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Digital Mediatization in the Lifestyle Sport Slacklining

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the connection between digital media practices of athletes in the lifestyle sport slacklining, the mediatization of the sport and its development. It deliberately focuses on this narrow field to make mediatization and its sub-processes more apparent.

Mediatization, “the interrelation between the change of media and communication, on the one hand, and the change of culture and society on the other” (Hepp & Krotz, 2014, p. 3), struggles with how to assess transformations in society that are introduced by digital media. A lack of mediation in the cultural field of slacklining prior to the onset of digital media, allows for an observation of undistorted digital mediatization.

Twenty-six (26) semi-structured in-depth interviews with professional and nonprofessional slackliners were conducted for the purpose of this study to first, expose the respondents’ digital media practices and also offer answers to the questions of how such practices are viewed and how the development of the sport is influenced. The empirical data obtained from the interviews, was evaluated using thematic analysis.

The findings strongly suggest that mediatization, induced by digital media practices of individuals, can impact significantly on the development of lifestyle sporting cultures. Contemporary slacklining is considerably shaped by digital mediatization, in that slackliners extend their communication capabilities, accommodate to the use of digital media and substitute/amalgamate parts of their sport with digital media.

1 INTRODUCTION

Today, globalization, individualization, mediatization and the growing importance of the economy, which we here call commercialization, can be seen as the relevant metaprocesses that influence democracy and society, culture, politics and other conditions of life over the longer term (Krotz, 2007, p. 257).

Slacklining could exist without digital media, but the impression of slacklining, what you can see of it and how the community interacts – presently, these cannot possibly be imagined without digital media (Interviewee 9, a 26-year-old German slackliner).

The importance of digital media for communication has been steadily growing over the last decades and with it the power of digital media in society. Mediatization describes social and cultural transformations that involve media and mediated communication as an important parameter (Lundby, 2009). However, exactly what mediatization looks like and how digital media's growing power manifests in society remains difficult to assess (Ekström et al., 2016, p. 1099). Therefore, it is important to uncover how digital media and media technologies impact different realms of society and 'cultural fields'.

Sport, while not always considered as such, is an influential cultural field that 'cannot be missed out on the contemporary cultural horizon' (Wenner, 1998, preface). The importance of sport in modern societies has been growing over recent decades (Syed, 2017) and today, sport is a topic that is more widely read on social media than politics (Mitchell & Page, 2013). Lifestyle sports (e.g. surfing, snowboarding, climbing) and its practitioners have been identified as early adopters of digital media and new media technologies (Thorpe, 2016). Moreover, lifestyle sports are constituting an ever-larger part of the contemporary sports landscape and might soon challenge traditional sports 'for the title of most-watched category of sports content' (Jacobs et al., 2015, p. 38). However, they have thus far only attracted very limited research attention from media and sports scholars (Wheaton, 2015). One lifestyle sport that has grown exponentially in recent years around the world and that has been almost completely neglected in social science research, is slacklining: balancing and doing tricks on flat webbing.

To qualitatively contribute to mediatization research, this study investigates the effects of digital media use in the cultural field of slacklining. It represents a social-constructivist approach to mediatization (Hepp, 2013) that emphasises the communicative choices of individuals for cultural and societal changes. It rejects the inevitability of communication technologies as drivers of social change and does not assume a growing influence of 'the media' in a linear way. Digital media and media technologies are not the only parameters of social change and likely not even its driving forces.

By deliberately focusing on the narrow cultural field of slacklining, the intention is to contribute to a clearer understanding of the relationship between digital media practices and cultural transformation/development within a very limited environment, where processes are more transparent. As digital media arguably also altered the effects of previous mediatization processes (Finnemann, 2011), it is necessary to investigate what constitutes *pure* 'digital mediatization'.

A lack of prior mediation arguably makes slacklining a particularly interesting field for research on digital mediatization, as participants went almost directly from 'face-to-face' to the inclusion of digital media in their interaction with the sport (i.e. the sport had not been mediated by mass media prior to the onset of digital media). Direct effects of previous (mass media) mediatization on the sport are therefore negligible. But while slacklining is an independent sport with its own culture, it is arguably not as distinct from all other lifestyle sports, as to make results in this field an exception and inapplicable to the larger field of lifestyle sports. As such, exploring the interrelations between digital media and slacklining may propose channels of mediatization that can improve understanding of mediatization processes in lifestyle sports and the cultural field of sports more generally. Therefore, the focus of this study is highly relevant to advance on specific, measurable effects (Ekström et al., 2016) of digital media influence in society.

Within the framework of this research, 26 interviews were conducted with slackliners from around the world. To reduce bias in this subset of the slacklining population, careful attention was paid to include a wide range of practitioners from different backgrounds and different intensities of engagement (Donnelly, 2006). The study applied Schulz' (2004) four sub-processes of mediatization to assess channels of mediatization in detail. This thesis aims to contribute to a clearer understanding of mediatization. To put its approach and results in context, the next section critically evaluates relevant academic literature.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sports and Digital Media

There is a large body of research addressing the conjunction of media and sport (Raney & Bryant, 2006). Media have arguably always been important in sports (Frandsen, 2014; Ruddock et al., 2010) and with the proliferation of television, the interdependence between sports organisations, sponsors, and media companies was termed 'sports/media complex' (Jhally, 1989, p. 77), 'media-sport-production complex' (Maguire, 1991), 'mediasports' (Wenner, 1998) or 'media-sport-cultural-complex' (Rowe, 1999). However, neither sport nor media became the dominant player. Sports rely on media to overcome their 'seminal place-based localism', while the media depend on sports 'as an assembly point for its increasingly elusive audiences' (Rowe, 2015, p. 579).

Digital media forms have changed the relationship between media and sports. Professional athletes use social media to spread their news and updates directly and strategically, and to get in touch with

fans – without having to rely on the news media (Hutchins, 2011; Birkner & Nölleke, 2016). Both sports teams and media organisations use digital media to connect with and engage their audiences (Boehmer, 2016). Whereas the challenges and fears that digital media brings to the field of sport have been well documented (Lefever, 2012; Frandsen, 2016), it is in a field that is often overlooked in media sports research, the alternative sportscape of lifestyle sports, that digital media forms arguably have an especially visible and profound impact (Jacobs et al., 2015).

2.2 Lifestyle Sports and Slacklining

'Lifestyle' sports, also named 'extreme', 'action', 'alternative' or 'adventure' sports in academic literature, comprise a large variety of modern sports (e.g. surfing, climbing, snowboarding, parkour, skydiving). Lifestyle sports often promote an 'outsider identity relative to the organized sports establishment' (Kusz, 2007, p. 359) and most lifestyle sports emphasise a '[...] hedonistic, individualistic ideology that promotes commitment, but denounces regulation and institutionalisation, and tend[s] to be critical of, or ambivalent to, commercialism and formal "person-on-person" style competition' (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2016, p. 3). The last five decades have seen a constant rise in the popularity of lifestyle sports (Rinehart, 2000), which was to a considerable extent due to exposure by ESPN's *X Games* (Rinehart, 2008). Following research on youth subcultures by Hall & Jefferson (1976), Hebdige (1979) and

Thornton (1995), who noted that 'to understand distinctions of youth subculture, a "systematic investigation of their media consumption" is critical' (Thornton, 1995, p. 14), different lifestyle sports and their subcultures began to attract research attention. Researchers were especially interested in the ambiguous relationship lifestyle sports have with commercial interests and consumption (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004; Edwards & Corte, 2010), the construction of identity (Wheaton & Beal, 2003; Wheaton, 2007) and lifestyle sports media as a space for challenging and reaffirming gender stereotypes (Thorpe, 2008; Lewis, 2016).

Slacklining, balancing on one- or two-inch flat webbing, is an activity that goes back to a pastime activity within the Yosemite Valley (USA) climbing subculture in the 1970s (Balcom, 2005). The activity is related to tight-rope walking, but uses different material and much less tension to allow for a dynamic walking experience and different kinds of tricks (Kleindl, 2010). Slacklining started to develop into a global lifestyle sport in its own right only since about 2007, but it has done so with great speed (Volery & Rodenkrich, 2012). Apart from 'low-and shortlining' (slacklines of up to 30m length close to ground level), important sub-styles include 'tricklining' (performing tricks and jumps on a slackline) and 'highlining' (slacklining at great heights). Tightly connected to the sport's development are slackline 'festivals': events where practitioners gather over a few days to set up a multitude of slacklines (Zak, 2011), and competitions (mostly in tricklining) at outdoor fairs.

Slacklining was spread from Yosemite to Europe around 2000 (Miller & Mauser, 2013) and trans-local communication among slackliners was organised via online forums almost from the start (Thomann,

2016). Slacklining is an increasingly visible sports phenomenon in and outside many cities around the world. With its main competitions and world-record attempts staged as media events, as well as an exponentially growing base of practitioners (Iverson, 2016), it makes a suitable subject for media and sports research. Medical studies have tested slacklining as a rehabilitation and training tool for other sports (Donath & Zahner, 2013; Anlauff et al., 2013; Gabel et al., 2016), however, apart from Mahoney et al.'s (2013) YouTube video analysis, to the best of the author's knowledge, there has not been any social science research conducted on slacklining. Due to its niche position and recent development, slacklining and its culture had hardly been mediated (e.g. there were no dedicated magazines) before the advent of digital media.

2.3 Digital Media in Lifestyle Sports

Research on the media habits of lifestyle sports participants largely focused on magazines and videos (Wheaton, 2004; Nelson, 2010) and for some time treated social media and websites as just 'another communication channel whose content reflect[ed] qualities already prevalent in offline equivalents' (Woermann, 2012, p. 621). Such valuable research addressed the importance of lifestyle sports media for the identity formation of athletes (Wheaton & Beal, 2003) and for conveying the thrill of the sport (Booth, 2008). However, for many lifestyle sports, digital media has been more than just another media channel.

Following (Ferrell et al., 2001), who observed that US BASE jumpers documenting their jumps with cameras '[...] elongate[d] and expand[ed] the meaning of an ephemeral event' (ibid, p. 178), the role of digital media in lifestyle sports has attracted more research interest.

Woermann (2012) has argued that free-skiing has been subject to digital mediatization, as athletes place importance on the role of video recording and 'prosuming' (both producing and consuming content; Toffler, 1980; Kotler, 1986) digital free-skiing content. The author finds that social media are important for the development of participants' style and skill progress (acting as a mirror for their performance), but also constitutes a pastime that is part of the sport. The sporting experience happening on the screen is as much part of the activity as the experience that takes place on the slopes.

In the lifestyle sport parkour, (Kidder, 2012) finds that digital media forms enable athletes to experience the activity beyond the local context, allowing for its 'glocalisation' (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007). As athletes use social media to organise meetings and to connect internationally, digital media help to connect both the local and global 'tribes' of participants (Thorpe & Ahmad, 2015). Gilchrist & Wheaton (2013) argue that 'social software and a participatory online culture' were a main reason for parkour's fast growth and development (ibid, p. 7) and they also allowed for self-marketing without gatekeepers (like magazine editors). The video-sharing platform YouTube appears to be especially important in parkour. It is a platform for training tutorials, discussions, sharing knowledge and criticism, as well as an important source of inspiration for parkour athletes (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013).

Studying the labour relationships of professional climbers, Dumont (2017) argues that digital media contributes to diminishing the importance of competition in climbing: most sponsors now prefer to support athletes who produce high-quality digital content of outdoor performances. Developing the skills to provide a steady stream of compelling content amongst increasing amateur competition puts a lot of pressure on climbers, making it more difficult to make a living from the sport.

Lifestyle sports practitioners are often very quick to adopt new (digital) technologies

(Thorpe, 2016), which allow them to 'convert seemingly peripheral cultural activities into wider cultural value' (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013, p. 11). Therefore, it is important to pay attention to such technologies within mediatization processes in the lifestyle sportscape. Scholars find that smartphones, GoPro™ action cameras and high-quality DSLR cameras modify how lifestyle sport athletes portray and perceive their environment (Evers, 2015; Vannini & Stewart, 2017) and that such technology is '[...] contributing to new forms of individual and collective meaning-making' (Thorpe, 2016, p. 13). Camera drones are a very recent development, but have seen explosive growth in lifestyle sports media productions

(Thorpe, 2016). In 2016, the winning short movie of the 'Rise of the Drones' film festival, which is especially dedicated to short movies shot mainly on camera drones, was 'Over the clouds', a film featuring highlining (epictv.com).

The existing research on related lifestyle sports suggests that slackliners 'prosume' digital media, use digital media to improve their training, discuss different aspects of the sport and share knowledge and inspiration of different kinds. They are likely employing the latest digital media technologies to document their activities and making them visible to a broader public and to potential sponsors. Digital media content and technologies may (as in the case of parkour) act as a catalyst for the development of the sport, but might also lead to its diversification and 'glocalisation'. As in the case of climbing, digital media may put pressure on professionals and result in a restructuring of power relations within the sport.

One limitation of a large body of lifestyle sport research is its confinement to 'relatively small groups of core participants and some media analys[es] of subcultural (niche) media' (Donnelly, 2006, p. 219). Such analyses, while valuable, arguably do not suffice to accurately depict the 'circuit of culture' (Du Gay et al., 1997) in lifestyle sports communities accurately

(Thorpe, 2016). While sport and media have been considered by some as an 'example sine qua non of mediatization' (Frandsen, 2014, p. 525), much research remains vague about what it understands as mediatization or equates mediatization with televisionisation (Horky, 2009). The next chapter therefore aims to clarify this study's approach to the concept of mediatization.

2.4 Mediatization

Mediatization is a complex phenomenon. Most generally, it can be described as a concept

[...] used to analyse critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 197).¹

First used by Manheim (1933/1979), Baudrillard (1972/1981) and Habermas (1981/1987) and in the context of politics by Mazzoleni & Schulz (1999), mediatization has been understood by scholars in different ways (Lundby, 2009). Most scholars agree that mediatization constitutes a 'metaproces' (Krotz, 2007) that cannot be measured directly, but should be conceived of as a 'superior theoretical approach[] describing long-term processes of change' (Hepp, 2009, p.140).

But while the field of mediatization research has been converging in recent years (Frandsen, 2016), there remains some confusion as well as several different approaches to mediatization. Often, scholars leave it to the reader to define the concepts of 'the media', 'digital media' or 'media logic'. Several scholars have tried to categorise mediatization research into two approaches (institutional and social-constructivist; Couldry and Hepp, 2013; Hepp et al., 2015) or three approaches (institutional, technological, and cultural; Livingstone & Lunt, 2014; Bolin, 2014). However, these categories are often more confusing than clarifying.

E.g. Hjarvard (2008), an advocate of the institutional approach, defines mediatization as 'the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic' (ibid, p. 113). But it is certainly difficult to understand the influence of 'the media and their logic' (Altheide & Snow, 1979), without considering specific technological affordances, like television. Similarly narrow, the technological approach focuses on mediatization as a result of the affordances of communication technologies and is therefore likely to ignore interests and agency of both providers and users of media technologies.

Most criticism of mediatization theory is directed at the institutional and the technological approaches. Critics argue that mediatization thus conceptualised cannot take the 'heterogeneity of the transformations' into account (Couldry, 2008, p. 378). Moreover, scholars often assume a linear and causal 'media-centric' nature of change, do not embed their research in the historical settings and lack a clear conceptual design (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014). Considering such critique, Hepp (2009), Bolin (2014) and Hepp et al. (2015) have argued for a conception of mediatization in which the media possess a *Prägnkraft* or 'moulding force' (i.e. a certain 'pressure' on the way we communicate; Hepp,

¹ For a similar definition, see: (Hepp et al., 2010, p. 223)

2009, p. 143), but work from *within* society. This is what Hepp & Krotz (2014) call 'mediatized worlds'. Hepp et al. (2015) argue that

[m]ediatization research is not about media effects but [...] about the interrelation between the change of media and communication, on the one hand, and the change of (fields of) culture and society, on the other hand. Media are not necessarily the driving forces of transformations (Hepp et al., 2015, p. 320).

The strength of this cultural, social-constructivist approach is that it can 'overcome the micromacro divide in theory' (Bolin, 2014, p. 194) and put more emphasis on the actions and experiences of individuals and less on 'media logic'. Thus, media is treated as technology and cultural form at the same time (Williams, 1990).

To investigate 'variation' induced by media changes, Hepp & Hasebrink (2014) have argued for a focus on the development of the 'communicative construction process' (ibid, p. 267), i.e. the constant change of communicative forms, media ensembles, constellation of actors and the thematic framing. Or, as the authors call it, a cultural field's 'communicative figurations'. However, applying the communicative figurations approach has two drawbacks for this study. First, the authors emphasise that it is more appropriate for analysis of transformation processes in society at large (ibid, p. 265). The second, and more important drawback of the approach is that it can identify *where* or *when* communication is changing, but not *whether* or *how* such change contributes to larger transformations in society.

Approaching mediatization from an institutional stance, Schulz (2004) argues for the analysis of four different sub-processes of mediatization: media may lead to an extension in communication capabilities (extension), actors may adapt to the existence of media in ways of thinking and acting (accommodation), previously unmediated activities may become dependent on media or old media is replaced by new media (substitution) and media may integrate with other practices or social institutions (amalgamation). However, this categorisation has been criticised for being ambiguous (Krotz, 2014) and implying a very linear nature of mediatization (Couldry, 2008). (Finnemann, 2011) criticises the lack of focus on properties of different types of media and the assumption of an 'intrinsic logic' (ibid, p. 76). Schulz' (2004) categories are therefore too narrow and cannot be used with regard to digital media.

Schulz' (2004) sub-processes may not be able to capture all aspects of mediatization and are potentially prone to give 'media-centric' results. However, applying such categories is necessary in order to break down mediatization and make it measurable. It allows for a macro view of social change induced by mediatization and for going beyond a mere description of media practices (Ekström et al., 2016). However, the proliferation of digital media has been an additional challenge for assessing mediatization.

2.5 Digital Mediatization

To some scholars, digital media are merely new innovations that do not represent something radically new for mediatization theory (Asp, 2014). Others, in contrast, conclude that digital mediatization is indeed something radically new. Hoskins (2014) suggests that with the proliferation of digital media we are entering a 'second phase of mediatization' shaped by 'hyperconnectivity'. Finnemann (2011) finds that digital media in modern societies 'initiate[] changes in the roles and functions of all media'. Digital media, Finnemann (2011) argues, are media that allow for: (1) both global and local reach, (2) differentiated communication (e.g. one-to-one and group communication), (3) constant availability, (4) pooling individuals, corporations, etc. on one single platform and (5) many different modes of communication, from private to public (ibid, p. 83). Thus, digitalization brings with it a whole new 'media matrix' (Meyrowitz, 1985), modifying effects of previous mediatization. Contemporary mediatization research, he therefore concludes, 'does not provide a unified conceptual framework for understanding contemporary media development' (Finnemann, 2011, p. 79).

However, slacklining is a rare case of a cultural field where 'digitalization has made possible a fresh introduction to mediated interaction' (Fornäs, 2014, p. 501). Therefore, not only is mediatization theory applicable for the cultural field of slacklining, but studying slacklining arguably allows to observe *pure* effects of digital mediatization, as the effects of mediatization on slacklining are not 'mixed' with any effects of 'digitally mediatized effects of previous mediatization'.

But as many effects of digitalisation are quite ambiguous, it is unclear what *pure* digital mediatization looks like. Some scholars argue that digital media radically transforms our understanding of 'audience', transforming media 'consumers' to 'producers' (Shirky, 2005; Rosen, 2006), while others see digital media use by and large as 'consumptive behavior [sic] by a different name' (Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009, p. 861). The truth possibly lies somewhere in the middle (Jenkins et al., 2013), but there are nevertheless a few 'general features' of digital mediatization. Regarding 'consumers' and 'producers', several authors argue that 'prosuming', has become more commonplace with digital media (Ritzer et al., 2012; Fornäs, 2014). Woermann (2012) has provided evidence that this might be especially true in lifestyle sporting cultures. An aspect of the idea of a 'digital media logic' was developed by Jenkins et al. (2013): in order to be seen in the digital environment, content needs to be 'spreadable'. It needs to be new/current, reworkable, allow for interactivity and should be 'part of a steady stream of material' (ibid, p. 198).

Digital mediatization in sports appears to be 'evolutional' rather than 'revolutional' (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010). Frandsen (2016) reports that digital mediatization can take different forms across different sports institutions and may thus lead to a diversification of sports. Sport institutions view it as a 'major concern' (ibid, p. 397), as they struggle to control their communication. However, effects of digital media may appear very differently in subprocesses of mediatization. Increased prosumption, designing for spreadability, institutional struggle and diversification are just some possible forms of their influence.

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study has its theoretical foundation in mediatization theory and draws in its focus on mediatization research, research on digital mediatization and digital media use in lifestyle sports. In light of the reviewed literature, this research follows the 'mediatized worlds' perspective as laid out by Hepp & Krotz (2014). It understands mediatization as a metaprocess that is not directly measurable (Krotz, 2007) and wants to take the perspectives of different actors and individuals into account (social-constructivist view). This perspective emphasises the importance of media and technology for social change (media- and technology-centred), but does not imply singular and linear media effects (media- and technology-centric). Thus, it allows for both micro and macro perspectives and acknowledges the possibility of non-linearity, (i.e. 'de-mediatization'; Grenz & Möll, 2014) and the complexity of mediatization. The framework conceptualises a way to incorporate measurability into mediatization research by using Schulz' (2004) four sub-processes of mediatization (extension, accommodation, substitution, amalgamation) within a narrow cultural field (slacklining). Digital media practices that can be regarded as belonging to these sub-processes, are treated as indicative of mediatization in the sport. Moreover, to appropriately categorise digital media behaviour, the framework draws on lifestyle sports research that highlights the ways in which athletes in different lifestyle sports have employed digital media forms and digital media technology, and the influences that the proliferation of digital media had on these sports.

Following Finnemann's (2011) definition of digital media, this study will define digital media as websites, social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), video-sharing platforms (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo), smartphone applications and digital content (e.g. videos, photos). Digital camera technologies (such as smartphone cameras, digital cameras, action cameras and camera drones) will be termed digital media technologies. By including digital camera technologies, this study extends Miller et al.'s (2016) notion regarding social media, which states that it is impossible to 'understand any one platform or media in isolation' (ibid, p. x): to understand the impact of digital media, these should not exclude technologies that enable production of digital media content.

This conceptual framework does not understand mediatization as inherently 'good' or 'bad', neither would it view digital media influences as 'weeds in the garden' of sports and a resulting cultural change necessarily as something to 'combat' (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2011, p. 291). Much more, the focus lies on mapping visible and potential social transformations and cultural changes due to the influence of digital media, exploring the importance of digital media within such transformation and finding out, how an interrelation between digital media and slacklining is negotiated by different actors and within certain aspects of the sport (Ekström et al., 2016).

4 OBJECTIVE(S) OF THE RESEARCH

Taking the conceptual framework as a foundation, this research aims to investigate how and why participants of different kinds in the sport of slacklining use different types of digital media when engaging with their sport, how they view digital media's influence in the development of slacklining and how they feel about such influence. Building on existing research in the fields of mediatization and digital media use in lifestyle sports, results to such answers are viewed through the conceptual lens illustrated above. The focus of the analysis will lie on interpreting data in light of Schulz' (2004) four sub-processes of mediatization and setting it in context to findings from related lifestyle sports literature. Thus, the main objective of this study is to explore and evaluate, how digital mediatization manifests itself in the sport of slacklining in different aspects and via different channels. In this way, it aims to contribute to uncovering additional links and channels through which mediatization in lifestyle sports works. The work therefore aims to qualitatively answer to the following research question:

How do digital media practices and experiences in the developing lifestyle sport of slacklining shape the development of the sport? I.e., in which way is slacklining subject to digital mediatization?

A sub-question to support the main research question, is:

How and why do slackliners use digital media and how do use and reception of technology and content differ between professional athletes and less engaged practitioners?

To measure up to the research question, which sets a strong focus on subjective experiences and motivations, qualitative interviewing appears to be the most suitable method for operationalization and gathering the necessary data. The following chapter will therefore outline the rationale for the methodological choice of qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, as well as introduce and justify research design and coding choices.

5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Rationale

The focus of the study and the research question laid out above, make a clear statement for the use of semi-structured, qualitative, individual interviews as a research method. As the study's goal is to gain insight into the *how* and *why* of a complicated process (mediatization) and understand motivations, interpretations and perceptions related to specific decisions and behaviour, interviewing is more suitable than a survey study (Silverman, 2001; Guest et al., 2013). This method can uncover

sub-conscious attitudes and help to understand a larger part of the participants' 'life world' (Bion et al., 2000; Kvale, 2010).

Participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork are frequent methodological choices in lifestyle sports research (Woermann, 2012; Evers, 2015; Dumont, 2017). This method arguably provides the most accurate information, as with interviews, '[...] the interviewer relies on the informant's account of actions that occurred elsewhere in space and time' (Bion et al., 2000, p. 46; J. Green & Thorogood, 2009). However, participant observation is a very time-consuming method and interviews were therefore deemed more appropriate for the limited scope of this work. The researcher aimed to mitigate the concerns mentioned above and in addition to his personal experience in the sport, went slacklining multiple times with a local group in London during the research process and immersed himself in digital slacklining content to better comprehend accounts of interviewees and put them in perspective.

The sport of slacklining is a largely unexplored field in the social sciences. Still, as outlined in the theoretical chapter, this study can draw on research in other lifestyle sports. Therefore, semi-structured interviews are especially suitable. This methodology allows to draw on related studies, but is flexible enough to allow new or unexpected ideas to emerge during the research (Gill et al., 2008). As specific jargon may vary locally, such flexibility, allowing for different phrasing and probing questions, is needed to not miss any information (Rapley, 2004; Ryan et al., 2009).

Focus group interviews are arguably more suitable for exploring a broad range of views and behaviours and often see a higher emotional involvement from participants (Liamputtong, 2011). However, individual interviews allow to explore a participant's life world at depth, ask follow-up probe questions and inquire into more sensitive issues. Moreover, in focus groups, professional athletes may establish a 'social dominance' (Berger, 2011, p. 137) over less engaged participants, distorting their answers or silencing them. Finally, professional slackliners are spread out over the globe. This makes recruitment for a focus group very difficult and gives preference to individual interviews (Bion et al., 2000).

Considering the small scale of local slacklining groups and the global spread and diversity of the sport, relying on face-to-face interviews did not suffice to compile an informative, meaningful dataset. Therefore, a considerable part of the interviews was conducted by phone and four of them by Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service Skype. Phone interviews are marked by an absence of nonverbal cues, which can result in loss of contextual data (Hopper, 1992, p. 8), less natural responses (Shuy, 2002) and reduced rapport (Sweet, 2002). However, respondents are often more relaxed and willing to disclose sensitive information on the phone (Smith, 2005) and negative effects can be compensated by taking additional effort to establish rapport (Novick, 2008). Similarly, data collected conducting VoIP interviews can be 'just as good as the data using face to face interaction' (Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016, p. 17).

Operationalising the research question in the proposed way has a few limitations. First, considering the small sample of respondents (26) and the lack of random sampling, the results from this study cannot be generalised for the global slacklining population (Kvale, 2010; Boyce

& Neale, 2006). However, the selection of interviews can '[...] help researchers interested in causality explore the context and mechanism of a causal explanation in ways surveys experiments, or even direct observation often cannot' (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012, p. 102). The interviewer himself might also introduce bias to the research, as participants tend to adapt their responses '[...] to their perceptions of what will best satisfy the interviewer' (Berger, 2011, p. 150). The researcher therefore paid careful attention to constantly reflect on his biases and preconceptions throughout the research.

5.2 Research Design

5.2.1 Ethical Considerations and Consent

All participants in the study were asked either for written consent (face-to-face interviews) or oral consent (interviews by phone/Skype). In phone interviews, the researcher asked for permission to record the conversation first. He then informed interviewees about their right to withdraw from the interview at any point, refuse an answer or delete some of the data from the record and obtained their consent. All interviewees were guaranteed complete confidentiality and any information that would enable to identify them was anonymised. The researcher took field notes and recorded the interviews at full length to ensure accuracy (Heritage, 1984). Lifestyle sports athletes are often from rather privileged, predominantly white, middle-class backgrounds (Thorpe, 2016) and interviewees were therefore not considered a particularly vulnerable group. However, ethical concerns were discussed with the Dissertation Supervisor, who also approved the researcher's ethics checklist.

5.2.2 Sampling and Recruitment

To test the chosen methodology, a pilot study, consisting of three interviews, preceded this research. These interviews provided valuable feedback that informed subsequent adjustments of the topic guide and the larger research. The sampling/selection process followed a two-fold approach. To 'include a range of views as wide as possible' (Gaskell, 2000, p. 41), the sample comprised respondents from different age groups, gender, nationality and 'mode of engagement' who practiced different slacklining styles (e.g. tricklining, highlining). This maximum variation sampling (Palys, 2008) was informed by a socio-scientific study on the slackline community (Röhm, 2013) and unpublished data provided by the International Slackline Association (Bretagne et al., unpublished). Thus, interviewees were purposefully selected to represent the diverse range of perspectives within the community as appropriately as possible (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Underlying this sampling/selection strategy was a snowball sampling approach, where interviewees recommended other potential participants to the researcher. This two-fold approach was necessary to ensure that the snowball-sample would not be a 'biased subset of the population' of slackliners (Morgan, 2008, p. 2).

Scholars have repeatedly reported the problematic dominance of male voices in lifestyle sports research (Wheaton, 2003; Thorpe, 2010). As the estimated percentage of women in the slacklining population varies between 11% (Röhm, 2013) and 18% (Bretagne et al., unpublished), this study included a percentage of 19% female athletes. To avoid a narrow focus on core participants (Donnelly, 2006), the study involved 14 professional athletes (defined as those who can live from the sport) and eleven less engaged practitioners. Most of the 26 interviewees were contacted via Facebook and were provided with a summary of the research idea beforehand.

5.2.3 Topic Guide

To provide the interviews with some structure, a topic guide accompanied each interview (Appendix 5). It was designed with the research question in mind and informed by the reviewed literature. The topic guide was divided into four parts and questions were designed in a very open manner. The first part contained a small structural outline that served as 'a prompt to the interviewer' (Gaskell, 2000, p. 40) and some 'warm-up' questions. The second part dealt with digital media use of respondents and slackline video content. The third part included questions about digital camera technologies and the last part was dedicated to questions about the development of the slacklining community, competition and institutions. The structure of the topic guide was revised and refined throughout the data collection process, thus contributing to the flow of the interviews.

5.2.4 Conducting the Interviews

Of the 26 interviews, eight were face-to-face interviews, and the rest were conducted via phone/VoIP. As half of the respondents were German or Swiss, 13 interviews were conducted and transcribed in German. In two cases, due to large time differences and very busy schedules, athletes responded to the topic guide in written and via WhatsApp voice message. Face-to-face interviews took place in cafés chosen by the interviewees and a few were conducted in a park. In phone interviews, the researcher took additional care to establish rapport by exchanging 'cultural knowledge' about slacklining with participants upfront. To this end, his familiarity with the subculture, as noted by (Leblanc, 2000; quoted in Esterberg, 2002, p. 90), proved to be an important advantage. Interviews lasted between 22 minutes and 87 minutes, with an average duration of 47 minutes.

5.2.5 Conducting the Analysis

Each interview was recorded in its full length to ensure accuracy and transcribed promptly, using the software *f4transkript*. As the focus of the study was not on the phonetic accuracy of the conversations, transcriptions were conducted following the 'simple' transcribing rules developed by Kuckartz et al. (2008) and Dresing & Pehl (2013). Additional care was taken to capture the most important non-verbal cues, such as pauses or laughter (Kvale, 2007, p. 26).

Considering the explanatory nature of the research question, thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews. One advantage of this approach for the present research is that it allows for an

interpretive analysis (Guest et al., 2012). Moreover, it enables a mix of deductive and inductive analysis, starting with 'a basic set of codes based on a priori theoretical understandings and expanding on these by readings of the text' (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 95). In this manner, sub-themes were induced from the interview data, 'open coded' and summarised into scores of codes, using NVivo. The main themes for this study were deduced from Schulz' (2004) four mediatization sub-processes: extension, accommodation, substitution, amalgamation. Suitable for the unexplored 'cultural field' of slacklining, the design allows for unexpected topics to emerge within the analytical lens of Schulz' (2004) categories.

6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main results originating from the thematic analysis of the 26 interviews with slackliners (quotes were anonymised). This is linked with an interpretation of the results in light of the conceptual framework. From an analysis of respondents' digital media practices, their views on and feelings about digital media's influence in the development of the sport, interesting results emerged regarding the mediatization of slacklining.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, interview transcripts were thematically analysed using the software NVivo. Employing Schulz' (2004) four categories for the analysis turned out to be a valuable approach to analyse mediatization in slacklining. The categories are the main themes of the research, as the results obtained from the interview data were largely captured by them. Different sub-themes that related to the four main themes of 'extension', 'accommodation', 'substitution' and 'amalgamation' were induced from the interviews. As expected, not all digital media practices could be assigned to only one sub-process. Where this happened, digital media practices appear in more than one chapter and according to their respective role. In these cases, Schulz' (2004) sub-processes again proved useful, as they allowed for an illustration of relations between different channels of mediatization.

6.1 Extension

Digital media forms have extended the communication capabilities of slackliners and thus contributed to a mediatization of the sport. The social media platform Facebook has played an important role.

6.1.1 Sharing of Knowledge and Progression of Skill Level

Slackliners share a lot of different knowledge via social media, especially via Facebook. This includes knowledge about safety, equipment, locations, and community activities. Without long-established standards and institutional bodies in the sport, especially the less engaged respondents reported to use social media as the first place to look for tutorials on basic movements or knowledge about equipment and safety. This is similar to what Thorpe and Ahmad (2015) and Gilchrist and Wheaton

(2013) reported for the sport of parkour. For more specific or sophisticated advice (e.g. on specific equipment or on how to set up long- or highlines safely), participants asked for advice in Facebook slacklining groups, such as

'SlackChat'². Regarding locations, some respondents mentioned a website called 'SlackMap', a Google Maps-like site where slackliners can get information on slackline spots around the world. Lacking magazines dedicated to the sport, it is via Facebook groups that slackliners get information on activities in the local or global slacklining community, spontaneous training sessions, new records, competition results and slackline festivals. The following quote by Interviewee 3, a 28-year-old Canadian professional slackliner, is revealing of this:

[...] Facebook is the most active place to stay in touch with what's going on in the world with slacklining, I always joke and call it "Slackbook". [...] It's like the worldwide slackline newspaper every time I open up my newsfeed.

Regarding the importance of Facebook for information about slackline festivals and events, a 24-year-old German (Interviewee 7) slackliner adds:

[...] all these festivals are in large part only run via Facebook events. Thus, you only get to know about the festivals via Facebook.

Regarding the progression of the skill level in the sport, many athletes name digital content as a main driver. Similar to what Thorpe and Ahmad (2015) observed for parkour, respondents attributed much of the speed at which the skill level in the sport developed, to being able to see other athletes do new tricks on the slackline via digital media. Moreover, athletes attributed developments in the style of the sport and its diversification to *specific* videos and their spread online. Interviewee 8, a 25-year-old German slackliner:

There was this one video about bouncing on longlines, it was the start of doing tricks on longlines. 2-3 months afterwards, there was a hype about it, everyone started doing this and now it's normal.

All respondents found social media extremely valuable for communicating and sharing knowledge within the slacklining community. However, some respondents preferred to seek knowledge offline with fellow slackliners instead. In the eyes of Interviewee 19, a 23-year-old Swiss slackliner:

² "SlackChat" is the largest Facebook group dedicated to slacklining, with more than 12.000 members (Iverson, 2016).

[...] the transfer of knowledge is a little slower than it could be because it [Facebook] is just a very unstructured medium.

According to respondents, the main reasons for seeking knowledge offline are two disadvantages of Facebook when it comes to sharing knowledge: the difficulty to assess the quality of information and the difficulty to archive information. In this way, the specific technological affordances of digital media can also contribute to 'de-mediatization' (Grenz & Möll, 2014).

6.1.2 Digital Camera Technology and Producing Content

Digital Camera Technology plays an important part in the extension of slackliners' communication capabilities, as it enables video communication. Facebook and video platforms like YouTube would not have had the same extending effect, were it not for the affordability of high definition cameras (and smartphones equipped with such) and action cameras like the GoPro™, providing a majority of the content and enabling communication by video. For professional athletes, the proliferation and diversification of digital camera technologies is associated with an extension of their production capabilities and visibility online. A 19-yearold Brazilian professional (Interviewee 2) describes it this way:

I used to make videos with a GoPro [...]. Now, I also have a DSLR camera and my possibilities tripled and I even feel more inspired to make editions.

Digital camera technologies extend the capabilities of *what* can be communicated. Most respondents indicated that what they are looking for in slackline videos, is content that conveys what it *feels* like to be doing the activity. The most interesting technology for many respondents in this respect are camera drones, especially for highlining. They mentioned that camera drones can portray the activity of walking across an abyss from a perspective that not even those experiencing the walk first-hand can, flying next to the person walking the line in mid-air, able to capture both the facial expressions of the highliner and putting length and environment of the highline in perspective. Therefore, this technology vastly extends the capabilities of communicating what it really feels like to be out on a highline and camera drones are, just like Evers (2015) finds for action cameras, an extension of the gaze of athletes and their audience.

6.1.3 Influence of Video Content and Prolongation of Motivation

Like Woermann (2012) reports for free-skiers, video content incites athletes to dream about doing their sport. Not only do slackliners often name professional video productions as motivation that attracted them to the sport. Respondents also mentioned dedicating leisure time to such 'dreaming' during their daily routine and preferred to watch and share creative, inspirational, high-quality videos that told a story and had stunning visuals.

Interviewer: And when you think of how you practice the sport; do you feel like digital media have or have had an impact on that?

A 31-year-old US professional (Interviewee 24): Yes, I would say so. Mainly because of the inspiration I get from other people's projects that I see on Instagram or Facebook to try something similar or different, it's inspiring to see what other people are doing. And if social media didn't exist, I wouldn't necessarily have those ideas sparked in my head to get out and get after it.

Interviewee 26, a 32-year-old Chinese slackliner admitted that he was bored by slacklining after a year, stopped and only got back into it after watching inspiring video content:

Without digital media, I was simply not creative enough to challenge myself on a slackline.

Thus, digital content also prolongs the motivation of athletes to continue doing the sport and try new things. However, compared to other factors, its motivational potential is limited. Regarding the development of different styles in the sport, respondents indicated that a video may inspire a trickliner to try a new trick on a trickline, but it will not make a trickliner go highlining. Barriers of entry (e.g. equipment) weigh heavier than the inspiration drawn from digital content. According to interviewees, changes in style are also strongly dependent on the preferences of the local community. Similarly, respondents rejected the idea that digital content had a stronger influence on their own risk perception than fear of injury. However, especially professionals agreed that extending the reach of digital content depicting risky slacklining (e.g. free-solo highlining, i.e. without a security leash attached) and the 'social media fame' that such activities garner, might distort the perception of such practices. A 28-year-old German professional (Interviewee 13) finds:

I don't think that things appear less dangerous [if you see them more often], but they could appear more interesting, if you see that people are successful doing them.

6.1.4 Global Connectivity and Organisation

Slackliners make extensive use of social media to connect, stay in contact and organise globally. And for the ability to connect with other slackliners globally and for the sport's global development, all respondents viewed Facebook as the most important tool. As one 27-year-old German slackliner (interviewee 5) puts it:

Slacklining would work without digitalisation, but it would be smaller, more local, you would not have this exchange. And I believe that we all benefit a lot from this exchange.

Many respondents reported that it was the global online slacklining community that made them travel more, as it was easy to connect with local slackline groups via social media. Interviewee 8, a 26-year-old German slackliner describes this:

What is so fundamentally different with slacklining, is that you write in a Facebook- or WhatsApp-group just about wherever you are that you would like to go slacklining, and 6-7 people that you have never seen before will turn up. [...] And that is the most natural thing in the world.

As most communication for slackliners runs via Facebook, practitioners not only plan small sessions, but also larger projects, and large-scale events via the platform, using its affordances for messaging, group discussions and event planning. Digital media also allow athletes to challenge each other and compete virtually. Online trickline competitions, where juries judge video performances, are a very recent development and 'democratise' global competition, as they 'allow people that don't have the possibility to pay the travel expenses, to go to competitions' (Interviewee 18, a 19-year-old Swiss professional).

In the 'cultural field' of slacklining, digital media enable the sharing and exchanging of knowledge and inspiration on a global scale and allow slackliners across the globe to come together and keep in touch. Digital media therefore have a huge impact on the speed of the development, the diversification, the growth, and the global spread of slacklining. By extending the communication capabilities of slackliners, digital media have thus contributed to the global character of the sport, increased its visibility, influenced style developments and the nature of competitions. Slackliners value this extension and the feeling of familiarity that is amplified by

[...] the one single medium that we all use being Facebook' (Interviewee 3). However, digital media do not always enhance the extension of communication capabilities and respondents indicated they can become an obstacle rather than an impetus to development, if online groups such as 'SlackChat' become very large.

6.2 Accommodation

The slackliners in the sample mentioned different ways in which they were accommodating to digital media, i.e. adapting to the existence of digital media in ways of their thinking and acting, when it came to slacklining.

6.2.1 Accommodation to Facebook

When thinking of the global slackline community, most respondents were also thinking of the online community, i.e. Facebook groups such as 'SlackChat'. In some cases, slackliners signed up to

Facebook only to be able to connect with the online slackline community. A 28-year-old Canadian professional (Interviewee 3) recalls:

I know people who didn't have Facebook before for their own reasons, and they've created new accounts that don't even have their real name, it's just Slack Rob, because he just wants to be in touch with what's going on.

In this respect, Facebook constitutes what mediatization scholars call the 'moulding force' of media (Krotz, 2007), i.e. the power of some media to 'exert a certain "pressure" on the way we communicate' (Hepp, 2009, p. 143). However, the quote also indicates that it is because of digital media's ability to extend communication capabilities, that athletes accommodate to them. A 'hierarchy' to some extent of mediatization sub-processes thus emerges from the data, with extension fuelling accommodation.

6.2.2 Accommodation for self-marketing

Professional slackliners often market themselves via digital media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. For them, the planning of a project sometimes even involved preplanning the kind of content they wanted to obtain from it. Some professional athletes described thinking of planning photos for certain hashtags and having the story-arch and length of the video they wanted to create afterwards in mind. Interviewee 6, a 24-year-old German professional says:

[...] I know exactly, we have this project and the movie about it should not be longer than four minutes, as people lose interest otherwise. In this sense, it [digital media] definitely influences how I work.

As Woermann (2012) describes, as a result from such accommodation, thinking of slacklining for these professionals also meant thinking of digitally documenting slacklining.

6.2.3 Conscious Accommodation

Slackliners are generally very conscious in their choices of accommodation and appear to accommodate mostly if they benefit from it. Professionals describe how they transformed their Facebook into a platform showing only slacklining-related news and use it to get briefed on what is going on in the 'world of slacklining' or for promoting a slackline-related business. Another example of such 'conscious accommodation' is the practice of naming events and gatherings 'competitions' and 'records', mainly to attract sponsorship and attention. Interviewee 19 describes this:

At the [name of a festival] festival that I am organising, we always have fun contests and this year we want to call one of them the "Swiss National Speed-lining Contest" and that

just makes...it's so much easier to find sponsors because it generates a lot more public attention than just a bunch of people slacklining in the park.

6.2.4 Covert Accommodation

In addition to such 'conscious accommodation', slackliners also indicated what could be described as 'covert accommodation'. Asked, whether there was usually a camera around when they were slacklining, many respondents gave an answer that was similar to what Interviewee 15, a 25-year-old Lithuanian slackliner said:

I do have it [a camera], but I don't take much photos. (...) Sometimes, just very rarely. Just because we do it [slacklining] quite often, so it's like "uh, you're on the line again".

While respondents also took pictures for memory, this attitude shows that for slackliners, a picture worth taking is one that is spreadable via social media afterwards. They reported taking pictures if the light was good or if they did something new or special, like setting up a highline.

So, while respondents' content production habits varied considerably, depending on their individual liking for photography and editing, for less engaged slackliners 'on the line' may not equal 'on the screen'. However, this may not indicate that the sport is less mediatized for them, as such behaviour constitutes an accommodation to how digital media work, too.

The accommodation of slackliners to a digital media environment has shaped the development of the sport in several ways. Professional slackliners have accommodated to digital media to market themselves online, which is a necessary precondition for 'social media careers' outside of competition (the other, amalgamation of slacklining and digital media, will be discussed in the next chapter). While the 'conscious accommodation' of slackliners to fund community activities has contributed to the development of the sport's festival culture and the lively character of the slacklining community, it also contributes to the commercialisation of the sport and such festivals. Non-professional slackliners, while prosuming the sport differently from professionals and to a lesser extent, have accommodated to the digital media environment, as well. Still, as these examples demonstrate, mediatization is not necessarily a stringent consequence of technological developments, but involves athletes as active agents of change. However, with an increasing accommodation to the use of digital media in slacklining, the power of digital media in the sport, its 'moulding force', is likely to increase.

6.3 Substitution and Amalgamation

Slackliners deploy digital media to substitute and amalgamate with different aspects of the sport. These two sub-processes have thus shaped the development of slacklining and its mediatization. In the eyes of athletes, the most important aspect for the development of slacklining is the substitution of face-to-face communication by communication via social media and the rapid exchange of video

content. But apart from communication, there are several other ways in which digital media substitution and amalgamation influence the sport.

6.3.1 Substitution and Amalgamation in Competition

Professional slackliners often opt to substitute or amalgamate attending competitions with making artful short-movies or movies of expeditions to increase their prominence in the scene. Online prominence and visibility can in turn become a channel to earn money from sponsorships. Interviewee 23, a 28-year-old US professional finds:

[...] some slackliners, they focus way more on videos and landing the first ever trick of this or the first ever of that and not really focusing on competitions. [...] If success is being popular and having everybody know your name and know you as a great athlete or whatever on Facebook, that's one way to do it, not competitions [...].

The diminished importance of competition for athletes' careers due to digital media influence is similar to what Dumont (2017) finds for the climbing scene, and what Ojala (2014) and Thorpe (2016) have documented in snowboarding. Producing creative, 'spreadable' short movies that are shared widely inside the sporting community enable athletes to convert 'social media capital into economic capital' and forge 'digital media-based careers' (Thorpe, 2016: 67) with the support of sponsors from within or outside lifestyle sport industries.

6.3.2 Amalgamation in Training and Feedback

With only few established clubs, organized trainings or coaches, slackliners use digital media for training and receiving motivation and feedback. To be able to assess their performance afterwards and thus make their training more efficient, some respondents reported setting up a camera when slacklining by themselves. Interviewee 16, a 40-year-old Polish slackliner explains:

I like to record myself sometimes, to see where I make mistakes, to see where my body is. [...] Recording on video is like telling someone else about his posture, you can see where the problem is.

However, a 28-year-old UK professional (Interviewee 22) explains why such e-learning cannot substitute real-life training:

It was only when I first-hand learnt off other trickliners how tight the line needed to be [...]. It was only first-hand that I really got the experience to then go out and learn. I got inspired by the internet and knew it was possible, and tried but failed. It shows interaction is actually needed as well, to be honest [...].

The last quote exemplifies how slackliners regarded digital media in their training: they allow for increased training efficiency and progress, but do not suffice on their own as training tools.

6.3.3 Amalgamation in Professional Slacklining

An incident described by Interviewee 13 illustrates the level to which digital media and slacklining have amalgamated for some professionals:

A friend of mine recently walked the longest distance ever on a highline and posted a photo [sic: video] on Instagram while he was still on the line. He fell, sat on the line and put out a video statement about what had just happened.

While this is arguably a more extreme case, many professional slackliners describe how filming slacklining has amalgamated with the activity. Interviewee 3 describes an interesting case of amalgamation between digital media technology and the sport, the use of camera drones for setting up highlines:

It [camera drones] is more or a tool than for filming, but then after you use it as a tool, you also get to get some really cool shots. [...] We fly over a string or a fishing line, something light weight, and then with that you pull over a thicker rope, then with that you pull over the rig. [...] it [camera drones] is a crucial tool for rigging these bigger highlines [...].

However, the amalgamation of digital media and slacklining is not a linear process, as one 21-year-old German professional athlete (Interviewee 4) explains:

In the past, I had the camera run constantly, but [...] let's put it this way, video production has become more elaborate and that is why digital media are not as much included in my training anymore as they used to be.

Professionals also mention the lack of direct feedback when training by themselves. Sharing a video about their training session on social media, online feedback substitutes offline feedback and provides motivation to continue training. Woermann (2012) refers to this as 'reflexive practices': digital media allow athletes to observe themselves and reflect on their identity.

However, assessing performance by giving feedback on video content, is different from 'real' feedback. Digital media can influence the assessment of performance and alter its meaning.

Slackliners are aware of this:

Interviewee 13: Facebook has turned into the medium that evaluates your performance, in a way. I mean, of course it is the world who evaluates it, but Facebook has the power over it, so to speak. And that is a little crazy, because for some people the picture they post at the end of the day has almost become more important than the experience they had.

Another account of how feedback on performance can be affected by digital media, is given by a 25-year-old German slackliner (Interviewee 8) regarding a video of a highline free-solo walk:

The first video of this [a free-solo highline walk], was one that was shot from the anchor-point [...]. You had no feeling for how high or how long that slackline was. And then [film-maker's name] published a trailer of it with drone-footage. Both videos, even though of the same performance, have been received very differently [online]. The first one got a lot of critical feedback, while reactions to the second one were more like "wow, that's the greatest clip I have ever seen" and it went viral. [...] That's why I believe new camera and filming techniques have a big influence on how the [slackline] scene develops.

Through the highlighted channels, digital media amalgamation of training may influence tendencies of individualisation in slacklining, reported by Röhms (2013, p. 7-8). Digital media amalgamation/substitution of performance may alter the meaning of feedback and influence slackliners' risk perception. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, digital media's influence on athletes' risk perception is ambiguous.

Importantly, for all respondents, the advantages of digital media use outweigh its disadvantages. And while some professionals mentioned having felt pressure to post on social media in the past because of a sponsor's demand, the great majority of respondents view digital media as a great opportunity for both themselves and the sport. Interviewee 13's response represents professional slackliners' view on the amalgamation of the sport with social media:

I've never perceived it [posting on social media] as pressure, [...] it's a question of how you interact with it. For me, it's become an integral part of my daily routine, so that installing two posts a day is the least effort.

This is unlike in more developed lifestyle sports like climbing, where Dumont (2017) reports anxiety among professionals in light of the changes due to digital mediatization.

6.3.4 Amalgamation in Amateur Slacklining

Arguably as part of what was described as 'covert accommodation' in the previous chapter, amateur slackliners do not engage in the amalgamation of digital media and the sport quite as much as professionals. For them, 'on the line' does generally not equal 'on the screen' (Woermann, 2012) and

amalgamation is usually confined to special occasions (e.g. new location or festivals). One effect of the amalgamation of slacklining and the act of filming/photographing it, is described by both amateur slackliners and professionals: A camera acts as a motivator. Athletes, while not indicating irresponsible behaviour due to the presence of a camera, generally admitted that the presence of a camera motivates and incites them to try harder. Interviewee 5, a 27-year-old German slackliner illustrates this:

It doesn't make a difference on a 30-metre line, but if I'm on a 60-70-metre line, which is outside my comfort zone, then it does have an impact, then the camera is motivating me. I will try harder, it pushes me.

6.3.5 Substitution of/Amalgamation with Institutions

In the case of slacklining, organisation via social media substitutes for and amalgamates with institutional structures like clubs or federations. A 37-year-old UK slackliner (interviewee 21), e.g. finds that

[...] the slackline London [Facebook] group is pretty much a club in its own right.

Social media enable easy, spontaneous organisation of trainings. The uncommitting and spontaneous nature of organisation in the sport they thus contribute to, was an essential part of slacklining for many respondents. However, social media arguably cannot substitute all aspects of institutional organisation. Respondents overall strongly supported the establishment of offline institutions, such as clubs and the International Slackline Association (ISA) to deal with authorities to keep spaces accessible for slackliners and do research on safety. Interviewee 20, a 33-year-old Swiss slackliner says:

I think if you want to develop as a slackliner and establish some structures, clubs, federations etc. you have to meet in person. If the sport is to progress, you have to meet.

Social media arguably facilitates the establishment of institutions in young lifestyle sports, as this quote from Interviewee 13 illustrates:

I don't think that they [digital media] impede [development of institutions], to be honest. I believe it even facilitates it in parts. Because forming a group, i.e. an unofficial association, some people will be more active than others and without a lot of regulating, structures resembling those of clubs are formed by self-organisation.

As the sport grows, however, many respondents indicated that disadvantages of Facebook for organising large groups (e.g. the difficulty to archive information or the uncommitting nature), become more pronounced. Interviewee 19 says:

[...] everything that has value [...] it just disappears down the wall on SlackChat within minutes.

As a response, slackliners are complementing a few large Facebook groups with multiple smaller, more local ones and with communication via different digital platforms. Especially in Switzerland, Germany, and China, additional social media (e.g. WhatsApp and WeChat) had replaced communication via Facebook on the local level. To better archive photos or videos and set up 'online resumés', many slackliners increasingly use Instagram. Still, athletes engaged with slackline institutions report a difficulty to define their role and have their messages heard in the steady stream of online content. Interviewee 8, a 25-year-old German slackliner says:

The transience of social media is a problem. In SlackChat, e.g., there are recurring discussions on the same topics because information is not preserved. It is not accessible anymore after one to two weeks. [...] But, to set up an information platform in addition to Facebook and WhatsApp that people want to use, is extremely difficult. You are in direct competition with that continuous stream of news and new videos.

This struggle appears to be similar to what Frandsen (2016) reports of traditional sports institutions.

6.3.6 Amalgamation with Festivals

Slackline festivals are an interesting example of how heavily offline slackline gatherings are amalgamated with social media. While most respondents indicated that they were reliant on Facebook for information about the festivals, they also mentioned that the platform enables more offline interaction. Asked, whether social media or festivals were more important for the slacklining community, responses were divided. A 21-year-old Brazilian slackliner (Interviewee 1) finds festivals are more important because:

'[...] when you are with someone, like with workshops or on a festival, [...] it's easier to get this energy and to be motivated than from a video and social media'. Interviewee 17, a 22-year-old Swiss slackliner says:

Online would suffice for all the technical parts and to organise slackline trainings, but for everything inter-personal, you need trainings and festivals.

However, a 26-year-old German professional (Interviewee 11) believes:

[...] Facebook is more important. Because Facebook is simply more present, the sheer amount of inspiration and exchange is much larger via Facebook than via festivals. You might attend a festival a few times per year, but the average person is on Facebook daily and the influence, therefore, is much bigger. Importantly, key experiences, e.g. starting to highline, often happen on festivals and getting in contact with that via festivals is much more intensive [...].

The example of slackline festivals is illustrative of how the amalgamation of digital media and offline activities can enable a 'virtuous circle' for motivation and progress.

These examples show, how the choices that slackliners made regarding the substitution and amalgamation of parts of the sport with digital media, have influenced the development of the sport. As professionals accommodate to a digital media environment and deploy digital media to amalgamate with the sport, they have influenced the development of competition, allowing the sport's non-competitive nature to persist even among professionals. Amalgamating with forms of training and performance feedback, digital media have increased training efficiency and motivation as well as influenced the role and outlook of feedback. An early substitution of institutional structures by digital media has had an impact on the development of institutions and their main responsibilities in the sport. Interestingly, substituting offline communication with communication via social media has supported an increase in the amount of offline meetings and helped develop the festival culture of the sport. However, substitution and amalgamation processes are dependent, among other factors, on the affordances of digital media and the willingness of athletes (who consciously weigh up advantages and disadvantages) to adopt them.

This chapter has shown how the mediatization of slacklining is constituted of athletes' digital media practices. These media practices often relate to different sub-processes of mediatization and the analysis has therefore facilitated the deconstruction of the complex metaprocess of mediatization into different parts. Slackliners' digital media practices are often indicative of more than one sub-process. E.g., 'digital media careers' are only possible because athletes use digital media to extend the reach of their communication, accommodate to the way social media platforms work and amalgamate their sport with digital technologies. This chapter has analysed mediatization sub-processes separately, but nevertheless illustrated interrelations between them. Moreover, the analysis could detect a hierarchy among mediatization subprocesses in slacklining: the extension of communication capabilities is a main driver for other sub-processes. Much of why slackliners accommodate to and substitute/amalgamate digital media with parts of their sport is due to digital media's ability to extend their communication capabilities. In this respect, accommodation, amalgamation, and

substitution can be regarded as supporting/reinforcing processes, amplifying the extent to which digital media can extend communication capabilities.

However, the analysis has also highlighted that digital media are not the only, and arguably not even the strongest factor driving the development of slacklining. Barriers of entry, personal willingness to take risk and other factors also play an important role.

7 CONCLUSION

By conceptualising mediatization through a social-constructivist lens and applying Schulz' (2004) four sub-processes of mediatization, this study concludes that digital media practices can have significant and diverse effects on the mediatization of lifestyle sporting cultures and influence their development. Involving athletes as conscious agents, the lifestyle sport slacklining is considerably shaped by digital mediatization in numerous ways. It is no exaggeration to say that the sport would look considerably different today without the influence of digital media.

Slackliners deploy digital media to extend their communication capabilities, accommodate to digital media and let them substitute or amalgamate with different aspects of the sport. While the extension of communication capabilities emerged as a driver for other subprocesses, the mediatization of slacklining is a multi-faceted development. Analysing slackliners' digital media practices with the conceptual lens of Schulz' (2004) mediatization sub-processes (extension, accommodation, substitution, amalgamation) proved useful for a clearer assessment of the complex metaprocess of mediatization. The use and reception of digital media differ between professional athletes and less engaged practitioners of slacklining, but overall, slackliners view the digital mediatization of their sport positively. It enables them to connect with athletes globally, to promote the sport and themselves and sometimes make a living from it.

Digital media, especially social media and digital camera technologies, enable slackliners to extend their communication capabilities dramatically. Consequently, they have a big impact on the speed of the athletes' skill progression and the speed of the sport's development in general. Digital media are also highly important for prolonging motivation and fuelling creativity and thus directly influence the growth of the slacklining population and the diversification of slacklining styles. Moreover, digital media have driven the professionalisation of slacklining, shaped the outlook of competition and the way that slackliners organise and imagine themselves as a global community. Where slackliners consciously accommodate to a digital media environment, it is to benefit from the communication channels that digital media enable (often for financial reasons, e.g.

sponsorships). Thus, digital media further contribute to both the sport's offline culture (festivals) and the commercialisation of slacklining. The substitution and amalgamation of different parts of slacklining with digital media has had an important impact on the nature of training and feedback

and the role and responsibilities of institutions in the sport. Structures on digital platforms such as Facebook can substitute the role of clubs and trainings in early phases of development and continue to amalgamate with them in meaningful ways during later development.

However, the disadvantages that respondents associated with organisation and communication via digital media imply that the impact of digital media and opinions on them may vary during the development of a lifestyle sport. An important factor appears to be the size of the lifestyle sporting community. With local communities, clubs and the international festival scene growing, the influence of digital media for substituting institutions might well diminish in the future. Therefore, future research should aim to uncover such developments over time and regarding different sizes of sport culture. Approaching lifestyle sport development from different starting points than media studies could additionally contribute to an even clearer understanding of mediatization.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 – Interview Participants in Detail

Count	Name	nationality	Age	years slacklining	sex	type of slacklining
1		BRA	23	3	m	long
2		BRA	19	5	f	trick
3		CAN	28	5	m	high
4		GER	21	5	m	trick
5		GER	27	5	f	long
6		GER	24	6	m	high
7		GER	24	6	m	high
8		GER	25	6	m	long
9		GER	26	7	m	high
10		GER	36	8	m	long
11		GER	26	9	m	high
12		GER	35	10	m	long
13		GER	28	11	m	high
14		GER	24	11	m	high
15		LIT	25	3	f	low / long
16		POL	40	3,5	m	long
17		SW	22	4	f	long / rodeo

18		SW	19	5	m	trick
19		SW	23	6	m	long
20		SW	33	10	m	water
21		UK	37	4	m	long
22		UK	29	8	m	long / high
23		US	28	6	m	trick
24		US	31	7	f	long / high
25		US	30	10	m	high
26		CHN	32	10	m	high/long

Interview Participants in Detail – continued

Count	institution	category	position	used as quotes
1	No	Normal	normal	1
2	No	Pro	core / professional	1
3	No	Pro	core / professional / company	4
4	No	Pro	core / professional	1
5	Yes	Normal	normal / club representative	2
6	No	Pro	core / professional / filming	1
7	No	Pro	core / professional	1
8	Yes	Normal	normal / club representative	4
9	No	Pro	core / professional	1
10	No	Normal	normal	/
11	No	Pro	core / professional / company	1
12	Yes	Normal	normal / club founder	/
13	No	Pro	core / professional	4
14	No	Pro	core / professional / filming / company	/
15	No	Normal	normal	1
16	Online	Normal	normal /FB admin	1
17	Yes	Normal	normal / club representative	1
18	No	Pro	core / professional	1
19	Yes	Normal	normal / club representative	4

20	Yes	Normal	normal / club representative	2
21	No	Normal	normal	1
22	Yes	Normal	core / professional	1
23	No	Pro	core / professional	1
24	No	Pro	core / professional	1
25	No	Pro	core / professional / company	/
26	No	Normal	normal	1

APPENDIX 2 – Topic Guide

Date: June 2017 Introduction:

Discuss time limit

Introduction of the researcher and the research project

Get consent to record interview 4. Discuss oral consent (see Consent Form) 5. Any questions from the interviewee?

Background and “Warm-up” questions:

Can you please introduce yourself (Name, Age), say how you got into slacklining and how often you practice it today?

Do you identify as a slackliner?

Is there such a thing as the typical slackliner?

Why do you slackline? What makes the sport special for you?

Topic 1 – Social media, video content and their influence

How do you get in contact with the slacklining online?

How and which social media do you use for slacklining? Why? Is there a main platform? How important is online communication for you/the slacklining community?

Does the way you use social media for slacklining differ from how you use it for other sports that you do?

Is digital media a part of slacklining for you?

What slackline style do practice most often? Why? What do you connect mentally with the different styles?

Do you watch slackline videos? What kind of videos?

Is there a certain feeling for you that is connected to watching a slackline video?

When you think of how you practice the sport, did digital media have an impact on that?

Are there any downsides to using digital media in slacklining for you? Do you feel pressure from “digital/online logic”?

In which direction is slacklining developing and why? Is it getting more dangerous or spectacular?

Topic 2 – Digital camera technologies and their influence

When you go slacklining, do you usually have a camera with you?

What is more important for you, slacklining or taking photos of it?

Who do you consider as your audience of the content you share? Who do you produce for?

Did digital camera technologies like the *GoPro™* or camera drones have an impact on your and other athletes' way of slacklining? Is there something special about them? What?

Did digital media technologies have an impact on your own video consumption habits? Do you find certain technologies especially interesting? Why?

Does the activity change for you, if there is a camera around?

Topic 3 – Competition, community and institutions

How important is competition in your eyes and for the development? Is it becoming more? Is there a need for in-person competition today?

Is there a shifting focus from (tricklining) competitions to big outdoor projects?

Do you think videos influence your and other athletes' style?

What is more important for the slacklining community, social media or festivals?

How important are slackline institutions (like ISA) for your practice of the sport and for the sport generally?

How important are big companies, like Red Bull, in slacklining?

APPENDIX 3 – Simplified Excerpt of Coding Frame

Deduced Codes	Induced Sub-Codes	Open Codes	Example Quotes
Extension	Sharing of Knowledge	Sharing of Knowledge	“In the beginning, I watched a lot of videos on equipment, how to set up things and stuff. And if someone posts a video about a new record, I also watch it.”
	Progression of Skill Level	Progression of Skill Level	“Social media is a big reason why the sport has evolved. It would still be in its infancy if there wasn’t social media for us to learn from each other.”
	Digital camera/technology extension	Speciality of Camera Drones	“Drones are perfectly suited for highlining, a flying camera that can fly out with you”.
	Influence of video content	Influence on style	“I think that highline video productions don’t affect trickliners.”
		Influence on risk perception	“Just because you see someone in the media go very fast with a car or just because you see Ueli Steck running up the Eiger without ropes, that doesn’t mean you will do it, too.”

	Prolongation of Motivation	Inspiration from videos	"When I look at these highline videos, one day I want to be there."
	Global Connectivity and Organisation	Global connection via Facebook	"If I am looking for any sort of contact or any sort of conversation with a slackliner, I usually start on Facebook."
	De-tension	Disadvantages of online communication	"The structure of online forums was better than social media because you could come back to older conversations."
Accommodation	Accommodation to Facebook	Accommodation to Facebook	"Everything is on Facebook. For me, slackline-related, Facebook is the central thing."

	Self-marketing	Self-marketing via social media	"Social media and especially Facebook are an ideal platform for me to market oneself as a brand and person."
	Conscious accommodation	Accommodation for funding of events	"If we throw an event, we always make fun competitions and we call them 'Swiss championships', just because it's so much easier to get sponsors."

	Covert accommodation	Amateur camera practices	"[...] when I go slacklining in Park like usual, I mostly only take my phone and only take photos if I am somewhere new or the location is cool"
Substitution/ Amalgamation	Substitution/Amalgamation in Competition	Digital media careers	"He's consistently made videos on YouTube, and he's also got pretty strong presence on Facebook [...] He's made more of a name for himself in that avenue than with competing."
	Amalgamation in Training	Filming for training efficiency	"I hate filming it, to be honest, well unless it's for watching it back myself to critically analyse."
	Amalgamation in Feedback	Facebook as a feedback platform	"Facebook has become the medium that evaluates your performance"
	Amalgamation Professional	Speciality of Camera Drones	"We use camera drones for rigging"
	Amalgamation Amateur	Influence of camera	"I definitely experienced myself, especially on lines where I don't feel 100% comfortable, that when there is a camera around, I kind of pull myself together and try to get the most out of myself."

	Substitution/Amalgamation in Institutions	Social media vs. institutions	"The Facebook group is a club in its own right."
	Amalgamation with Festivals	Social media vs. Festivals	"It's important to have both [digital media and festivals] to keep my interest in the sport."

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