media landscape – based on more amateur teams utilizing social media, and the emergence of news coverage about the contextualized results of the amateur leagues – and stemming from a social media research standpoint, researched effects among professional teams and athletes, are applied to the case of amateur teams and athletes. For this, twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with seven female and five male German amateur handball players from the northern Rhine region, all aged between 23 to 28 years old. The social media site of interest was Instagram. A thematic analysis approach was followed to explore respondents' perceptions towards their team's Instagram output, as well as their reflection and when and why they engage in re-posting, plus, whether they feel a sense of belonging or a fostered sense of competition concerning other teams. The main findings show similar effects of social media utilization among amateur athletes compared to professional athletes, though to a varying extent. Ideas of self-promotion and impression management exist, however, realize themselves more in the idea of presenting a belonging to a team on social media, instead of actively promoting themselves. They do enjoy, nonetheless, their teams promoting them (promotion by others). Further, amateur athletes tend to compare themselves with other teams' Instagram outputs and are potentially influenced by them, though negative effects are not as prominent as found among professional athletes. Employing an active social media strategy as a team, and joining other teams in doing so, makes the league more approachable, and players and their teams are feeling more connected – drawing from existing research on communities on social media. Concludingly, this research was a first step into individual amateur players' perceptions of social media utilization among amateur sports teams and draws a comparison to previously found effects among professional athletes and professional teams utilizing social media. Future research can build upon this, and further investigate the amateur sports media landscape and players' underlying motivations to react (potential gender and character differences), as well as different effects in a younger age group.

KEYWORDS: *social media, handball, amateur sports, professionalization, perception and effects*

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Social media has grown immensely. Baccarella et al. (2018) note that social media is ubiquitous (p. 436). With the increase in user base and the increase in user purposes, social media is shown to be affecting individuals and society (Kietzmann et al., 2011, p. 250). Those effects are of an ambiguous nature and can turn out positive or negative (Akram & Kumar, 2017). Individuals who use social media are, among others, athletes. For them, social media offers a tool to create personal branding, foster fan engagement, gain popularity, and give personal insights (Hull & Abeza, 2021, p. 15). Following the argumentation by Hull and Abeza (2021, p. 15), athletes can, therefore, engage in impression management (as explored by Doyle et al., 2020, p. 507), which can be seen as a positive outcome of social media utilization. Nonetheless, this impression management can also affect other athletes negatively, leading to self-deprecating, doubtful, or amotivated self-dialogue based on social comparison (investigated by Ruser and Steinfeldt, 2021, p. 156). Given this two-sided outcome, the effects of social media utilization remain ambiguous and cannot always fully be distinguished as positive or negative. In general, the utilization of social media is continuously growing in the sports industry – therefore, sports media is growing.

Professional teams use social media to make game announcements, show small interviews, and provide behind-the-scenes footage and insights into practice. Research shifts toward usage and the corresponding effect of social media on professional sports and players; Hayes et al. (2020) found that professional sports players can be affected by social media and influenced by messages, pressure, or competitor output (p. 863). Furthermore, professionalization concerning sports media is investigated by Adaş et al. (2020), who analyze, among amateur clubs, the method of using social media regarding professionalization (p. 136) – showing a potential link between the two.

The sport of handball represents an interesting example. Handball is played by two teams with each team having seven players, six on the field, and one in goal. It is a fast-paced game with scores often being between 25 to 35 goals for each team. Each game lasts 60 minutes in total, divided into two halves. In the context of German handball, the relevance of the sport is great, as it is also growing the following on social media (Podewils, 2022, para. 4). Following the German Handball Federation's agenda, the current decade 2020-2030 is called out as a decade for achieving even greater relevance for the sport of handball (DHB, 2022, slide 2). Handball can be considered the most famous indoor sport in Germany (DHB, n.d., para. 2), and events like the European Championship which was held in Germany in January 2024 support this development (DHB, 2022, slide 4). Meier et al. (2020) investigate the success of a shift from free TV to pay TV, which commenced with the move of the rights to *SKY* beforehand, having seemingly led to a decrease in TV audience reach by the time of the analysis (p. 629). Recently, the rights were acquired by a new niche sports channel, *DYN*. It remains to be seen, how the audience reach is developing there, however, one can say that next to the pay TV coverage, *DYN*'s social media presence for the sport of handball is growing. Social media is taking a more prominent entrance into the sport of handball, and over the past years, many clubs have

professionalized their appearance – professional teams and amateur teams.

Investigating the public appearance and looking at several examples of Instagram channels from amateur handball teams (each depicting the most senior team), the apparent professionalization of amateur sports media becomes visible. The following Figure 1 shows screenshots taken from the respective Instagram accounts, all from handball teams – professional, and non-professional – within North-Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

Figure 1

Examples of Professional and Non-Professional Handball Teams' Instagram Accounts
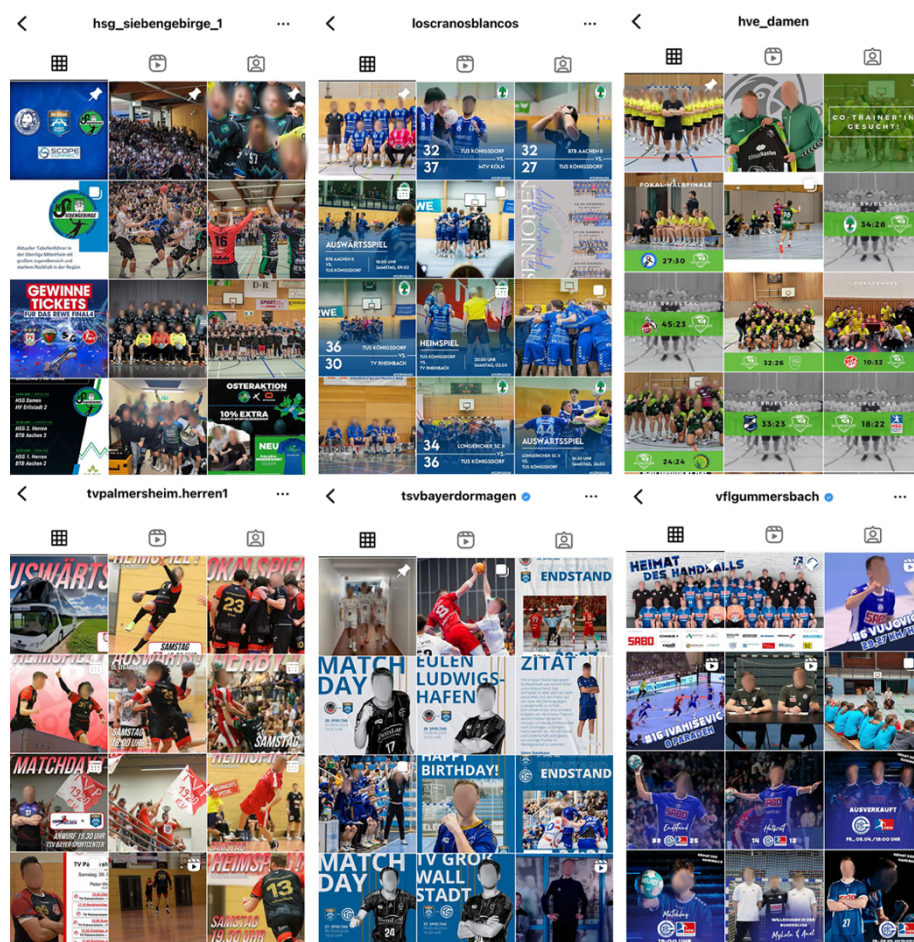

Note. Screenshots were taken on April 10th, 2024, from respective Instagram accounts (from left to right, top row first: HSG Siebengebirge 1. Herren, n.d.; Tus Königsdorf 1. Herren, n.d.; HV Erftstadt 1. Damen, n.d.; TV Palmersheim 1. Herren, n.d.; TSV Bayer Dormagen Handball, n.d.; VfL Gummersbach, n.d.). Faces blurred.

What can be seen from the above examples, is that the non-professional teams' social media output (those without a blue verification symbol behind the Instagram handle) resembles the appearance of the professional ones (those with a blue verification symbol). As noted by Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018), Instagram is an important medium for sports organizations to share visual content (p. 413). Content-wise, these accounts share high-quality photos and videos, engage in sharing match results and highlights, as well as present player and coach signings. They use Instagram as a platform to engage with their supporters, no matter whether it is a small regional club or a team from the first or second national division. All in all, many amateur handball teams introduce an active Instagram account to give insights into practice, match announcements, etc.

Another example of a changing amateur handball media landscape can be seen in the news coverage. Below are two screenshots from the *Harzhelden* website (see Figure 2), a news website that launched recently (Harzhelden, n.d.b, para. 1). Additionally, *Harzhelden* has a similar account and news coverage on Instagram. On their website and Instagram account, results from the men's regional leagues in the northern Rhine region within North-Rhine Westphalia are covered (starting from 5th league), combined with the results from the top three men's professional divisions in Germany.

Figure 2

Harzhelden Website
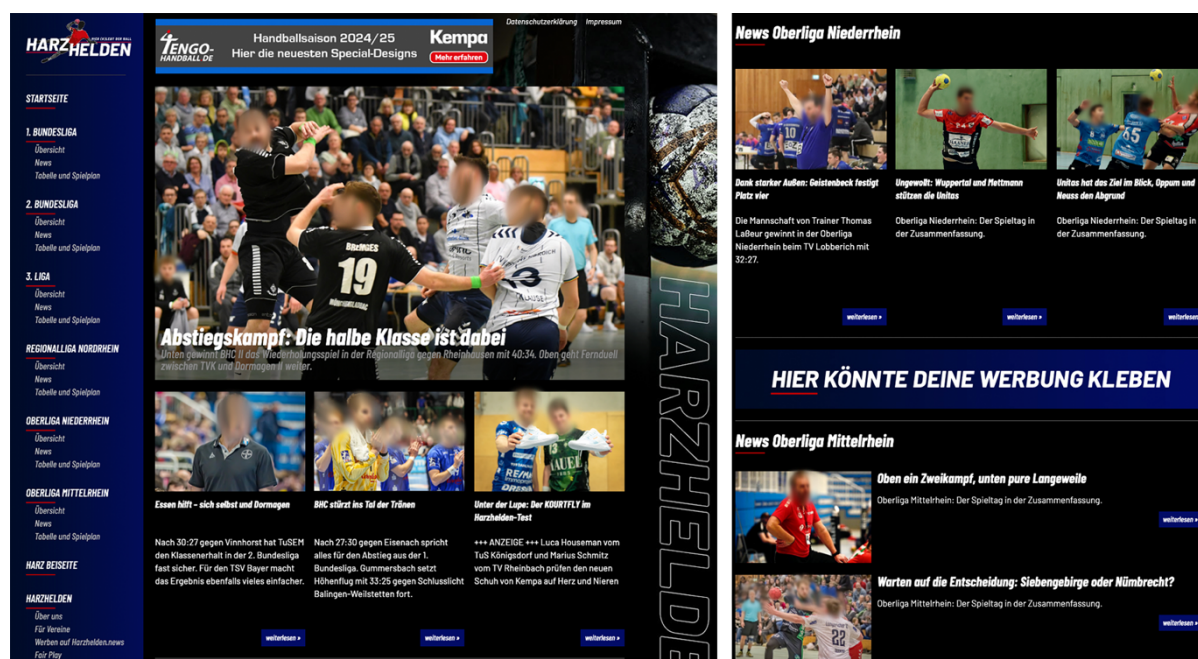
Note. The left shows the starting page, right shows the same page when scrolling further down. Screenshots were taken on April 10th, 2024, from Harzhelden (n.d.). Faces blurred.

The *Harzhelden* website presents match-day news and summaries from the top divisions as well as regional leagues. Furthermore, not only news is covered, but also a sponsored article about a sports shoe test, conducted by two amateur players (left screenshot of starting page, lower right corner, saying: "*Under the magnifying glass: The KOURTFLY in the Harzhelden test; +++ADVERTISEMENT +++ [...] from TuS Königsdorf and [...] from TV Rheinbach put the new Kempa shoe through its paces* [translated]"). Sponsored content is used to finance the news website *Harzhelden*, and this content is generated through the opinion of two amateur players (Harzhelden, n.d.).

Lastly, the example of the senior male team of the *HSG Siebengebirge* gives an interesting insight into a special happening in the fifth amateur division. During their home matches, they regularly welcome about 600 visitors, which is greatly above average compared to other clubs within their league (60 visitors) (Lokalzeit aus Bonn, 2023, 00:25:35). Even local television has picked up on this and released already two short video reports about it (*WDR Lokalzeit aus Bonn* and *WDR Aktuelle Stunde* – see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Video Reports

Note. Screenshots from Lokalzeit aus Bonn (2023, 00:27:15) (left), and Helmes (2024, 00:20:29) (right). Faces blurred.

All three examples – teams' Instagram accounts, *Harzhelden* news coverage, and local media news coverage – show the increasing professionalization of sports media in the realm of amateur handball in North-Rhine Westphalia, Germany. In general, one might consider a club and its players professional when they play at a high level and receive financial compensation. Amateur athletes, for this study, are those playing in the fourth, fifth, and sixth divisions. There might be examples of players within those leagues who earn a certain amount of money, but, overall, amateur athletes do not receive financial compensation.

The German Handball Federation (Deutscher Handbballbund/DHB) published a plan for the

decade 2020-2030 with several development goals to achieve greater relevance for the sport of handball (DHB, 2022, slide 2). Among them is the increase in the number and loyalty of fans as well as the players and volunteers, based on professional structures including digitalization (DHB, 2022, slide 2). While this campaign is focused on the works of the German Handball Federation, it still sends a message to all types of amateur clubs, as the federation aims to collaboratively professionalize the covering of results of all divisions on one single platform (DHB, 2022, slide 7). The German Handball Federation is strategically involved in the professionalization of sports media.

Combining the mentioned and profound effect of social media usage among professional players with an increasing professionalization of amateur sports media establishes societal relevance in investigating perceptions within the usage of social media among amateur sports players and their clubs, in this case, handball amateur players. Based on this phenomenon and societal relevance, the theoretical framework elaborates on academic research conducted in the context of social media use in the sphere of sports and develops relevant concepts for the study at hand. There has been an academic focus on professional sports, though, there is little research on amateur sports and social media. Amateur sports and athletes in the context of social media are not yet the focus of current research, nor is a potential professionalization based on the utilization of social media a topic of current research. Hayes et al. (2020, p. 852) and Nisar et al. (2018, p. 188) investigate the use of social media among professional sports players and clubs; whereas social media in the context of amateur sports has been researched by Adaş et al. (2020), focusing on how amateur sports clubs perceive their social media accounts as an online marketing tool (p. 136). Of great importance to this research are usage motivations for social media; amateur players like to get insights on their sports idols due to role model thinking (Kazazi, 2023, paras. 1-3), followed by a researched wish to imitate influencers (Ki & Kim, 2019, p. 915), and the social media usage motivation to 'self-promote' among certain users (Moon et al., 2016, p. 22). Further, Seidman (2013) explored, next to self-promotion, the motivation to use social media to fulfill the need to feel belongingness (p. 402). All of the above can potentially influence how amateur handball players perceive the professionalization of their team's social media activity. The wish to imitate professional handball teams as well as self-promote oneself and show belonging to a sports team (for example through re-posting), is relevant to understand their perceptions and actions.

In combining the societal relevance and up-to-now missing scientific focus on amateur sports, this introduction yields a respective scientific significance based on the societal one, an apparent professionalizing media landscape in the context of German amateur handball. This research stems from a social media research perspective and explores the (ambiguous) effects of social media on society and in the sphere of professional sports, applied to the case of amateur handball. The following research questions are answered.

main-RQ1: How do German amateur handball players perceive their team's social media output?

And the sub-questions:

sub-RQ2: How do they reflect on the posts, and when and why do they engage in re-posting?

sub-RQ3: Do they feel a sense of belonging to the team or a fostered competitive thinking concerning other teams?

Firstly, a theoretical framework is introduced, which elaborates on the current academic research in this field, meaning, how social media affect professional and amateur sporting contexts. From there, certain concepts are further developed and operationalized for the research at hand. The methods section presents these operationalized concepts used for thematic analysis and describes the data collection and research. Next, the results of twelve interviews are thoroughly expanded on, out of which, answers to the research question and corresponding sub-questions are presented. This thesis completes with the conclusion, limitations, and avenues for further research, as well as practical implications.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guides as a series of theories that interact and build upon each other. The aim is to elaborate on previous findings in the field of sports and social media use, as well as the investigation of various societal and individual implications based on the given context. The main research question 'How do German amateur handball players perceive their team's social media output?', accompanied by the two introduced sub-questions, guides through these consequent parts which are always linked back to the mentioned, in an attempt to identify sensitizing concepts for the proper investigation of German amateur handball players' perceptions. The following paragraphs apply the general effects of using social media on two levels, the organizational (sports teams), and the individual (athletes). Within these two levels, sub-levels of, each, the professional, and the non-professional, amateur, use case are depicted. That way, possible linkages and mergers between the two levels, professional, and amateur, can be drawn, which later on, help to, firstly, compare professional teams' and amateur teams' Instagram outputs in the context of an ongoing apparent professionalization, and, secondly, aid in identifying similar phenomena among professional and amateur athletes, in the context of using social media. To start, the role of social media in today's society is shortly elaborated on, upon which, afterward, the mentioned levels are introduced.

2.1. Social media in the society

Social media has grown enormously in its importance and use over the past two decades – "Social Media is everywhere" (Baccarella et al., 2018, p. 436). Not only on an individual level (micro), but also on a societal level (macro), and between the two levels (meso), we see effects – positive and negative (not always unanimously distinguishable) – today. Kietzmann et al. (2011) conclude that "[s]ocial media introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities, and individuals" (p. 250).

Among the positive effects, pointed out by Akram and Kumar (2017, p. 351), are increased connectivity among members of society, as well as education, information, and updates. The possibilities to gain knowledge and updates on all kinds of fields – for example, the results of amateur sports leagues – increase at an accelerating rate. Kietzmann et al. (2011) introduce the honeycomb framework, depicting seven building blocks of social media impacts on different levels: presence, sharing, relationships, identity, conversations, groups, and reputation (p. 243). These levels include, for example, the exchange and distribution of content (sharing level), the "extent to which users reveal themselves" (p. 243; identity level), "the extent to which users relate to each other" (p. 243; relationships level), "the extent to which users know the social standing of others and content" (p. 243; reputation level), and "the extent to which users are ordered or form communities (p. 243; groups level) (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

On the other hand, several scholars elaborate on the negative effects of social media on society (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Baccarella et al., 2018). The "dark side", as introduced by Baccarella

et al., 2018, p. 432), is directly connected to the positive side, and builds upon the honeycomb framework introduced by Kietzmann et al. (2011, p. 243). Among the same levels – presence, sharing, relationships, identity, conversations, groups, and reputation – Baccarella et al. (2018, p. 433) elaborate on the negative connotations. Inappropriate sharing of content (sharing level), "exploitation of online self" (p. 433; identity level), intimidation (relationships level), and in-group/out-group bias (groups level) present examples of how social media can negatively affect individuals and communities (Baccarella et al., 2018, p. 433).

Social media has serious implications. Whereas Kietzmann et al. (2011) prompt "Social media? Get serious!" (p. 241), Baccarella et al. (2018) answer "Social media? It's serious!" (p. 431). The following paragraphs investigate previous findings from research on utilizing social media in sports teams and individual athletes' use cases. As mentioned, within these use cases, the professional, and the non-professional, amateur, scenarios are depicted.

2.2. Using social media as a sports team

Since this research is exploring individual amateur athletes' perceptions of their team's Instagram output, it is important to understand both sides of the equation. To explore individual perceptions, one needs to realize the team's use case. In knowing what the sports team aims to accomplish with their social media strategy, one can eventually better link the resulting perceptions of athletes with the respective objective. The following two parts elaborate on previous research conducted among professional and amateur sports teams using social media.
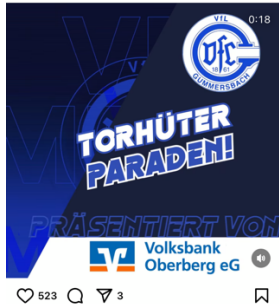
2.2.1. Professional sports teams

Social media has changed the ways companies can interact with consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013, p. 239); and not only companies but also sports clubs experience intensified fan engagement via their online channels (Clark & Maher, 2016, p. 1). "Social media has revolutionized the sports industry by changing the way athletes, coaches, clubs, federations, sport companies and other industry actors interact" (López-Carril et al., 2020, p. 1). Social media platforms give them the opportunities to directly interact with fans and increase spectator interest (Nisar et al., 2018, p. 194). Nisar et al. (2018) find that there is not necessarily a relationship between sporting success and audience interest, but a relation between interactivity on social media and audience interest (p. 193); building upon theories of sports marketing developed by other scholars. This fostered relationship creation between clubs and fans is of importance for all parties involved; according to Nisar et al. (2018), potential fans can become frequent audiences of the sport, increasing their loyalty to the club (p. 189). Overall, social media is used to generate excitement around a team or club (Hull & Abeza, 2021, p. 14). Abeza et al. (2019, p. 90) investigate professional sports managers in four major leagues in North America, the MLB, NBA, NHL, and NFL, and find that objectives for professional sports teams in the usage of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Periscope,

Tumblr, YouTube, Vine, Google+, LinkedIn, and Weibo) are interaction, update, public relations, sales, sponsorship, and customer service. They elaborate on the several use cases of social media for professional sports teams. Among others, there are "Update" as "[t]o provide news updates (e.g., breaking news on player signings or trades), to communicate a variety of information quickly and efficiently (e.g., live game highlights, invite fans to community event), and to provide a behind-the-scenes look (e.g., teams and facilities, team at a training, player in airplane/bus, players' injury and rehabilitation)" and "Sponsorship", meaning, "[t]o monetize social media through sponsorship/partnership" (Abeza et al., 2019, p. 91). Applying these findings to the German Handball Bundesliga, Kautz et al. (2020) investigated four professional handball clubs from Germany, and their corresponding social media output on Facebook and Twitter, finding that they "primarily issued statements regarding themselves and their sport-related activities" (p. 239). Although this analysis in this thesis is not concerned with Facebook and Twitter posts, the Instagram presence of professional German Handball teams appears to be congruent with what Abeza et al. (2019, p. 91) and Kautz et al. (2020, p. 239) published (see Table 1).

Table 1

Applying Abeza et al. (2019, p. 91) to VFL Gummersbach's Instagram Output

Post	Use case for communication strategy
	"Update" – "[t]o provide news updates (e.g., breaking news on player signings or trades), to communicate a variety of information quickly and efficiently (e.g., live game highlights, invite fans to community event), and to provide a behind-the-scenes look (e.g., teams and facilities, team at a training, player in airplane/bus, players' injury and rehabilitation)" (Abeza et al., 2019, p. 91)
	"Sponsorship" – "[t]o monetize social media through sponsorship/partnership" (Abeza et al., 2019, p. 91)

Note. Examples of VFL Gummersbach's (a professional German handball team) Instagram output – applicable to exemplary use cases defined by Abeza et al. (2019, p. 91). Screenshots were taken on May 26th, 2024, from the respective Instagram account (left to right, top row first: VfL Gummersbach, 2024b; VfL Gummersbach, 2024a; VfL Gummersbach, 2023). Faces blurred.

Consequently, combining previous literature and investigating the Instagram presence of professional German handball teams, a 'professional appearance' of handball teams on Instagram can be carefully defined (in line with Table 1, applying the findings by Abeza et al. (2019, p. 91) on a professional handball team in Germany). From there, the professionalization of amateur sports media, based on the increasing existence of 'professionally appearing' amateur teams' Instagram outputs, can be investigated (see Figure 1). However, this is not based on a properly conducted visual content analysis of professional and amateur teams' Instagram posts but based on the researcher's interpretation and knowledge of the field of study. The researcher himself has played handball for many years in the respective region and has access to several handball teams and players on Instagram, from where this interpretation and perception is supported. It remains to be investigated in the exploration of the research question, of how amateur players perceive this development and whether they link it to a form of professionalization.

2.2.2. Amateur sports teams

Whereas the use of social media among professional sports teams gained scholarly attention, the research on the use case of social media among amateur sports teams is less developed, as illustrated by Robinson and France (2011) referring to scarce research on amateur sports marketing (p. 52) – which has not remarkably changed since then. Adaş et al. (2020) investigated four themes relating to social media use among amateur sports teams, namely, the advantages of using social media, selecting fitting social media platforms, learnings in reaching the target group, and the technique of using social media concerning professionalization (p. 136). Naraine and Parent (2017) studied the inclusion of social media as a stakeholder management tool for not-for-profit sports organizations, finding, among others, that "[w]ith social media continuing to gain prominence, it is plausible more organizations will continue to adopt this method of communication. However, the findings also suggest it is likely this change will be minor and not radically shift an organization's condition" (pp. 72/73). Therefore, social media alone does not necessarily drastically change the state of a sports club.

In a qualitative study on amateur sports teams in New Zealand, Robinson and France (2011) find that amateur sports clubs prefer to professionalize but are missing resources and revenues (p. 58). For the situation to change, amateur sports clubs need to grow a relationship with the media (Robinson & France, 2011, p. 58). "Given amateur team sports are funded from the community and

bottom-up sources, a sensible choice for the sports organizations is to also gain media coverage from the community and local media" (Robinson & France, 2011, p. 58). A comparable development is seen in German amateur handball leagues in North-Rhine Westphalia, as Figures 2 and 3 show. A news outlet covering contextualized results of the amateur leagues emerges (*Harzhelden*), as well as media coverage of the *HSG Siebengebirge*, a team from the local fifth division, on local television.

2.3. Using social media as an individual athlete

Moving from the organizational to the individual level, next, social media use among athletes and the respective existing research are presented. As there is rarely any research on social media use among amateur athletes, research on using social media among 'normal' people is applied, to get the closest to possible underlying motivations and effects among amateur athletes.

2.3.1. Social media usage among professional athletes

Social media presents a tool for professional athletes to create personal branding, foster fan engagement, gain popularity, and give personal insights into their lives (Hull & Abeza, 2021, p. 15; Kazazi, 2023, paras. 1-3). Following Doyle et al. (2020), the theory of self-presentation by Goffman (1959, as cited in Doyle et al., 2020, p. 507) finds its way into the underlying mechanisms influencing the so-called impression management done by athletes on social media, meaning "selectively emphasizing those elements of their careers or characteristics with which they would like to be associated and for which they would like to be known" (p. 507).

Research, however, shows that social media usage can negatively affect athletes in certain settings (Hayes et. al., 2020, p. 863). According to Hayes et al. (2020), athletes are found to be distracted, when faced with positive and negative messages, pressure, personal branding, and the social media output of their competitors (p. 863). They, like 'normal' people – and linking back to Kietzmann et al. (2011, p. 243) and Baccarella et al. (2018, p. 433) –, are affected by social media, not only positively but also negatively. In the context of Twitter and using it, David et al. (2018) find that student-athletes experience benefits, for example, as an "avenue for advocacy and moral support and promoting team cohesion" (p. 163), as well as demerits, such as the "receipt of critical tweets and detrimental performance implications" (p. 163). Furthermore, Ruser and Steinfeldt (2021), explore the psychological impact of social media in sports:

> The inception of social media has opened the door to the possibility of athletes engaging in upward and downward social comparison countless times within any given hour. A common, athlete-centered example might be scrolling through social media, only to start on a tangent of thinking about how much they [need] to improve to beat a competitor who recently posted an intense training video. Through social media, young athletes expose themselves to countless situations in which their internal self-dialogue might be self-deprecating, doubtful, or

amotivated due to social comparison (p. 156).

The corresponding socio-psychological element, that underlies the mentioned by Ruser and Steinfeldt (2021, p. 156), social comparison, is not just existent among professional athletes. As going to be elaborated later on, social media sites can be places of social comparison in general (Cramer et al., 2016, p. 739).

Furthermore, the implementation of the story feature on Instagram opened up new possibilities to share content on the platform. A study conducted by Li et al. (2021) investigated how elite female athletes engage with the story feature during an international sports event (p. 113). Among other types of content, the elite female athletes posted primarily promotional and match-related content on their stories (Li et al., 2021, p. 113). They found that "elite women athletes disseminated three types of promotional content using Instagram Stories: self-promotion, team promotion, and brand promotion" (Li et al., 2021, p. 116); and, Li et al. (2021) acknowledge, that through the mention-sharing function, meaning when one is being tagged on another post or story, it becomes easier to re-post it on their own story, allowing for a facilitated interaction with followers (p. 116).

The findings of the mentioned impact among professional athletes when using social media show that social media is influential – in an ambiguous manner. This research aims to investigate perceptions – positive and negative –, that have been found among professional athletes, among amateur handball players. Further, the ability to re-post, especially following the mention-sharing function, is of relevance to this research, as, also, amateur athletes can easily engage in this form of content sharing. Due to the increasing professionalization in amateur sports media, and the present effects of the use of social media among professionals, the assumption of similar perceptions and reactive actions among amateurs exists, even though the competitive landscape might be less extreme.

2.3.2. Social media usage among 'normal' people

It is of special interest for this research to understand how and why 'normal' people, who, for the sake of this study, include amateur athletes, use social media. Following this, one can better understand the potential perceptions and effects of the amateur athletes' teams' social media accounts. Current research has investigated underlying motivations and outcomes to a great extent and found several noticeable use cases, among them, using social media as a means to self-promote oneself, to feel a sense of belonging, and, also, to socially compare with others. Nonetheless, using different types of social media underlies different psychological motivations that can vary accordingly (van Dijck, 2013, p. 199; Laor, 2022, p. 2).

A prominent example of using social media is self-promotion (Moon et al., 2016, p. 22); and, as elaborated on by Doyle et al. (2020), who build upon Goffman's (1959, as cited in Doyle et al., 2020, p. 507) theory of self-presentation, professional athletes engage in impression management (p.

507). Generally, impression management is not only related to professional athletes but found to be an existing issue when using social media (Rui & Stefanone, 2013, p. 110). Related to self-promotion are the motivational drivers of self-expression and social interaction, which are crucial motivational drivers in the use of Instagram (Moon et al., 2016, p. 22). Presumably, this matches with the assumption of amateur handball players self-promoting themselves or enjoying mediums and other channels that are promoting them – their team's social media. Lynch et al. (2018) investigate the general idea of promotion by others, and that it can be preferred by people who want to avoid certain interpersonal costs of self-promotion (pp. 642/643). Promotion by others is an interesting concept in the context of, first, the content shown on the team's Instagram account, which, from there, can turn into more active self-promotion, for example through re-posting. Re-posting, following the mention-sharing function, enables the user to share the content on their own story or main feed. There is little research on why 'normal' people engage in re-posting content on their story feature, however, in the sporting context, similar assumptions to the use cases of professional athletes (as investigated by Li et al., 2021, p. 113) can be formulated. Further, Yenilmez Kacar (2024) argues, that Instagram's two ways to share content, via the main feed or the story feature, differently influence self-presentational practices, such as frequency, audiences, temporal value, impression management efforts, and social approval (p. 113). Given the lesser scholarly focus on re-posting following the mention-sharing function among 'normal' people, this research aims to further identify motivations among amateur athletes to do so, as it adds more depth to understanding their respective perceptions and reactions.

Seidman (2013) investigated, next to self-promotion, the motivation to feel belongingness in using social media (p. 402). The extent to which social media usage is influenced by these two motivational drivers varies based on personal characteristics (Seidman, 2013, p. 405; Smith et al., 2021, p. 19). Thomas et al. (2017) investigate social identification in sports teams, where personal identity motives play a strong role in group identification processes (p. 518). Belongingness does play a role in team sports, as, on the one hand, members want to feel part of the team, and on the other hand, they potentially want to show being part of the team to the outside world. The former can be based on the general human need to belong, identified by Maslow (1943), as the human looks "for a place in his group" (p. 381). This need is seemingly translated into the use of social media.

Another phenomenon in the use of social media is following and gaining insights into the lives of influencers (Lee et al., 2022, p. 78). According to Ki and Kim (2019), consumers especially intend to "mimic" social media influencers (p. 915). As previously elaborated research shows, professional athletes engage in showing their lives online, from which fans gain insights into the practices and lives of their sports idols, presumably aiming to mimic them, for example in a sporting context. Following the idea to mimic influencers, the influencers in sports can be favorite athletes or clubs for example. Frequently visiting and becoming a fan of a certain club and sport might lead to increased role model status for the respective players. Mutter and Pawlowski (2014) show that a motivational effect of professional sports success on participation in amateur sports can exist, arguing

that it mainly increases the frequency of participation within a sport (p. 332). Due to increasing coverage of sporting role models on social media, fans and consumers are frequently faced with insights into practice and match highlights of their idols (Sanderson & Kassing, 2015, p. 247). According to McCarthy (2011, as cited in Sanderson & Kassing, 2015, p. 249), in "sports that historically receive less media coverage [...] fans used new media to connect with one another to share information about the sport, create new content, and archive disparate artifacts – all of which contributed to collective intelligences about the sport and identification with it" (pp. 249/250). These new media enhance the possibilities to identify with a club or player (Sanderson & Kassing, 2015, p. 249). As Pan and Zeng (2018) find, in the realm of para-social interaction, "wishful identification [...] can lead to the desire to emulate" (p. 210) – mimicking, as touched upon earlier. This mimicking behavior is interesting for this research as it influences the amateurs' interest in the professional athletes and teams of the sport. Doyle et al. (2020) found that variables like including teammates in pictures and high-quality photos on athletes' social media, increase the engagement response by the audience (p. 522) – something that amateur athletes might want to mimic. Following this interest, the research aims to investigate amateur athletes' perception and re-posting behavior based on their team's social media output and how it links to having certain athletes and clubs as (sporting and digital) inspiration.

Additionally, research suggests that social media becomes gamified in the sense that competition is a motivational driver in using it (Chimenti et al., 2021, p. 624). Social media sites like Facebook are places of social comparison (Cramer et al., 2016, p. 739), which in itself can initiate competitive behavior (Garcia et al., 2013, p. 634). In the context of sports, competition is a known phenomenon; nonetheless, amateur players might perceive their team's social media output and feel more professional, in turn, comparing themselves to others – linking back to findings among athletes by Ruser and Steinfeldt (2021, p. 156). The previous notion of presumably feeling more professional in a competitive context does fit with research conducted by Curry and Weiss (1989, p. 257), who investigated sport identity and motivation for sport participation. They find that "competitive motivation in particular is associated with self-definitions of being an athlete" (Curry & Weiss, 1989, p. 266).

Concludingly, the various motivational drivers for using social media and resulting effects have a potential impact on how amateur players perceive and react to their team's social media output. This research aims at understanding these motivational drivers in the respective context.

2.4. What is meant by professionalization?

The introduction serves as an insight into current digital happenings for amateur handball in the German northern Rhine region. From the researcher's perspective, this can be called an ongoing apparent professionalization. Nonetheless, this study takes steps to confirm this development, or, to put it differently, the perceptions of this development among amateur athletes are investigated and

presented later on in the results section. As an addition to this literature review, it is interesting to explore current research in the field of professionalization in comparable scenarios. From there, possible effects on actors affected by this development can be better understood.

Research often talks about the professionalization of sports organizations in the context of paid professionals (Dowling et al., 2014, p. 525). Dowling et al. (2014) define sports professionalization as "the process by which sport organisations, systems, and the occupation of sport, transforms from a volunteer-driven to an increasingly business-like phenomenon" (p. 527). They elaborate on existing research up to their time of investigation, and conclude, that not only the inclusion of paid professionals defines professionalization, but, further, advances within organizational, systemic, and occupational professionalization play a role in mentioned (pp. 525-527). In the context of organizations utilizing social media, taking on a distinguishing perspective might be valuable. As stated by Naraine and Parent (2017), social media use increases in general, and more sports organizations adopt it, however, it does not radically change the state of the organization (pp. 72/73) – which can be interpreted as not professionalizing the organization itself. However, this current research is not interested in calling the sports organizations professionalized but calling the changing amateur sports media landscape professionalized. It can be argued, that, the more actors join and utilize an active social media strategy, meaning more teams in the leagues are active on social media, the coverage of news and entertainment in the small sphere of the league increases – and professionalizes, as it resembles similarities to the professional leagues. In that regard, the term professionalization refers to becoming closer to what the professional teams do in their leagues – on social media.

2.5. The interplay of actors – handball (league) community online

The effect of more teams joining an active social media strategy can be referred to as the creation and growth of an online community. According to Papadopoulos et al. (2012), "different forms of Social Media networks are possible depending on the transactions of the Social Media application under study" (p. 520) – which, in the case at hand, is Instagram. Instagram serves as a tool to post on the main feed and story, follow, tag, like, comment, and share, and, also, allows for the creation of shared posts. Further, "[e]xplicit communities are created as a result of human decision and acquire members based on human consent" (Papadopoulos et al., 2012, p. 521). The explicit offline existence of several community levels, from micro (the team), to meso (the league), to macro (people interested in handball), already allows for certain distinctions, and similar levels can be applied to the online environment and respective explicit communities. The emergence of online social media affects community and network creation, as well as the communication of actors (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014, p. 2). Within the different levels, players perceive their team, the league, and the handball world, as a community – which, when shifting online, can be perceived to a similar, or, dependably, even greater, extent. This interplay is of interest to this research as the players'

perceptions of their team's Instagram output shall not be solely identified from a singular perspective, the team's output, but, naturally, be connected to the perception of what other teams and players are doing in the league (community). Therefore, it is important to draw attention to perceived effects within the league.

2.6. Concluding the theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is contextualized around a recent development in the amateur handball's digital environment and stakeholder communication, an apparent professionalization of the media landscape. Based on this apparent professionalization, assumptions can be formulated, of finding similar underlying motivations and effects of utilizing social media among teams and athletes, on the professional and the amateur level. In becoming an increasingly important tool for amateur sports teams, and potentially influencing perceptions of professionalism, competition, and belonging among their amateur players, current research has not yet investigated respective happenings. Academics have focused on the effects on professional athletes and social media's impact on professional and amateur clubs; but it remains to be investigated, how amateur players perceive their amateur team's social media output and act upon it (re-posting). As outlined before, of special interest emerges the question of self-promotion, belonging, and social comparison on Instagram. In the context of amateur athletes perceiving their team's social media output and reacting to it, underlying motivations of Instagram usage, and understanding them, creates a better comprehension and ability to answer the research questions. Further, network and community effects resulting from the interplay of different teams' existing social media accounts are sought to be investigated. In general, themes that are of interest are derived from previous literature and are further operationalized in the methods section.

3. Research design

The following chapter elaborates on the research design including the argumentation for in-depth interviewing as a qualitative research method employed by the researcher. The description of the operationalization and relevant constructs/concepts are presented with example questions from the interview guide for the semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the sample and sampling strategy, which includes the list of interviewees for this research (anonymized), as well as the collection, processing, and analysis of the data are explained. Lastly, ethical considerations are elaborated on.

3.1. Methods

To investigate the above-mentioned research question, a thorough understanding of individuals' perceptions and actions (re-posting) associated with their team's social media output is required. This justifies the method of qualitative in-depth interviews, as, according to Johnson (2001), in in-depth interviews, an interviewee's opinion and experience are sought to be properly understood (p. 104). Furthermore, narrative and discursive in-depth interviews investigate certain ways of what and how the interviewee is talking about a respective matter (Dumitrica, 2024, 00:02:35). For the analysis at hand, in-depth interviews aim to investigate how amateur handball players talk about perceptions and actions in general, and ways of how they further give meaning to certain experiences associated with their team's social media output as well as their re-posting behavior based on that. The interviews are semi-structured and follow the topic guide based on the theoretical framework.

3.1.1. Sample and sampling strategy

The interviewees were selected through personal reach-out based on social media research (convenience sampling). A total of twelve interviewees were selected to conduct online interviews with, aiming to reach saturation of insightful themes and concepts. A variety of demographics in terms of teams, age, and gender was achieved, not necessarily regarding the leagues though, as all male players played in the same league. Nonetheless, this league represents a large part of the region of interest, so it fits the purpose of this research. Male and female amateur handball players were approximately equally recruited. Seven interviewees were selected based on my network and relationships. Another five interviewees were selected through either social media reach-out or via the network of the other seven interviewees. The interviewees were chosen based on their handball team's performance (must be considered high amateur level – 4., 5., 6. division), and whether their handball team has an Instagram account, on which the team posts regularly and gives insights into matches and other happenings, as well as, whether the interviewee has an own Instagram account, where she or he has access to the team's Instagram output. Therefore, the social media site that is of interest for this research was Instagram. Furthermore, the focused age group was selected to be 18-28 years old, as younger age groups are found to be more active on social media (Hruska & Maresova, 2020, p. 1).

Generally speaking, the leagues in the region of interest are divided and named as follows: *Verbandsliga* (6th division), *Oberliga* (5th division), and *Regionalliga* (4th division). Overall, homogeneity in the sample in terms of age group and interest in handball was preferred. Table 2 presents the twelve interviewees who were recruited for this research. Relevant information about their age, gender, and the league they play in, is anonymized.

Table 2

Interviewee Demographics (N = 12)

Interviewee	Age	Gender	League (Season 23/24)
Interviewee 1	23	male	Oberliga (5.)
Interviewee 2	27	female	Oberliga (5.)
Interviewee 3	24	female	Oberliga (5.)
Interviewee 4	23	male	Oberliga (5.)
Interviewee 5	24	male	Oberliga (5.)
Interviewee 6	23	male	Oberliga (5.)
Interviewee 7	24	female	Regionalliga (4.)
Interviewee 8	25	male	Oberliga (5.)
Interviewee 9	24	female	Oberliga (5.)
Interviewee 10	27	female	Verbandsliga (6.)
Interviewee 11	28	female	Verbandsliga (6.)
Interviewee 12	24	female	Regionalliga (4.)

Note. Names of interviewees anonymized.

Throughout conducting the interviews, I received several points of feedback of it being an interesting topic, and the players have not yet thought about this phenomenon in-depth. The interviews stimulated thinking on both ends, which encouraged me to continue this project.

3.1.2. *Operationalization and relevant concepts*

Based on the theoretical framework, the research aims to investigate the perceptions and behavior of individual amateur handball players based on their team's social media output. Four themes were deductively looked out for in the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, as shown in the following Figure 4. Generally, data that related to those themes, was classified under the particular theme. The accompanying information elaborates on the example questions (whole topic guide to be found in Appendix A), and which theory the concepts are based on (in brackets). These underlying themes in the research question aided in structuring the topic guide on which the interviews were based and allowed for a subsequent in-depth answering of the research questions. Afterwards, data collection and coding processes are further elaborated on.

Figure 4

Underlying Themes in the Research Question

3.1.2.1. Mimicking professional handball

For this theme, questions about interest in professional handball, favorite teams, and players, as well as if the interviewee regularly checks their respective Instagram output were asked. Emotions and values that the interviewee affiliates with role models and favorite teams and players were sought to be investigated (based on Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014, p. 332). Also, what kind of output do they wish to see on their team's account? This acted as a base from where potential wish-to-mimic might exist (based on Sanderson & Kassing, 2015, pp. 247-249; Ki & Kim, 2019, p. 915). Example questions for the concept of mimicking professional handball are: how do you follow the results and news of professional handball? And, how would you describe the impact of following professional handball on your handball journey? Understanding the interviewees' access and potential idolization of professional handball, in a sporting, but, additionally, ideally, in a digital context, lays the inspirational foundation from where their perceptions can be better understood and grounded.

3.1.2.2. Promotion by others

For this theme, questions about their associated feelings with the team's Instagram output, especially when the respondent is shown on the posts were asked, as well as questions about belonging (based on Maslow, 1943, p. 381; Thomas et al., 2017, p. 518). It was of interest to compare associated feelings when being promoted by others (the team), with actively promoting oneself (re-posting) (based on Lynch et al., 2018, pp. 642/643). Example questions for the concept of promotion by others are: how do you describe your team's Instagram output? Does it feature you? And, how do you describe your feelings associated with your team's Instagram output? The concept of promotion

by others is of special interest as it connects to the following concept of self-promotion. Both of these are derived from the ideas to passively perceive the content and/or actively re-post it and to understand different underlying motivational drivers.

3.1.2.3. Self-promotion

For this theme, questions about their team's Instagram output were asked, as well as questions about the interviewee's reactive actions (based on Goffman, 1959, as cited in Doyle et al., 2020, p. 507; Rui & Stefanone, 2013, p. 110). How do they react and what can be the underlying motivations for this reaction? Questions about the desire to show that one belongs were asked (referring to Seidman, 2013, p. 402). Example questions for the concept of self-promotion are: how do you react to it (the posts)? And, when re-posting, do you want to show to the outside, that you are part of a team or group? As mentioned, the concept of self-promotion is of special interest as it connects to the concept of promotion by others. Understanding both of them and their role in the respondents' perceptions and actions is valuable.

3.1.2.4. Network/community effects

For this theme, questions about their team's Instagram output were asked in combination with questions about a changing relationship with other teams and players (based on Seargeant & Tagg, 2014, p. 2). Do potential drivers of competition exist (based on Cramer et al., 2016, p. 739; Chimenti et al., 2021, p. 624; Ruser & Steinfeldt, 2021, p. 156)? Example questions for the concept of network/community effects are: do you compare yourself with other players'/teams' outputs? And, how would you describe a (changed) relation to other teams and their players? Network and community effects add a broader level to the interviewees' perceptions, as they can elaborate on effects within the league and among teams. A singular perspective on only their team would be missing out on important meaning-making processes generated by the overall interplay between the teams on social media.

3.2. Data collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews are chosen as a data collection method for qualitative thematic analysis, as they represent a valuable kind of investigation into perceptions and feelings associated with certain topics by participants (Johnson, 2001, p. 106). During the interviews, I followed a topic guide with prepared questions, so that all conversations were structurally led by the same investigation of operationalized concepts. Nonetheless, I remained adaptable in the course of the conversation, changed questions, or skipped certain ones, as I orientated myself toward the respondent's answers and insights. For example, some interviewees hold responsible social media positions within their team, next to playing in the team, so I was especially interested in their perceptions and way of working. One interviewee manages several workings at a regional club as well

as a professional club and was able to give deepening insights into his strategies and ideas of communication. Although I remained adaptable, the overall topic guide was followed to ensure no deviation from the relevant concepts occurs.

All twelve interviews were conducted in German, as this is the mother tongue of the interviewer and the interviewees. By conducting the interviews in the respondents' mother tongue, a proper investigation of sentiments, perceptions, and reactions is potentially facilitated (Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p. 434). The transcripts themselves are kept in German, however, coding happened in English. Relevant statements from the interviewees, which are later presented in the results section are translated into English. When presenting the translation, I made sure that the interviewees' messages were conveyed equally.

The data collection happened during the last week of April and the month of May. Between the first five interviews and the other seven interviews a re-evaluation of the topic guide, based on answers received, was employed. The topic guide was not majorly changed, nonetheless, a few ideas of additional questions or potential follow-up questions were added later on, namely in an attempt to grasp the concept of belonging and the desire to show mentioned on social media. As the data collection and analysis represent an iterative process during thematic qualitative analysis (Boeije, 2010b, p. 119), they were approached like this, and allowed during phases of data collection for initial analysis and potential additional literature search, which can aid during the analysis of the data collected. This mainly happened with two added themes of interest, after several interviews were conducted, namely research about feelings of belonging on social media and network and community effects. A literature search based on those was conducted and later newly emerged in the theoretical framework and topic guide.

What appeared to be challenging is, that except for the first interview, none of the other eleven interviews lasted 45 minutes. Nonetheless, the topic guide was followed for every interview and was well incorporated into the conversation. Interview 8 showed some flexibility, as the interviewee was able to give insights into the happenings of interest also from a more professional perspective, as he, additionally to being a handball player, employs a marketing position for a handball club. After a 'small talk' to set the scene and atmosphere for all the interviews, the recording was started. After conducting the interviews, often, talks about the general research project occurred, accompanied by interviewees' suggestions for other interviewees from their respective networks, which in turn facilitated my recruiting process. According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), "saturation can be achieved in a narrow range of interviews (9–17) [...], particularly in studies with relatively homogenous study populations and narrowly defined objectives" (p. 9). I can firmly state that a saturation of themes based on the questions I asked and narrowly defined concepts I was interested in, occurred during my interview process, as it was also based on a homogenous study population. Saturation, in the context of qualitative research, means that data was collected until no new information was obtained (Morse, 1995, p. 147). From there, I could analyze the data and achieve a

respective result in answering the research questions.

3.3. Data processing, analysis, and interpretation

Following the conduct of in-depth interviews, the transcriptions were thematically analyzed. In general, and in line with Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), the dataset of all interview transcriptions was investigated to find repeated patterns of sensemaking. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis of the data focused on a semantic level (p. 84) – as it follows "a specific question or area of interest within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Furthermore, the analysis entailed moving from the description of themes to the interpretation and theorization, meaning that the repetitive themes, as well as unique insights, were elaborated against pre-existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84) – with the aim to form a comprehensive understanding of how amateur handball players perceive and act based on their team's social media output, taking into account an apparent professionalization and characteristic reasons to use social media. For the concrete steps of the analysis of the interviews, Boeije's (2010a) analysis in qualitative research was taken as a guide.

The thematic analysis was conducted using the digital software Atlas.ti. By using digital software to thematically analyze the interviews, the researcher's process of working with and analyzing the data can be facilitated (Boeije, 2010b, p. 98). The analysis in Atlas.ti can especially ease the steps of open and axial coding outlined by Boeije (2010a, p. 90) – as well as the organization and finding of relevant quotes when preparing the reporting of results. Appendix B shows an overview and example codes of the resulted coding process.

Generally speaking, the steps of open, selective, and axial coding are more linked with constructivist grounded theory. However, as argued by Braun and Clarke (2006), "grounded theory seems increasingly to be used in a way that is essentially grounded theory 'lite' – as a set of procedures for coding data very much akin to thematic analysis" (p. 81). Further, in following and claiming a proper thematic analysis, the researcher remains flexible in a way of not being fully obliged to develop a grounded theory from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The data can be analyzed inductively, which refers more to a grounded theory approach, or deductively, which refers more to an analyst-driven approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 83/84). Overall, thematic analysis refers to a pattern-seeking analysis. In the case at hand, a social constructivist approach was employed in analyzing the meaning-making processes of the respondents; they construct reality through the way they speak about and perceive the different phenomena. A professionalizing media landscape and the effect of their team's Instagram output are perceived and explained differently by different interviewees (as shown in the results section). The individual steps of the coding processes are explained next.

3.3.1. Open coding

Following the thematic approach for qualitative analysis by Boeije (2010b, p. 98), the first step to thematically analyze the qualitative data was open coding. In open coding, the researcher is immersed in the data. Textual fragments that describe a certain idea/standpoint/happening were coded individually throughout the texts. Only little attention to what might be relevant to the research question was paid at this point, as concepts, that the researcher might not yet have thought of, can emerge from the data (Boeije, 2010b, p. 96) – inductively. I started the open coding process after the first five interviews and finished it after the twelfth one. By re-reading the first five transcripts, I was able to get an idea of already saturating themes, expected ones, based on my literature review (deductive), but also potential new themes emerging from the data (inductive). For my coding process, I used sensitizing concepts from the prior established theoretical framework and respective operationalization. Those included codes linked to mimicking professional handball, self-promotion, and promotion by others which were respectively measured (see Appendix B for coding examples). From an inductive manner, the codes of showing to belong and the ones further linking to network and community effects emerged. I was able to redefine my interview guide and allow for a deeper investigation of revealed themes in the following interviews. From the data at hand, 274 open codes emerged. They account for all various statements by the interviewees that show their perceptions of their team's social media output and respective actions, the apparent professionalization of amateur sports social media in general, as well as accompanying themes.

3.3.2. Axial coding

Axial coding, along the same lines as Boeije (2010b), introduces the step of categorizing or finding themes within the initial codes from open coding (p. 106). Once all data was thoroughly openly coded, I aimed to merge codes under certain themes. These themes were important to get a more generalized idea about the data, and in turn, allowed a preparation for the final step, selective coding. I grouped similar open codes under categories which presented itself as a difficult process. For some codes, I was not directly sure whether they talk about the same, and, therefore, could be grouped. However, again, a constant re-visiting of the actual data and constant comparison with other codes and groups helped me advance in this process. During the axial coding process, seven themes, relevant to answering the research questions, emerged from the previous 274 open codes (see Appendix B for overview and example codes). Those seven themes were then ready to be linked with the theory under broader categories, the selective coding process.

3.3.3. Selective coding

Selective coding established the final step of the thematic analysis, laid out by Boeije (2010b, p. 116). In this step, the themes that emerged from the axial coding process were linked back to the theoretical framework, aiming at a deeper understanding of them (Boeije, 2010b, p. 114). The

theoretical framework and its investigated concepts, which were operationalized, were sought to be brought into connection with the emerging themes from the data. If the operationalization, as well as qualitative data collection, the interviews, serve the purpose of answering the research question well, this step is ideally relatively straightforward. Most of the selective codes were concluded in a deductive manner, as the theoretical framework serves as a solid foundation to investigate saturated themes mentioned by interviewees. However, in some cases, interviewees gave insights into phenomena, which were not yet greatly investigated in the theoretical framework, so a continuous process of immersing in the data and re-visiting the theoretical framework established itself. Finally, four selective codes were developed from the axial codes. Again, Appendix B serves as a proper overview guide to illustrate the linkages. The results of this process are presented in the following results section, elaborating on all main themes, and aiming to explain occurring phenomena with the support of the theoretical framework.

3.4. Research ethics

According to Silverman (2011), the central themes for credibility in research are reliability and validity (p. 360). Reliability in interviews is, firstly, achieved through tape recording of the interview (Silverman, 2011, p. 265). In the case at hand, this is done by recorded Microsoft Teams interviews, from where the audio recording is used for transcribing purposes. Additionally, pre-testing the interview, as well as, re-analyzing the first interviews with the inclusion of different researchers is of importance to achieve reliability in this context, was, however, not done in the case at hand. Still, I followed standardized steps in analyzing the data and aimed for a transparent description of my steps in the previous, as well as the following, paragraphs.

Moreover, it is important to be self-reflexive about my role as a researcher. Since I am familiar with the sport and region of interest, as well as with some of the interviewees, I am aware of the fact that my questions can be biased. Nonetheless, the interviews were all conducted in an open atmosphere, allowing the interviewees to elaborate on their perceptions, without me persuasively leading them towards a certain answer. Moreover, I have to be self-reflexive about the fact that I am following more male amateur players and their teams on Instagram, which influences my perception of the amateur handball media landscape, since, also, for example, *Harzhelden* only covers the men's leagues. This effect was tried to be limited by asking the interviewees about their perceptions of the amateur handball media landscape.

Further, in terms of validity, I have to acknowledge the following steps outlined by Silverman (2011): analytic induction, the constant comparative method, deviant-case analysis, comprehensive data treatment, and appropriate tabulations (p. 374). During the analysis, I have not only treated emerging themes from a deductive perspective, but also allowed for analytic induction, and the emergence of themes purely based on the data. Also, I constantly compared emerging themes with the growing body of data. Deviant cases are addressed in my results section, transparently showing that

only one or two interviewees talked about a respective deviant case. Lastly, I have not added appropriate tabulations to a large extent, nonetheless, added them where needed in facilitating the comprehension of data collection and analysis.

4. Results

This research intends to answer the question of how German amateur handball players perceive their team's social media output. This question was further contextualized by two sub-questions, firstly, how do they reflect on the posts, and when and why do they engage in re-posting, and, secondly, whether they feel a sense of belonging to the team or a fostered competitive thinking concerning other teams.

The following results are interpreted starting with the respondents' perspective on the current amateur handball social media landscape, and whether they feel a sense of professionalization. This confirms the context, on which the answering of the research questions builds. From there, the individual perceptions of the respondents' teams' Instagram outputs with insights into their re-posting behavior, intertwined with their general usage of Instagram, are presented. I investigated the mentioned perceptions by aiming to discover the underlying motivational drivers.

4.1. The professionalization of amateur sports media

The professionalization of amateur sports media is rarely researched, however, accounted for by research investigating the use cases of social media for amateur sports teams (Robinson & France, 2011, p. 47; Adaş et al., 2020, p. 136). As laid out in the introduction, this research is grounded upon a perceived professionalization based on the researcher's knowledge of the field in which the study is conducted (amateur handball in the German northern Rhine area). Interestingly, the respondents argue there is a professionalization of sports social media in the context of the handball teams' presence and activity on Instagram going on, however, they account for existing differences between the teams and clubs. Some teams are more invested in a seemingly more professionalized appearance than others. On the question of how he would describe the current media presence of amateur handball, interviewee 1 says "[v]ery strong actually, because it feels like every men's team in our league has its own page". And, asking whether he perceives this as an ongoing professionalization, he answers "[i]t depends from club to club". Interviewee 8 states the media presence is "very club-specific", and interviewee 6 joins this reasoning, saying it is "very different". Seeing more sports teams adopting a social media strategy can be linked to Naraine and Parent (2017), saying that this is due to social media gaining prominence (p. 72). Notably, interviewee 8, whose team finished the season 23/24 as a champion in the fifth division and was consequently promoted to the fourth division, says that a strong media presence would be a basic requirement and part of the future. Interviewee 8's perspective on a strong media presence being important is shared by other interviewees as well.

The purpose of social media is driven by the idea to share information, meaning, for example, to announce games, and report on results and transfers. Interviewee 6 summarizes the kind of posts on his team's Instagram page as follows: "match previews, meaning, advertising for our matches [...] [T]hen videos after the game or results. [...] [O]r if there are any events, any special features. [...] Advertising for our bus trips, for the away games, that we get enough people together." Additionally,

interviewee 3 explains to share information on "[...] what kind of position we're in at the moment, are we just coming off five defeats, or have we just had five wins [...]. I think that's really important, and I think these player presentations that we have are basically really cool, that you say, OK, this is the team." These types of communication with different types of stakeholders are also studied by Abeza et al. (2019) when they investigate social media communication objectives among professional sports clubs (p. 91). Seeing similar communication objectives among amateur handball clubs, parallel lines to professional clubs, and another reason for justifying an ongoing professionalization can be drawn from this.

One type of stakeholder is potential new players. A major difference between amateur clubs' to professional clubs' communication objectives in using social media appears to be the attraction of new players via social media (referring to professional clubs' communication objectives outlined by Abeza et al., 2019, p. 91 – attracting new players is not among them). Interviewee 2 touches upon a strong Instagram presence which can potentially influence transfer decisions of players. Due to many transfers away from the female teams and internal shifts of players at a crucial moment, the club had difficulties gathering enough players for the team, so former players were re-activated. Interviewee 2 concludes that:

> [...] we had an internet presence for a year, then a couple came to the trial training, but this year has actually escalated completely. So I think there were 15 people at the trial training, and then, I don't know if it was just because of that [internet presence], but I can well imagine it now.

Interviewee 5, having recently transferred between clubs, acknowledges that the type of Instagram presence was not "so important to me. [...] [B]ut it was important to me that there was somehow a presence on Instagram". Interviewee 7 describes the development over the past years and the fact that you can attract new players: "[...], also that you're looking for players, so in amateur handball, I didn't have that a few years ago, [...], or, for example, player requests directly via Insta messages or something like that, [...], I definitely don't know that from before." Interviewee 8 adds, that "social media is the first thing you see from the club. [...] and these emotions [increasing spectatorship at games] are also conveyed via social media" – which attracts new players. Incorporating the attraction of new players as a communication objective for amateur sports teams' social media use is an interesting result found by this research – and, according to the interviewees, it does have an impact, as several interviewees mentioned it as an important asset of a strong Instagram presence. Therefore, one can see a recent development in the utilization of Instagram among amateur sports teams: to attract new players, but, also, the other way around, with players being attracted; it does not only happen when a club is in need for players, but can, potentially, also be initiated by the player. Academic research remains scarce on this topic, meaning this finding marks an initial effort in this

area.

In conclusion, the media presence of both male and female amateur teams in the northern Rhine area in Germany grows, but generally varies. To some extent, professionalization is recognizable, as teams are putting more effort into their managed media presence. On top of that, the launch of *Harzhelden* plays a role in the male amateur divisions, as pointed out by interviewee 4: "I would say that this definitely contributes to professionalization. I would say that they have an important influence". Given the context of an apparent professionalization to a varying extent, players were asked how they generally perceive their teams' social media outputs, how they reflect and react to it, and other thoughts they might have towards impact and effect, which is analyzed later on. Next, the influence of professional handball on respondents is elaborated on.

4.2. Mimicking professional handball

At the beginning of the interviews, I asked my interviewees about their access to professional handball, as well as questions about favorite players and potential role models. This access to professional handball and potential idolizing represent an interesting avenue in this research, as it tries to bridge the gap between amateurs and professionals. Several effects of social media usage are found among professional athletes and clubs, and efforts of amateur players and teams to mimic them – in a sporting and digital context – opens the door for comparison.

Most interviewees said they follow professional handball on social media, mainly Instagram. Comparing it to the past, interviewee 1 says, "nowadays you can access it much better if you just follow the player, your favorite player, and then just look at the videos of him, the pictures, the results or whatever, so you have much more direct access than before". Interviewee 12 further elaborates, that "it used to be through TV [...], but now I mainly see what they're [the professional players] up to on social media, so I'd say I don't watch so much TV at the moment, I watch a lot on Instagram". Mentioned development can be contextualized by the findings of Sanderson and Kassing (2015), saying that increasing coverage of sporting role models on social media leads to fans gaining more insights into match highlights (p. 247). Further, new media increases the possibilities to identify with a player (Sanderson & Kassing, 2015, p. 249). Professional handball players are not (yet) on a comparable influencer status as sporting personalities who are seen in bigger sports like football, and full identification with certain players was not mentioned by the interviewees. Moreover, though some said they had an idol when they were younger, almost none said that they still have a sporting role model or idol today. However, some mentioned, that even though the role-model status, which they might have had for them when they were younger, diminished, still, today, they analyze the professionals' playing techniques and aim to partially copy them – in a sporting context. Interviewee 6 says: "I try to do that analytically and then just look at it, OK, what is the line player doing now, how are they behaving in defense; and I try to pick things up from there".

Enjoying their team's social media output could exist due to the attempt to mimic the

professional clubs' social media output. Doyle et al. (2020) state that including teammates in pictures and high-quality photos on athletes' social media increases the audience's engagement (p. 522). Therefore, I asked the interviewees which types of posts they wish to see on their teams' Instagram output and they often mentioned types of posts that can be seen on professional teams' account pages like highlight plays, practice insights, or match scenes. Interviewee 4 talks about posts to show sponsors of the team and, with an increasing media presence, appeal to new sponsors, reflecting on the idea that "the influencers are actually showing the way", and how to work with sponsors. The latter can be contextualized by the findings of Ki and Kim (2019), as consumers intend to "mimic" social media influencers (p. 915). Interviewee 5 adds that he "created a kind of social media kit for this [sponsors], which you can give to sponsors and that you simply have posts where [...] the MVP of the game is 'presented by' [...] and then get more money as a result". Posts to show sponsors or working with sponsored content are communication strategies employed by professional teams (Abeza et al., 2019, p. 91). One needs to acknowledge, that interviewee 5 manages his team's Instagram output and has a greater purpose for the team in mind, when he talks about sponsored posts. Interviewee 1 says, as "an amateur club, you take an example from the professionals, what they post, what they do". In general, the team's Instagram output is often inspired by the output of professional teams, as mentioned by several interviewees (interviewees 1, 4, 5, 10). Concludingly, we can say that amateur teams get inspired by what the professionals do, and they would enjoy mimicking them. This results from their access to Instagram and professional clubs' output and influences how the players perceive in turn their own team's Instagram output.

Furthermore, some interviewees mention the emergence of so-called handball influencers on Instagram. Interviewee 11 says, that one influencer

> also does a lot of social media in handball and somehow really takes you with her in the morning at breakfast and to practice and I don't know what that is, but it's more what interests me about it, because I think she does professional sport, of course, so competitive sport, but she's somehow a bit more approachable, so for me personally a bit closer than the real professionals [...].

Interviewee 11 talks about what Lee et al. (2022) distinguished as another phenomenon in the use of social media – following and gaining insights into the lives of influencers (p. 78). Even though interviewee 11 was the only one who explicitly mentioned this type of interest for the influencer, other interviewees mentioned handball influencers as well, and that they have seen their content. According to McCarthy (2011, as cited in Sanderson & Kassing, 2015), in "sports that historically receive less media coverage [...] fans used new media to connect with one another to share information about the sport, create new content, and archive disparate artifacts – all of which contributed to collective intelligences about the sport and identification with it" (pp. 249/250). Not

only the emergence of handball influencers but also having more and more amateur clubs utilizing and activating their Instagram accounts stimulate potential network effects within the league – creating new content and increasing media coverage. Many interviewees stated that they are interested in what other amateur teams are doing on Instagram, and they also get inspired by the output of others. Interviewee 12 says "more and more clubs are doing it and yes, it's kind of fun [...] comparing yourself with others and depending on what trends come up, [...] share and see what the others are doing". The revealed effect and comparison between amateur teams is discussed later on in more detail, however, suits the mentioned contextualization by McCarthy (2011, as cited in Sanderson & Kassing, 2015, pp. 249/250).

Given a changing amateur handball media landscape and inspirational mechanisms on a bi-directional horizontal level – between amateur teams – and on a one-directional vertical level – an amateur team is inspired by a professional team, as well as an amateur player being inspired by a professional player (however more in the sporting context), the next step is to explore respondents' general usage patterns of Instagram, before further being able to capture their perceptions, concluded effect, and reactional behavior towards their team's Instagram output.

4.3. Personal usage of Instagram

The personal usage of Instagram presented itself to be mostly similar among my interviewees. They use Instagram as a source of information – as stated earlier, also handball-related information –, and as a means against boredom. Some interviewees said they spent too much time on Instagram, with interviewee 4 saying, that opening Instagram is "more of a reflex than a conscious decision". They mostly define themselves as rather passive Instagram users, sometimes posting a story (varying extent among interviewees), but rarely posting in their main feed. Others said they post from time to time in the main feed. For transparency reasons: I have not based the interviewees' definition of themselves being an active or passive user off a certain scale, so comparing them remains difficult. However, their general perception of how they use Instagram residues suitable for this research, as well as their explanations in when and why they engage in re-posting. Further, it is confirmed, that they all have access to their team's Instagram output, as well as potential access to other teams' Instagram outputs – amateur and professional.

According to Wong et al. (2019), "frequency of viewing posts, liking posts, and posting images is predicted by being motivated by a desire to belong" (p. 470). Taking into account the interviewees' mostly defined user type of being a rather passive user of Instagram, this shows an interesting behavior. However, being a passive user can also relate to posting less in their main feed. And, as investigated by Yenilmez Kacar (2024), Instagram entails two ways to share content, via the main feed or the story feature (p. 109). This influences self-presentational practices, such as frequency, audiences, temporal value, impression management efforts, and social approval (Yenilmez Kacar, 2024, p. 113). Respondents in the study of Yenilmez Kacar (2024) were found to post

extensively more stories than main feed posts (pp. 113/114). Furthermore, what resembles an interesting finding by Yenilmez Kacar (2024), is that they engage less in impression management efforts when posting a story, compared to a post in the main feed (pp. 115/116); a story post is done "'without thinking' and 'reflect[s] their true state without concern'" (p. 115). This needs to be taken into account when later on elaborating on self-promotional drivers and the desire to show belonging when re-posting their team's content, which potentially depicts themselves, as the underlying motivations might simply not be too conscious and pressuring – since re-posting is done 'without thinking'. Further, they often do not actively create the story image but re-post an existing one (mention-sharing function). However, the interviewees later on also explicitly explored their motivations when re-posting the content, allowing for a respective investigation.

4.4. Personal feelings associated with the team's Instagram output

In the attempt to answer the main research question of how German amateur handball players perceive their team's social media output (main-RQ1), and, partially sub-RQ2, how they reflect on the posts, the following two themes were analyzed.

4.4.1. Promotion by others

Several interviewees attach a certain level of satisfaction to the fact of being present in the posts (interviewees 1, 4, 5, 9, 11). Interviewee 4 says: "I'm happy when I'm in this picture, for example, or we used to shoot short videos of someone throwing or doing an exercise or something like that. I'm really happy when I'm in it and I'm happy to share it." The interviewees react satisfied to the posts on their team's Instagram account, including the ones in which they are shown; and it can lead to them re-posting the content (see *individual re-posting*). Generally, a reason to be satisfied when being shown on the posts, as the previously introduced literature investigates, might be due to the idea of self-promotion on social media (Moon et al., 2016, p. 22). Goffman's (1959, as cited in Doyle et al., 2020, p. 507) theory of self-presentation and professional athletes engaging in impression management (Doyle et al., 2020, p. 507), likely matches with the assumption of amateur handball players self-promoting themselves or appreciating mediums and other channels that are promoting them – their team's social media (promotion by others based on Lynch et al., 2018, pp. 642/643); as impression management is not only related to professional athletes but found to be a noticeable driver of using social media in general (Rui & Stefanone, 2013, p. 110). This theme might correlate with the infra-discussed self-promotion theme in *individual re-posting*, however, is distinguished by the players. They enjoy being shown, though, they do not need it as a crucial self-promoting tool towards others. This general effect can be based on findings by Lynch et al. (2018), saying that depending on personal characteristics, promotion by others can be enjoyed and preferred by people (pp. 642/643) – this effect is further contextualized in *individual re-posting*. However, as the effects of social media on users as well as their varying motivations to use them and act upon content remain ambiguous in

general, I tried to dig deeper into which associations and perceptions might further underlie this satisfaction in the next paragraph – as one amplifier for feeling satisfied about the posts, can be the desire to belong.

4.4.2. Belonging

Social media can influence feelings of belonging (Smith et al., 2021, p. 19). Nevertheless, as research shows, those feelings and sense of belonging are in complex correlation with other individual factors, such as personality characteristics and context (Kraut et al., 2002, as cited in Smith et al., 2021, p. 19). I have asked my interviewees whether they perceive an increased feeling of being part of the team or being valued in the team based on them being shown in the Instagram output. Some answered "no", and that it is more important about what you do during the games or practice; since another reason is, that they rotate the players who are shown in the posts so everyone is presented (Interviewees 1, 3, 4, 6, 7). On the other hand, interviewee 4 also said,

> if you show up there more often or something [on the posts], [...] I think that makes a difference [...]. It's cool if you can upload it somehow, and then other people see, [...], there's the picture of the club, and you're the center of attention, you're the one who's standing up for the club, [...], and now this week you're advertising.

Interviewee 4 seems to feel valued in the team and is engaged in re-posting when he can show that his club is advertising with him. Interviewee 4 touches upon being able to re-post and show that he is part of that club and the club is proud of him. This is something that is further discussed under *individual re-posting*. Interviewee 5 remembers:

> when I noticed for the first time that something was being posted about me, so to speak, that 'welcome to the team' and so on, [...] I thought that was really cool, and I felt much more comfortable then, even directly in the team and somehow as if I had been accepted there even more or even better.

Having been an advertisement for the club "felt extremely awesome", interviewee 5 says. The latter can be linked to a study by Thomas et al. (2017, p. 508), who are investigating social identification in sports teams. Personal identity motives play a strong role in group identification processes, as "participants identified with their teams to the extent that the team provided them with a personal sense of self-esteem, distinctiveness, efficacy, and meaning" (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 518). Being an advertisement for the club potentially serves for that 'distinctiveness'; according to Thomas et al. (2017), 'distinctiveness' meant "[b]eing a member of this team distinguishes me from other people" (p. 513).

Feeling as a part of the team and feeling valued is important to the players – based on the basic human need to belong (Maslow, 1943, p. 381). However, this feeling is not necessarily always conveyed to them from being shown in the Instagram posts, as answers differed. This could stem from the personality characteristics influencing general feelings of belonging on social media, as mentioned by Smith et al. (2021, p. 19).

4.5. Individual re-posting

Basing this section on the insights from the previous two paragraphs on *promotion by others* and *belonging* in the context of social media use, it is up next to be explored when and why the respondents engage in re-posting content from their team's Instagram output (sub-RQ2). From the interviews, I found that most interviewees are involved in re-posting their team-related content. Some more often, some rarely, however, most re-post it from time to time. According to the interviewees, the posts that they re-post can be announcement posts, game results, or player introductions – which can be linked back to findings by Li et al. (2021) on elite athletes posting promotional and match-related content in their stories (p. 113). One motivation for the interviewees to re-post content like match announcements or results, is to let friends know, and, either attract them to come to the match, or inform them about the result (interviewee 1: "re-post, so that friends or acquaintances then also see, yes, here, then and then you can watch a game"; interviewee 3: "I know some of my friends are interested in this, and I do not then necessarily text everyone, hey, by the way, we've won"). This can be explained by the general advantages of social media, like increased connectivity, information, and updates (Akram & Kumar, 2017, p. 351). To further understand underlying motivations to re-post, the concepts of self-promotion and belongingness as motivational drivers for using Instagram, might, in turn, influence individual reactions to the team's social media output. In the context of self-promoting on Instagram, interviewee 1 has seen players who re-post every goal they have thrown (in the case the respective team has posted it before); "probably to make a name for yourself and to [...] show boah I've scored such a cool goal here or [...] to show that you've scored a lot of goals or something else". Interviewee 1 talks about this happening in a disliking manner. Interviewee 6 compares his reactions over the past years:

> Above all, the age was completely different. When you're in the middle of puberty, [...] you naturally want to show off [...] what you're doing. You're proud of what you're doing, and it was perhaps even more important to you what others thought of you. Nowadays, I don't really care about that. [...] I don't have to prove anything to anyone anymore, so those days are over.

The idea of self-promotion seems to exist in this context; however, the players appear to be self-reflexive about it. In general, this could be based on underlying personality and psychological characteristics, which are difficult to fully grasp in the conducted interviews. According to Lynch et

al. (2018), "promotion by others is one route that can provide a benefit to self-esteem while mitigating some of the costs of seeking self-esteem through self-promotion" (pp. 642/643). The mentioned costs can include initial liking of people, who promote themselves, to decrease, less trust over time, as well as slight stagnation in gaining new friends compared to less narcissistic colleagues (Lynch et al., 2018, pp. 631/632). Weighing these potential costs might be different among certain characters in general. However, this is why some might enjoy promotion by others more than active self-promotion.

Nonetheless, self-promotion can also be accompanied by showing that one belongs. Interviewee 3 was not able to play the second half of the season, and says, she re-posted for the following reason: "you can always be proud of a team performance like that [...] [and] it's also just being proud that you're part of a team, a team sport". Interviewee 2 says "it's more a way of showing that you're proud to be part of it [the team]". Interviewee 12, on the question whether she likes to share content from her team's Instagram account, depicting her, because she wants to show that she is part of a team, states

> Yes, I would say that. So it's the same when I'm out and about with my friends, and re-post that I'm somehow eating with a few friends and that you're somehow part of it and not sitting around at home alone, so even if it's stupid, that you have to share it to feel better somehow [...].

Interviewee 11 agrees and says that it is important to show to the outside world that she is part of a team. It resembles an interesting thought, which these interviewees mention, of being part of a team and showing this via Instagram – linking back to the concept of *belonging*. As Seidman (2013) argues, belongingness and self-presentation are motivational drivers for the use of Facebook (p. 402) – which presumably can be applied similarly to the case of Instagram. Therefore, one side of the story is, whether and because of what you feel being part of a team (not necessarily through Instagram posts, as some interviewees also mention that it is more important what happens during practice and matches – see *4.4.2. Belonging*), and the other side of the story is, how you show, to the outside world, that you are part of a team (through re-posting content – *individual re-posting*, this paragraph). Again, the respective motivational drivers are based on varying personal characteristics, which influence the resulting extent (Seidman, 2013, p. 405; Smith et al., 2021, p. 19). Additionally, these findings can be applied to research by David et al. (2018), who find that student-athletes experience advantages in using Twitter, for example, as an "avenue for [...] promoting team cohesion" (p.163). As mentioned, one can argue, that, in showing that you are part of a team, you are also self-promoting yourself; therefore, drivers to show that one belongs seem to be a prominent self-promotional mechanism in this case – however, re-posting to promote you and the team, seemingly avoids costs of direct self-promotion (referring to Lynch et al., 2018, pp. 631/632). For transparency reasons:

throughout the interviews, I realized that I can change the belonging question from only feeling a sense of belonging when seeing oneself in the posts, to also include a question of, in the case of re-posting, wanting to show to the outside world that one belongs to a team. Therefore, I was able to better grasp this partial theme in the interviews I conducted later – adding to the answers to sub-RQ3, feelings of belonging, and, in turn answering sub-RQ2, when and why they re-post. Concludingly, the development of a professionalized amateur handball social media landscape offers the players an avenue to depict belonging online. Notably, the prominent mentioning of showing that one belongs and promoting the team stems from female interviewees mostly. Nonetheless, this research is not further investigating this potential gender imbalance, as I cannot fully distinguish whether the answers evolved from me being, throughout the data collection, better able to grasp this theme in later conducted interviews (all with female players) and, therefore, asking for it, or it being for different underlying reasons.

4.6. Perceptions based on the co-existence of different teams' Instagram outputs

I have further asked my interviewees, how they would elaborate on underlying reasoning for the team to engage in an active Instagram presence and what a more general effect for the league could be. Similar to individual athletes' motivation to engage in impression management, sports teams are following comparable steps to create the best picture of themselves, their performance, and the atmosphere within the team. As investigated by Abeza et al. (2019), sports teams use different communication objectives on social media (p. 91). In line with the already discussed attraction mechanisms for new players, amateur teams aim for different outcomes when engaging in an active social media strategy. Outcomes can be, first, to attract new players (interviewees 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11), second, to increase spectatorship at games (interviewees 1, 2, 3, 12), and, third, to actively influence other teams' perceptions of the own team (interviewee 10, 11). This research primarily focuses on the personal perceptions of the players based on their own team's Instagram output; however, it deepens the understanding to recognize perceptions based on relationships with other teams and respective comparisons of their Instagram outputs, especially in the context of competition (sub-RQ3). Therefore, the final paragraph of this results section investigates the co-existence of different teams' Instagram outputs and the resulting perceptions players have regarding themselves and the league.

4.6.1. Competition, or feeling as one?

I asked my interviewees if they are influenced by other teams' Instagram outputs. Interviewee 10 explains, that "you let yourself be influenced by the appearance of the Instagram channel, because a lot of professional things were posted, [...] it just made a good impression and the players did too". Interviewee 11 adds the following point:

> I think you do compare yourself a bit, the teams with each other. What do they do in preparation or not? How early do they start? Have they already been at it for three weeks? And we're only three months away? You do compare yourself a bit, but I wouldn't say that it has a big influence now, because I would trust my coach in what he does.

When using social media, one has to keep in mind that research suggests that social media becomes gamified in the sense that competition is a motivational driver in using it (Chimenti et al., 2021, p. 624). Competition in sport is happening among amateur teams as well, nonetheless, to a lesser extent and in a different context than among professionals. Amateur players can perceive their own or another team's social media output as more professional, and, in turn, compare themselves with each other. Curry and Weiss (1989) discovered that self-definitions of being an athlete correlate with competitive motivation (p. 266). The interviewees did not identify themselves as professional athletes but described elements of social comparison that they have encountered (interviewees 4, 10, 11). One can link the two examples from interviewees 10 and 11 back to what Ruser and Steinfeldt (2021) said about athletes who might start thinking about the extent they need "to improve to beat a competitor who recently posted an intense training video [and that] [t]hrough social media, young athletes expose themselves to countless situations in which their internal self-dialogue might be self-deprecating, doubtful, or amotivated due to social comparison" (p. 156). Although the comparison might take place, players are seemingly not too negatively influenced by it. They, in general, appear self-reflexive about the self-comparing phenomenon on Instagram. Not in a sporting context, but based on comparing the teams' atmospheres among each other, interviewee 4 mentions

> we never post anything about it [parties after winning a match] and when other teams post something, [...] [i]t may look awesome, but [...] it's just snapshots, that's a typical Instagram phenomenon, that somehow people post really awesome pictures [...], and then it wasn't actually a great day, but somehow [just] an awesome picture.

Furthermore, I asked them whether they see a changing relationship between other teams and players happening – through the development of Instagram as a driver of media presence in amateur handball. Interviewee 1 explains:

> you also get an insight into how the team that you don't like so much sees you as a team [...] that can lead to more tension and [...] some players remember that, who then think in the second leg 'yes, now it's time to really dig in'.

Other interviewees argued along similar lines, saying that the Instagram output (of your team and the other team) can, on the one hand, increase the motivation to compete ("this can sometimes pour fire in there, depending on who is playing against each other and that has been announced three times

beforehand", interviewee 11), and, on the other hand, worsen or greaten the perceived image of other teams and players ("you think [...] it's really odd that they did that, [...] then somehow you have a worse relationship [...] with them or the other way around, that you think [...] they must be really likeable because it looks like that", interviewee 12). Interviewee 1 further tells the story of his coach using Instagram posts of a competing team, that already felt like they were going to be the winner, as a motivational driver for his own team. All these examples resemble a noteworthy effect on competitive thinking through the lens of an apparent professionalizing media landscape among amateur handball teams and players in the northern Rhine area in Germany (answering sub-RQ3).

Other interviewees perceive the changing relationship more positively. For example, regarding an increasing Instagram presence of other teams, interviewee 4 states "it brings you closer if you just see more of what other people are doing, [...] you just have more of a connection with people. You can imagine more, it's just a bit more personal". In general, several interviewees said the league becomes "more approachable" and/or "interactive" (Interviewees 3, 4, 5, 6, 7), and, in that, also more connected. This can be linked back to McCarthy (2011, as cited in Sanderson & Kassing, 2015), saying that "new media [is used] to connect with one another to share information about the sport, create new content [...] – all of which contributed to collective intelligences about the sport and identification with it" (pp. 249/250); and, further, it can be contextualized by community effects of sports teams on Instagram, related to the depiction by Seargeant and Tagg (2014), that social media affects community and network creation, as well as the communication of actors (p. 2; also identified by Kietzmann et al., 2011, p. 243). Mentioned possibilities to post, tag, comment, like, re-post, and the creation of shared posts, allow for a deepening of these community effects. Instagram influences the players' perceptions of the league, other teams, other players, and the interplay as a community.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how German amateur handball players in the northern Rhine region perceive their team's social media output (main-RQ1). This research question was embedded in the context of an apparent professionalization of the amateur handball media landscape which was explored through the researcher's perspective as well as the respondents' perceptions. Further, next to respondents' perceptions of their teams' Instagram accounts, the reflection on the output and following actions that the amateur handball players perform as an answer to the social media output were investigated (sub-RQ2). Finally, respondents' perceptions in light of a feeling of belonging or fostered competitive thinking concerning other teams were elaborated (sub-RQ3).

The research was conducted by employing the method of in-depth interviewing with 12 amateur handball players from the respective region – seven female players and five male players. The social media site of interest was Instagram. The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, allowing for an in-depth understanding of concerning themes, which emerged, deductively and inductively, from a literature review and the data itself.

The results of the in-depth interviews and consequent analysis show, that, firstly, German amateur handball players currently perceive a certain professionalization of the amateur handball social media landscape in the northern Rhine region, though, to a varying extent. Interviewees explained this happening through the employment of active Instagram channels by several teams, and, said that often, teams get inspired by other amateur teams' and professional teams' accounts. Especially the attraction of new players can be facilitated by an active Instagram channel, which is valued by the interviewees – and represents an addition to the existing body of research on amateur sports teams' utilization of social media. Interviewees like their teams' Instagram outputs, with some wishing for more professionalized content in that regard, such as sponsored posts or highlight plays. Generally, interviewed players mentioned that they desire for certain posts on their team's Instagram account, that are reminiscent of the design and content of posts by professional teams. This might be influenced by the idea of mimicking idols and influencers.

The following perception of this Instagram output has to be interpreted through different perspectives. In general, interviewees react satisfied to active social media accounts, as well as, posts depicting them personally. One reason can be the idea of promotion by others, meaning the respondent is not actively self-promoting herself or himself when not re-posting the content but generally enjoys other mediums that promote her/him. These other mediums can, for example, be the team's Instagram account. Another idea is the satisfaction generated when they feel a higher sense of belonging because of them being shown on the accounts' output. Their team is advertising with them, or clearly presenting them as a player of the team. The respondents feel that they belong – however, this was only partially concluded by the respondents.

Concerning re-posting content, the picture is different. The interviewees were aware of self-promotional mechanisms and, overall refrained from saying to do so, when re-posting. According to

Moon et al. (2016) and Doyle et al. (2020), social media can be a place of self-promotion (Moon et al., 2016, p. 22), and athletes often use it for so-called impression management (Doyle et al., 2020, p. 507). Nonetheless, these amateur handball players seem to know of this fact and do not actively engage in self-promoting activities following the Instagram output of their team – or at least not too often. In that context, re-posting is mostly used for informative purposes, to let friends know, when they play and if they have won, or, generally, for team-promotion purposes – or promoting their own 'belonging'. The latter is interesting, as, especially through the interviews I conducted later on, I was able to grasp the theme, of wanting to actively show that one belongs. Belonging to the sports team, and promoting their team, is attractive to respondents and a motivational driver in re-posting the content. The increasingly professionalized amateur handball media landscape offers the players an avenue to portray their belonging online, which resembles an unexpected finding.

For both, the passive role (perceiving the content), and the slightly more active role (re-posting the content), different personal characteristics underly motivational drivers to perceive and react upon it – which also clearly resembled from the interviews, as answers differed.

Lastly, the Instagram output as a driver of competition is mentioned by some interviewees, for example, in the context of anecdotes they tell about another team's Instagram output influencing an idea of competition and being used for motivational purposes among the own team, to increase the ambition to win against them. Some interviewees also describe Instagram as a driver for negative and positive reputations of other teams and players. This appears to be an interesting result of the professionalizing media landscape. A more professionalized Instagram landscape among teams in the league leads to a changing relationship between the players and teams. In general, one can see an effect of Instagram on the leagues, as the leagues become more approachable, the more teams join online; and players can visit other teams' and players' account pages, amplifying the mentioned community and network effects, stemming from the use of online social media (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014, p. 2) – "all of which contributed to collective intelligences about the sport and identification with it" (McCarthy, 2011, as cited in Sanderson & Kassing, 2015, pp. 249/250). This represents an unexpected finding of the study and adds to the research on social media utilization among amateur sports teams.

All in all, similar to findings of research among athletes conducted by Ruser and Steinfeldt (2021, p. 156), amateur athletes tend to compare themselves on social media – and they can also be influenced by it (comparable to findings among professional athletes, conducted by Hayes et al., 2020, p. 863). Nonetheless, respondents mentioned that the level of influence rests on perceptions of competitive power and chances of winning and did not affect the amateur athletes on a deeper personal level. This can be explained by them not defining themselves as professional, as, according to Curry and Weiss (1989), competitive motivation relates to self-definitions of being an athlete (p. 266). All interviewees defined professional athletes, as persons who get financial compensation. In that regard, the differing 'seriousness' of the sporting level in terms of not having to make a living off

it, might influence the lower personal influence following the co-existing of different teams' and players' Instagram outputs.

This research adds to the current body of academic research since it applies findings of professional teams and athletes on amateur teams and athletes given a growing professionalizing media landscape among amateurs. Broader social media research was applied to the case of amateur athletes in a growing social media environment, as both, amateurs and professionals, underly similar motivational drivers and influences for using social media. With the context – the media landscape – appearing more professional, similar effects as among professional athletes, were found among amateur athletes, though to a differing extent. The appliance of social media research in the context of an apparent professionalizing amateur handball media landscape is initiating – and a first step on a path paved by the recent development and growing media presence of handball in Germany. Unexpected findings occurred in the attraction of new players when utilizing an active social media presence as an amateur team, the avenue for players to depict their belonging through re-posting, and community effects within a league that becomes more approachable. Concludingly, this research resembles a starting point into individual amateur players' perceptions of social media utilization among amateur sports teams and draws a comparison to previously found effects among professional athletes and professional teams utilizing social media.

5.1. Limitations

This study is influenced by the choice of the methods, in-depth interviewing. As Johnson (2001) acknowledges, the interviewer naturally influences the interviews (p. 108). As elaborated in the *research ethics*, I could potentially bias my interviewees' answers, by posing questions a certain way. Further, my role as a researcher, and the fact that I personally know some interviewees, can affect the interviews. However, those influential points were tried to be limited in allowing for open answers and building upon the respondents' previous answers. The interviewer, by knowing the respective field, can also engage in a better dialogue with the interviewees, allowing for a smooth procedure (Johnson, 2001, p.109).

Furthermore, this study is conducted with handball players from the same specific region, coming from mostly similar leagues. In that way, perceptions potentially correlate more easily and are not generalizable to a larger extent. On the other hand, one might argue, that respondents should have been recruited from the same team, to ensure a common ground and knowledge, from where perceptions can be analyzed. This study explicitly decided not to do that, in an attempt to get insights into how different players from different teams also perceive each other's team's social media output in relation to their own team's output.

5.2. Recommendations for further research

This research can answer the research questions on how amateur handball players perceive their team's social media output and their respective reactions towards it, given the context of an appearing professionalizing media landscape. Nonetheless, this study was conducted in a specific part of Germany with similar leagues, so perceptions might correlate. Further research could try to expand on this, by 1) developing a more generalizable idea of a professionalizing amateur media landscape and better confirming the context (e.g. through a broader content analysis), 2) deep-diving into underlying psychological motivations for amateur sports players in presenting themselves and their team on social media (potentially accounting for mentioned gender imbalances), and, 3) investigating potential age-group differences in how the players react upon the team's output. The study at hand could not fully grasp whether differences compared to younger players (for example 15-18 years old) can occur, but one interviewee sparked interest in that regard as he mentioned a different behavior when he was younger.

5.3. Practical implications

To conclude this research, I would like to present some thoughts about the potential practical implications of this study. First of all, handball in Germany is becoming increasingly popular, and so is the media coverage. Among this, social media sees more and more examples of increasing handball content. As developed through this study, several teams are professionalizing their social media presence, which is found to be a strong tool for communicating information with all types of stakeholders, as well as, attracting new players to the team. Potential strengths in acquiring new sponsors through new advertising spaces were presented by some interviewees. The development of a social media presence influences leagues and teams and investing in an active presence can be considered a valuable asset for a professionalizing sports team in the amateur divisions.

Moreover, players are given an avenue to depict their belonging online, which can be influenced by participating in team sports. Negative effects occur, however, to a mild extent, and players seem to be self-reflexive about them. They generally enjoy their team being active on social media. And, further, the league and handball community as such becomes more approachable and interactive, as more teams join this development.

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main-RQ1: How do German amateur handball players perceive their team's social media output?

sub-RQ2: How do they reflect on the posts, and when and why do they engage in reposting?

sub-RQ3: Do they feel a sense of belonging to the team or a fostered competitive thinking concerning other teams?

Warm-up: Self-description and relation to handball

- Who are you?
- How old are you?
- What is your relation to handball?
- Since when do you play?
- How would you describe the impact of handball on your everyday life?

Professional handball:

- How do you follow the results and news of professional handball?
  - Who are your favorite teams and players?
    - How do you keep yourself up to date with them?
- How would you describe the impact of following professional handball on your handball journey?
- What are your thoughts about role modeling?
  - Do you perceive someone/a certain team in the handball world as a role model/inspiration? Who?
  - Would you consider yourself a role model/inspiration (e.g., for younger players)?

The professionalization of amateur sports media:

- How would you describe the current amateur handball sports media landscape?
  - Would you say that a professionalization is happening?
- For you, what does it mean to be professional?
- Do you see yourself as a professional?
  - Would your friends say the same about you?

Own Instagram usage:

- How do you use Instagram?
- How would you describe your underlying motivations for your Instagram usage?
- Would you describe yourself as an active or passive user?
- Would you consider Instagram as a driver for the effect of mentioned role-modeling? How?

- Would you consider Instagram as a driver for the professionalization of amateur sports media? How?

Team's Instagram output and associated perceptions and actions:
- How do you describe your team's Instagram output?
  - Does it feature you?
  - How do you react to it?
    - Like, comment, share, repost, ...?
- How do you describe your feelings associated with your team's Instagram output?
- Do you see any positive effects from your team's social media output on yourself? And on others?
  - (Do you feel more as part of the team when being shown in the posts?)
  - (When re-posting, do you want to show to the outside, that you are part of a team or group?)
  - (Do you experience feelings of happiness regarding your team's Instagram output?)
  - (Do you experience feeling valued based on your team's Instagram output?)
- Do you see any negative effects from your team's social media output on yourself? And on others?
  - (Do you compare yourself with other players'/teams' outputs?)

Questions on the impact of the team's Instagram output:
- What do you think about your team's Instagram output? Is it good/bad?
  - What could be improved? What kind of posts would you personally love to see there? Why?
- How do you talk about your team's Instagram output in your team and in the locker room?
- How would you describe the impact of your team's Instagram output on your personal environment?
- How would you describe the impact of your team's Instagram output on the sporting success or failure of your team?
- How would you describe a (changed) relation to other teams and their players?
  - Do you inform yourself about (players from) other teams through Instagram?
  - Do you believe (players from) other teams do the same regarding you?

Lastly:
- Would you have expected any other question that I should have asked?
  - What would be the answer?

As mentioned in the methods chapter, a total of 274 open codes emerged. The following table shows an example range of open codes per axial code and the corresponding selective coding.

Open	Axial	Selective
Social media use in following professional handball	Interest in professional handball	Mimicking professional handball
Not actively following professional handball		
Watching professional games		
Role-model thinking when one was younger	Role-modeling	
Seeing oneself as a role-model		
Seeing oneself as a professional		
Not influenced by professional role-models		
Cool	Satisfaction	Promotion by others
Feels nice when team advertises with picture of oneself		
Loves to see posts with picture of oneself		
Feeling as part of the team	Belonging	
Everybody is shown on posts		
Get attracted to new team		
Inform friends	Individual re-posting	Self-promotion
Re-posting of team information		
Everyone re-posts everything		
Happy to share		
Show that you are part of the team		
Enjoys reaction on re-posting		
Team makes it easy to re-post, since tagged		
Self-promotion		
Aim to appear like the professionals	Team's impression management	Network/community effects
Show the team's best side		
Influence other teams		

Compare with other teams		
Compare with other players		
Attract new players		
Teams more connected	Effect on league	
More approachable		
More professional		
Driver of competition		

Please find below the empty consent form that I used for the interviews. I sent out the German

translation to my interviewees. German and English versions are below.

ANTRAG AUF ZUSTIMMUNG ZUR TEILNAHME AN DER STUDIE

BEI FRAGEN ZUR STUDIE WENDEN SIE SICH BITTE AN:
Simon Brauckhoff, 694448sb@student.eur.nl

BESCHREIBUNG
Sie sind eingeladen, an einer Studie zum Thema „Handball in sozialen Medien" teilzunehmen. Der
Zweck der Studie ist es, die Wahrnehmung von Amateur-Handballspielern in Bezug auf die
Instagram-Posts ihrer Teams zu verstehen.

Wenn Sie sich bereit erklären, an dieser Studie teilzunehmen, erklären Sie sich damit einverstanden,
interviewt zu werden. Ganz allgemein gesprochen, werden sich meine Fragen auf Folgendes
beziehen:

- Handball in Ihrem täglichen Leben
- den Instagram-Output Ihrer Mannschaft und Ihre Wahrnehmung und Reaktion darauf
- Ihre Nutzungsmotivationen für Instagram

Sofern Sie es nicht vorziehen, dass keine Aufnahmen gemacht werden, werde ich eine Video- und
Audioaufnahme des Interviews machen.

Ich werde das Material aus den Interviews und meiner Beobachtung ausschließlich für akademische
Arbeiten, wie weitere Forschungen, akademische Tagungen und Publikationen verwenden.

RISIKEN UND VORTEILE
Soweit ich das beurteilen kann, sind mit der Teilnahme an dieser Studie keine Risiken verbunden. Ich
werde Ihren Namen oder andere identifizierende Informationen [wie Ihren Namen in sozialen
Medien] in der Studie nicht verwenden. Die Teilnehmer an der Studie werden nur mit Pseudonymen
und in Form von allgemeinen Merkmalen wie Alter und Geschlecht usw. bezeichnet.
Es steht Ihnen jederzeit frei, eine bestimmte Frage nicht zu beantworten und/oder die Teilnahme zu
beenden.

ZEITLICHER UMFANG
Ihre Teilnahme an dieser Studie wird etwa 45 Minuten dauern. Sie können Ihre Teilnahme jederzeit
unterbrechen.

VERGÜTUNG
Für Ihre Teilnahme an der Studie werden Sie nicht entschädigt.

RECHTE DER TEILNEHMER
Wenn Sie sich entschlossen haben, an diesem Projekt teilzunehmen, verstehen Sie bitte, dass Ihre
Teilnahme freiwillig ist und Sie das Recht haben, Ihre Zustimmung jederzeit zurückzuziehen oder die
Teilnahme abzubrechen, ohne dass Ihnen daraus Nachteile entstehen. Sie haben das Recht, die
Beantwortung bestimmter Fragen zu verweigern. Wenn Sie es wünschen, wird Ihre Identität in allen
schriftlichen Daten, die aus der Studie hervorgehen, bekannt gegeben. Andernfalls wird Ihre

Privatsphäre in allen veröffentlichten und schriftlichen Daten, die sich aus der Studie ergeben, gewahrt.

KONTAKTE UND FRAGEN

Wenn Sie Fragen zu Ihren Rechten als Studienteilnehmer haben oder zu irgendeinem Zeitpunkt mit irgendeinem Aspekt dieser Studie unzufrieden sind, können Sie sich - auf Wunsch auch anonym – an meinen Supervisor Arne van Lienden, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, vanlienden@eshcc.eur.nl, wenden.

UNTERZEICHNUNG DER EINVERSTÄNDNISERKLÄRUNG

Wenn Sie diese Einverständniserklärung unterschreiben, ist Ihre Unterschrift der einzige Nachweis Ihrer Identität. Sie brauchen dieses Formular also NICHT zu unterschreiben. Um Risiken zu minimieren und Ihre Identität zu schützen, können Sie es vorziehen, mündlich einzuwilligen. Ihre mündliche Zustimmung ist ausreichend.

Ich erkläre mich damit einverstanden, während dieser Studie aufgezeichnet zu werden:

Name   Unterschrift   Datum

Ich ziehe es vor, dass meine Identität in allen schriftlichen Daten, die aus dieser Studie hervorgehen, offengelegt wird:

Name   Unterschrift   Datum

Diese Kopie der Einverständniserklärung ist für Sie bestimmt.

<div align="center">**CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH**</div>

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:
Simon Brauckhoff, 694448sb@student.eur.nl

DESCRIPTION
You are invited to participate in a research about "handball on social media". The purpose of the study is to understand amateur handball players' perception of their teams' Instagram outputs.
Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to:

• the role of handball in your daily life
• your team's Instagram output and your perception and reaction
• your usage motivations for Instagram

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

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

RISKS AND BENEFITS
As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information [such as your social media name] in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT
Your participation in this study will take approximately 45 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS
There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

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 without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

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 – Arne van Lienden, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, vanlienden@eshcc.eur.nl

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM
If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name   Signature   Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study:

Name   Signature   Date

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