ABSTRACT: The study examines the presence of female skiers, with and without a disability, on the social media platform Facebook. It focuses on Czech and foreign athletes and discusses their posts, as well as promotional and commercial content published on their official Facebook pages. The study is based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the published content (i.e. texts, photos and videos, links, hashtags), taking into consideration fans' reactions posted on the official Facebook pages of the selected athletes. Personal Facebook pages of four female athletes are reflected on. These athletes were successful at the World Championships in 2017. To provide consistency, all of the selected athletes are skiers (Tereza Kmochová – the Czech hearing impaired alpine skier, Šárka Strachová – the Czech alpine skier, Henrieta Farkašová – the Slovak visually impaired alpine skier and Mikaela Shiffrin – the American champion in alpine skiing). Three key research questions are posed: How the female skiers in question use their official Facebook pages for communication, promotional and commercial purposes? What are the similarities and differences present in Facebook communication of the female athletes with and without a disability? What are the similarities and differences in Facebook communication of these Czech and foreign skiers? The results prove, for example, that the able-bodied athletes post significantly more content on their official Facebook pages than the athletes with the aforementioned disabilities. Moreover, Tereza Kmochová who also participates in standard competitions tends to post more promotional content than Henrieta Farkašová who competes only in para alpine skiing.

KEY WORDS: disabled athletes, disabled sport, impairment, Facebook, mediated sport, social media

Introduction

The theme of equal treatment of athletes with and without a disability has recently attracted social and political attention. Since 2018, US Paralympians have received the same prize money as US Olympians.1
In the Czech Republic, impaired athletes try to improve the position and public acceptance of Paralympic sports, too. The initiative The Future of the Czech Paralympic Committee was founded by successful medallists from the European Championships, the World Championships, and the Paralympic Games. However, media representation of athletes with a disability has been explored to a lesser extent. Only a few of the existing academic studies and publications on media, sports and society focus on sports and disability or impaired athletes in particular (e.g. those written by Šemcová Tejkalová, Purdace and Howe, Ellis and Goggin, Hardin or Macková and Trunečková). Moreover, studies that would discuss athletes with a disability and their online presence and use of social media are notably absent, especially in terms of Czech media studies. We aim to partially fill this academic gap by paying attention to the questions of disabled athletes’ online communication, i.e. their social media presence.

The first Paralympic Games were held in Rome, Italy in 1960 and featured 400 athletes from 23 countries. In 1976, Chamonix, Sweden staged the first Paralympic Winter Games. The Games are now the second biggest sporting event in the world. In the past, sport has been seen as a form of therapy, and nowadays it can help to return to ‘ordinary’ life: "The Paralympic Games are the pinnacle of the career of Paralympic athletes and motivates others to participate or engage in Paralympic events."

The development of disabled athletes was also evident in Czechoslovakia. Athletes with visual and hearing impairments were the first to compete in 1929. The prominent physiotherapist Mjůr Srdceň organised the first games in 1948 in Kladrura. There were 82 patients divided into four groups (in accordance with the nature of their disabilities). This sporting event that took place in Czechoslovakia was even larger than the aforementioned games in the UK (in Stoke Mandeville, only 16 athletes with a disability started as opposed to 82 athletes competing in Kladrura).

Back in the 20th century, disabled athletes were out of the media spotlight. One of rare examples of media coverage related to impaired sportsmen dates back to 1964 when athletes with various physical disabilities attended the Czechoslovak C2 European Championships in athletes in Osstava. It was the first time this competition came close to bringing a sporting event including both athletes without and with a disability. However, the nationwide newspapers such as Radio pravo, Mladí františek or Novobohdová dovoz and the specialised sports newspaper called Československý sport did not mention this event. Disabled athletes may have appeared in the newspapers published in the same period, but only exceptionally. Today, public perception of impaired athletes is entirely different, even in case of television viewers. This shift in society-wide acceptance of disabled athletes makes their media presentation much more frequent than ever before. After all, information on sportswomen and sportsmen with a disability used to be disseminated only during the Paralympic Games. "With limited exceptions, the Paralympic Games is often the only time that disability sport receives any kind of national media coverage in countries around the world." Information about athletes with disabilities varies. Live broadcasts of sporting events on television now include a wider spectrum of top competitions involving athletes with a disability; news reports on this area of interest are offered more frequently. For example, British Channel 4 broadcasts a significant portion of sports programmes related to disabled athletes, helping to strengthen their media presentation in Great Britain. According to a recent interview with Daniel Jackson, Channel 4 has taught audiences to become familiar with classifications and rules associated with sporting events for disabled athletes. Ellis and Goggin even mention that "media 'teach us about what is human', 'normal', and acceptable, and our attitude to disability is no exception."

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serious obstacles complicating their lives. Thomas and Smith remark, “the socio-cultural stereotypes of disabled people and the experience of impairment and disability that are evident in the press are said to have the effect of evoking from readers emotions of pity and fear.” Fans have a passion for sports because also of unique human stories of individual athletes who succeed in their disciplines. As Goggin and Newell say, “many stories still draw on stock stereotypes of ‘brave, elite athletes’, ‘special people’, ‘remarkable achievers’ – in short, categories identified in earlier studies of disability and media. However, a sporting performance itself is just one of the elements through which the media present sporting events. Goggin and Newell also mention that “representation of people with disability within mainstream media is found in portrayal of brave, elite athletes who overcome their disability.”

The International Paralympic Committee improves the existing models of communication about disabled sport by using social networks more thoroughly: “The IPC has invested heavily in social media as a means of spreading its message and providing wide-ranging access to information about the Paralympic Movement and Games. This includes the use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google…” According to Real, these new technologies help to overcome the time and geographical barriers. In the case of sports fandom, fans can be very close to their favourite athletes or teams, although they are currently thousands of miles away. Lindemann and Cherney state that “new media function in three ways when it comes to disabled sport: it serves to legitimize for mainstream audiences disabled sport as a ‘real’ sport, it provides visibility for the athletes, and it enables athletes to connect to their fans and to each other.” Social media allow people with disabilities influence the media content and topics related to disabled sport by offering individual interpretations capturing the perspective of ordinary people with various disabilities. People with disabilities have historically been excluded in the realms of sport – where they fail to meet standards of the ‘ideal sporting body’ – and in advertising, where they also fail to meet an ideal body standard.

Social media such as Facebook or Twitter allow their users to engage in immediate interactions; they thus represent another crucial communication channel for sports and building athletes’ personal brands. Moreover, Lindemann and Cherney argue that the new communication technologies are being commonly implemented into the sports field. From this point of view, it is obvious that social media, which take an important part of daily routine of our (and future) generation, cannot be omitted. Boyd and Ellison define social networking sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.”

According to Boyd and Ellison, the first multifunctional social networking sites was the network called Six Degrees launched in 1997. This social network allowed its users to manage their personal profiles and friend lists, and they could also see other people’s friend lists. The possible problem was that people using Six Degrees could not have a network of friends and acquaintances in the online environment and therefore received only a small number of requests for friendship. At the same time, users were not interested in establishing contacts with unknown users. Six Degrees ceased activity in 2000. After 2000, social media’s functions started to extend and their social importance escalated quickly. Not only the specialised social networks like YouTube or Instagram but also the complex networks allowing various types of interaction, i.e. MySpace, Facebook or Twitter were developed in the first decade of the new Millennium. Facebook has been the most used social networking site in the world since 2008. This social network was originally created as a communication tool for the students of Harvard University. With its increasing popularity, the access was also provided to students of other educational institutions, and since September 2006 to anyone who wanted to join. Nowadays, Facebook has more than two billion monthly active users and is definitely the most commonly used social network in the world, and also in the Czech Republic.

The areas of media production and sport are mutually linked, influencing each other and falling under the sphere nowadays called “MediaSport.” Although the commercialisation of sport has already been recognised as a trend, it is now becoming a crucial and fundamental part of MediaSport practice as well as research. However, Real mentions that technologies enabling the commercialisation of modern sport lead to a sort of conflict – the traditional ideals of sport are absorbed by the culture of consumerism. Real talks about this phenomenon in relation to TV production, but recent communication phenomena suggest that sports presented via social media can be commercialised quite efficiently as well.

![Chart 1: Connection between media and athletes’ communication on social networking sites](image-url)


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As Walsh, Clavio, Lowell and Blaszka mention, social media such as Facebook or Twitter allow immediate interaction, thus representing another crucial channel for sports communication and building athletes’ personal brands.34,36,39,40 Aral, Kooiman and Ross have coined the term “branding athletes” as “the process through which an individual athlete builds a personal brand by establishing his/her own identity.”36 Pogoraro’s study mentioned above highlights that female athletes post a significantly higher number of photographs of themselves performing their sport than their male counterparts on Instagram.44 Our research is based on both qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry. The quantitative part of the analysis focuses on the selected athletes’ Facebook pages, while the qualitative part examines data from the selected social media accounts.47 We aim to identify the communication patterns and possible causes and consequences of these athletes’ social media use. The research sample includes three-month content of the official Facebook pages of the selected female skiers. We do not take into consideration whether the selected Facebook pages are managed by the athletes themselves or by media professionals (i.e. employees of marketing agencies). Previous research on the ways female and male athletes use social networks has identified significant gender differences in how athletes use social media and in their reasons for doing so. Smith and Sanderson reveal that female athletes post a significantly higher number of photographs of themselves performing their sports than their male counterparts on Instagram. Their findings thus contrast starkly with the conclusions of previous studies, which identify a prevalence of photos with passive poses on the social media profiles of female athletes.37 From the marketing point of view, the analysis of the communications posted by tennis players active on Twitter conducted by Ledel and Danylukh shows that male athletes focus more on sports fandom, while female athletes are predominantly brand-oriented.48 Although our research sample is relatively small, the study should indicate certain diversities in the athletes’ communication on social media and could be a starting point for future research. As stated above, the research sample includes:

- **Teresa Kmocho** – the Czech hearing impaired alpine skier.
- **Šárka Stechaová** – the Czech alpine skier.
- **Henrieta Farkašová** – the Slovak world-class visually impaired skier.
- **Mihaela Shifrin** – the American champion in alpine skiing.

**Note:** The further described foreign academic studies are predominantly US-based. In the United States, Twitter is the most commonly used social networking site, whereas Facebook plays this role in the Czech Republic.49 Previous research on the ways female and male athletes use social networks has identified significant gender differences in how athletes use social media and in their reasons for doing so. Smith and Sanderson reveal that female athletes post a significantly higher number of photographs of themselves performing their sports than their male counterparts on Instagram. Their findings thus contrast starkly with the conclusions of previous studies, which identify a prevalence of photos with passive poses on the social media profiles of female athletes.37 From the marketing point of view, the analysis of the communications posted by tennis players active on Twitter conducted by Ledel and Danylukh shows that male athletes focus more on sports fandom, while female athletes are predominantly brand-oriented.48 Although our research sample is relatively small, the study should indicate certain diversities in the athletes’ communication on social media and could be a starting point for future research. As stated above, the research sample includes:

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**The research poses three main research questions:**

**RQ1:** Do the female skiers in question use their official Facebook pages for communication, promotional and commercial purposes?

**RQ2:** What are the similarities and differences present in Facebook communication of the female athletes with and without a disability?

**RQ3:** What are the similarities and differences in Facebook communication of these Czech and foreign skiers?

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64 Dominika Šulecká – the Slovak world-class visually impaired skier.
65 Mikaella Shifrin – the American champion in alpine skiing.
To research the communication patterns of the selected female athletes and the way and frequency of posting promotional and commercial messages through social media the quantitative content analysis of their official Facebook pages is used. This method has been chosen mainly because of the complexity and nature of the obtained data. In terms of a necessary categorisation of the relevant Facebook posts, this research uses an approach similar to the methodology applied by Hambrick and Mahoney, who examined Twitter as a marketing tool of celebrity athletes, in combination with the approach used by Guerin and Clavio who focused on Facebook as a tool of sports marketing in general.

The communication categories we use are inspired by Hambrick and Mahoney, Guerin and Clavio and Turková:

- **Interactivity** is represented by posts through which the athlete expresses a personal opinion or communicates with other Facebook users. The space for others’ reactions is also provided.
- **Sport-related posts** are messages associated with the athlete’s sports discipline, sporting events and athletic practices.
- **Diversity** includes posts not related to sport which may be thematically linked to popular culture such as music, films, etc. or the matters of everyday life such as politics and religion.
- **Fans-related posts** refer to activities that are carried out by other athletes and teams.
- **Promotion** reflects endorsement and support of sporting events, corporate sponsors, products and activities. Each post mentioning a sponsor belongs to this category.

To expose the level and character of commercialisation, the athletes’ postings are also divided into five promotion categories (previously used by Hambrick and Mahoney and Turková):

- **Product posts** directly mention the athlete’s corporate sponsors or other business entities (including their goods and services).
- **Charity** refers to fundraising and non-profit organisations or activities.
- **Self-promotion** is defined as messages highlighting the athlete’s personal life and activities.
- **Competition** provides information about the upcoming and current sporting events, e.g. matches, championships or races.
- **Family and friends-related posts** are focused on the athlete’s family members and friends (that may or may not be athletes) and their activities or products.

The whole research material has been coded simultaneously by two coders to strengthen the objectivity and precision of the whole coding process. Thanks to this approach the authors have also been able to discuss all of the coding disagreements.


**Comparison of Female Skiers’ Communication on Social Media**

Tereza Kmochová won two golds and three silvers at the 2017 World Para Alpine Skiing Championships. Two years before that she had won five gold medals at the Deaflympic Games. She also participated in the 2017 Alpine World Ski Championships for athletes without disabilities.

Šárka Strachová is the most successful Czech alpine skier. She has a bronze medal from the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver; she also has medals from the World Championships. At the 2017 Alpine World Ski Championships in St. Moritz, she was fifth in slalom.

Henrieta Farkášová is the star amongst athletes with a visual impairment. At the 2017 World Para Alpine Skiing Championships she won four golds and one silver, the same number of medals she won during the 2018 Paralympic Games in PyeongChang with her guide Nataša Štrbová. After the 2018 Paralympic Games, she had much more social media followers than in 2017.

Mikaela Shiffrin is the most successful American alpine skier of today. She is a two-time Olympic gold medalist (from Sochi 2014 and PyeongChang 2018). The athlete won gold in slalom and silver in giant slalom at the 2017 Alpine World Ski Championships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Reactions to content posted by the able-bodied and disabled skiers on their official Facebook pages (a comparison)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tereza Kmochová</strong> (CZE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followers in 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followers in 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: own processing, 2018

Table 1 shows the numbers of followers, how many likes the skiers obtained and also how many comments the fans wrote under their posts during the observed period. Shiffrin has the highest numbers of followers, shares, likes and comments because she is (for example, according to Wasike) a well-known athlete associated with the major (mainstream) sport. As Wenner mentions, ‘the sports star is perhaps the most easily identified hero in the contemporary era.’ This statement corresponds with the results of our observation.
Mikaela Shiffrin is undoubtedly the most popular skier included in the research sample; so it is not surprising that her post from 20\textsuperscript{th} March 2017, a photograph with the Big Crystal Globe for the best female alpine skier of the season, is the most liked amongst all the posts made by the selected female athletes. Besides offering photographs, Shiffrin’s postings in 2017 are often enclosed by one or more hashtags. This fact is also proven by Picture 2. The numbers of comments and shares of this particular post are also high, but not the highest. It could be caused by its character, which does not encourage fans to discuss or react. From the 309 comments under the photo with The Big Crystal Globe, there is only one negative or rather mixed reaction. A Facebook user stated: “Your bad assssss!!”

Table 2 provides the evidence of the minimum, maximum and mean of reactions of visitors and fans of the chosen skiers’ official Facebook pages on the content that Tereza Kmochová, Sirka Strachová, Henrieta Farkašová and Mikaela Shiffrin posted during the observed period. It is possible to indicate the differences in the visitors’ response rate while comparing the able-bodied and disabled skiers. Posts of the able-bodied skiers, i.e. Sirka Strachová and Mikaela Shiffrin, are more likely to be shared, liked or commented than contents posted by the skiers with a disability (Henrieta Farkašová and Tereza Kmochová).

The most interactive post made by Henrieta Farkašová describes her success at the 2017 World Para Alpine Skiing Championships where she won four gold and one silver medal. She became the most successful athlete with a visual impairment who had ever competed at this level. The post is enclosed by a set of four photographs of Henrieta Farkašová and her guide, Natália Sabričová, with the medals from Tarvisio. The visually attractive content along with the acknowledgment of the importance of fans’ support could be the reason why this post is the most shared, liked and commented amongst all contents posted on Farkašová’s Facebook page during the research period. The post portrayed by Picture 1 has 25 comments. All these reactions are positive, and Henrieta Farkašová answers all of the messages. Moreover, Henrieta Farkašová is the only athlete from our sample who uses two different languages in all posts (her native language and English).

The most commented and shared post by Šárka Strachová is a video about the end of her professional sports career. In the video, she thanks her fans and supporters, and she also mentions that she uses social media for issuing this statement because Facebook has been the main channel for communication with her fans. Although this post has a lot of likes, it is not the most liked one, because a lot of her fans mention that they are disappointed she retires, so they are not able to ‘like’ her post. Tereza Kmochová’s most commented post also offers a video content – a hyperlink reference to the Česká televize’s documentary regarding her life story. She wants to encourage other people with a disability to overcome their handicaps. The fans’ reactions to this post are not always positive; some people degrade Kmochová’s impairment or blame her for cheating. On the other hand, many fans admire her courage and say that she is a good inspiration. For example, one of them states: “You are a role model for everybody who says it is not possible. I admire you!”

Both most commented and shared posts of the Czech skiers included video contents, whereas the foreign skiers achieved the best ‘results’ in terms of interactivity with posts containing pictures.
Table 3: The number of posts on the official Facebook pages of the able-bodied and disabled skiers in each category (in comparison)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Interactivity</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Diversity</th>
<th>Fandom</th>
<th>Promotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teréza Kmochová (CZE)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Šárka Strachová (CZE)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henrieta Farkášová (SVK)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikaela Shiffrin (USA)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of posts containing Promotional Picture(s) 9 14 6 26
The number of posts containing Promotional Link(s) 2 0 0 8
The number of posts containing Promotional Hashtag(s) 9 0 0 32
Table 3 offers the numbers of posts made by each skier during the research period categorised as Interactivity, Sport, Diversity, Fandom, Promotion, Mentioning Sponsors, Promotional Pictures, Promotional Videos, Promotional Links and Promotional Hashtags. The able-bodied athletes posted significantly more content on their official Facebook pages than the disabled athletes. Mikaela Shiffrin, being the most popular and well-known skier in our sample, published the highest number of posts (almost two times more than Šárka Strachová, the second most active contributor).

Regarding categorisation, it is also possible to indicate certain differences between the able-bodied and disabled skiers, as well as between all of the individual athletes. The skier who competed (also) in the able-bodied disciplines (Teréza Kmochová) posted more promotional content than Henrieta Farkášová who competed only in the disciplines related to visually impaired skiers.

The overall character of each athlete’s postings varies in accordance with their different personalities. For example, Teréza Kmochová’s posts are only about sport or promotion. Mikaela Shiffrin’s content is much more diverse – she has more than two posts in each category (Interactivity, Sport, Diversity, Fandom and Promotion). Moreover, she is the only one who has at least one post in every category. About 50% of all posts on Kmochová’s, Strachová’s and Shiffrin’s Facebook pages can be evaluated as promotional. However, in the case of Henrieta Farkášová, the share of promotional posts is relatively low, but she almost always encloses her posts belonging to other category by promotional hashtags. She is also one only who promotes other athletes and their accomplishments. Strachová and Shiffrin frequently complement their posts by both promotional and non-promotional images.

Discussion and Conclusions

As Purdue and Howe point out, the Paralympic Movement and also individual athletes with different kinds of disabilities need to succeed in attracting attention of the able-bodied audience. New forms of communication (such as online social media) can play an important role in the popularisation process related to athletes with a disability. Mikaela Shiffrin (the most successful female skier of today) and Šárka Strachová (the former successful Czech skier) post much more content on their official Facebook pages than Henrieta Farkášová (the highly successful visually impaired Slovak skier) and Tereza Kmochová (the hearing impaired Czech skier). However, we have to keep in mind that Henrieta Farkášová started to mention her sponsors more often after the immense success at the Paralympic Games in 2018. As Hardin argues, our culture of consumerism tends to exclude people with disabilities from promotional and advertising materials. The author also claims that athletes with a disability wish to have greater coverage in sports media and advertising materials. They want to possess communication space equal to the opportunities available to athletes with no physical disability. On the other hand, some of them, e.g. wheelchair athletes, understand how the market ‘forces’ work. They recognise that companies need to make profit, but they are not as “profitable” as the athletes without a disability.74 Promoting products through social networks is one of the opportunities to use celebrity athletes and their star power.75 Our research has proved that foreign skiers post more messages mentioning their sponsors than Czech skiers. The skiers without a disability (Šárka Strachová, Mikaela Shiffrin) post more content than the skiers with a disability. Facebook represents an effective marketing and communication channel for celebrity athletes and their product endorsements, and not only in the sports field: “While sports event viewing and attendance are well-established entertainment and leisure activities, viewing, attending, or listening to a contemporary sports event may feel more like a shopping spree. Many branded products and services have raced to sports events as a means of meeting sales, corporate, and communication objectives. Some product categories, such as beer and shaving cream, have traditionally been linked with sports. And athletes have historically been among the most highly sought celebrities for brand endorsement.”76 Sports fans, who watch television, read newspapers or browse the Internet, certainly see that their favourite athletes promote a lot of products. For example, Cristiano Ronaldo has endorsed Nike’s sports apparel, especially clothes and shoes; Usain Bolt has been the face of Puma. Other celebrity athletes use their appeal to endorse unrelated products such as Michael Phelps and Michael Strahan with Subway, Ray Lewis with Old Spice, Tiger Woods with Rolex or Lionel Messi with Lays.77 Our research supports this fact. For example, Henrieta Farkášová promoted a city bags brand called Donechubags and Tereza Kmochová repeatedly mentioned Audi and an international consulting company Adstra. The analysis also shows many differences in how social media visitors and fans react to the Facebook contents posted by the skiers in question. In other words, if one female athlete is significantly more popular on Facebook than the others, her posts will most likely receive more reactions (likes, comments, shares). However, additional research is needed to better understand why the fans react the way they do and why some of the reactions are mixed or negative.

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