

# ‘I HAVE WON, AND I WANT TO SHARE IT’: THE WAYS FEMALE SKIERS USE FACEBOOK AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL

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## 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 Kmočová – 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 Kmočová 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.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Paralympic.org – Media Centre*. [online]. [2018-10-31]. Available at: <<https://www.paralympic.org/news/paralympians-earn-equal-payouts-olympians-usa?sf92922811=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.<sup>2</sup>

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 Němcová Tejkalová,<sup>3</sup> Purdue and Howe,<sup>4</sup> Ellis and Goggin,<sup>5</sup> Hardin<sup>6</sup> or Macková and Trunečka<sup>7</sup>). 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 question of disabled athletes’ online communication, i.e. their social media presence.

In our article, we analyse *Facebook* pages of two female skiers with and two without a disability. The research consists of both a qualitative and a quantitative analysis. As we have mentioned above, the official *Facebook* pages included in the analysis belong to Tereza Kmočhová, the Czech hearing impaired alpine skier, Šárka Strachová, the Czech alpine skier with no disability, Henrieta Farkašová, the Slovak visually impaired alpine skier, and Mikaela Shiffrin, the American champion in alpine skiing and the most successful alpine skier of the World Championships in 2017 and during the 2017 season.

The *Facebook* pages of the selected athletes were analysed over three months: a month when the main event of each skier’s World (Para/Alpine) Ski Championships was held, a month before that, and a month after the main event of the season took place. We focus on female athletes because in the Czech Republic, female skiers, those with no disability and disabled alike, are much more successful than men. This research sample also precludes the possibility of results distortion caused by gender-diversity problems.<sup>8</sup> Although the sample is relatively small, the study implies a possibility to indicate differences in the athletes’ communication on social media and therefore could be used as a starting point for future research in the given area of interest.

## Theoretical Background

The first mention about athletes with a disability was published 130 years ago. The oldest sports club for people with disabilities was for the deaf. This club was founded in 1888 in Berlin. Not much is known about whether any clubs followed at all (and if so, how many). The history of sporting events including disabled people sees 1944 as a very important year. Back then, Dr. Ludwig Guttmann established a rehabilitation centre in Stoke Mandeville where sport was a part of rehabilitation. On 29<sup>th</sup> July 1948, Dr. Guttmann organised the first competition for wheelchair athletes (the Stoke Mandeville Games), and this preceded the creation of Paralympic Games and the professionalization of some disabled athletes.<sup>9</sup>

“The first Paralympic Games were held in Rome, Italy in 1960 and featured 400 athletes from 23 countries. In 1976 Örnsköldsvik, Sweden staged the first Paralympic Winter Games. The Games are now the second biggest sporting event in the world.”<sup>10</sup> 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 motivate others to participate or engage in Paralympic events.”<sup>11</sup>

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 Mojmír Srdečný organised the first games in 1948 in Kladruby. 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 Kladruby).<sup>12</sup>

Back in the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Championships in athletics in Ostrava. It was the first time this competition came close to being a sporting event including both athletes without and with a disability. However, the nationwide newspapers such as *Rudé právo*, *Mladá fronta* or *Svobodné slovo* and the specialised sports newspaper called *Československý sport* did not mention anything related to this event. Disabled athletes may have appeared in the newspapers published in the same period, but only exceptionally.<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Ellis and Goggin even mention that “media ‘teach’ us about what is ‘human’, ‘normal’, and acceptable, and our attitude to disability is no exception.”<sup>16</sup> In the Czech Republic, the news server *Aktualne.cz* has created a webpage specialising in news reports on Paralympic disciplines.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in 2018, the nationwide public broadcaster *Česká televize* broadcasted live studios discussing the 2018 Paralympic Games – for the first time ever.<sup>18</sup>

There are several different ways we can understand the problem of physical disabilities. Media play an important role in this process because they shape culture, preserve culture, reproduce and distribute our ideas.<sup>19</sup> The forms in which the media present disabled people have led to establishing several stereotypical models. As Nelson examines, cinema and television show the people with disabilities mostly as people who we have to pity or fear.<sup>20</sup> “The way the media portray people with disabilities and disability sport can have a major impact on how other groups and individuals within society view them also.”<sup>21</sup> Given the current trends in public dissemination of sports news, disabled athletes are presented as heroes who have managed to overcome

2 *Budoucnost ČPV*. [online]. [2018-10-31]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/BudoucnostCPV/>>.

3 See: NĚMCOVÁ TEJKALOVÁ, A.: *Ti druzí sportovci. Mediální stereotypizace a rámcování handicapovaných v tisku v letech 1948-2008*. Prague : Karolinum, 2012.

4 For more information, see: PURDUE, J. A., HOWE, B.: See the Sport, Not the Disability: Exploring the Paralympic Paradox. In *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 2012, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 189-205. [online]. [2018-07-25]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2012.685102>>.

5 See, for example: ELLIS, K., GOGGIN G.: *Disability & the Media*. London : Palgrave, 2015.

6 See: HARDIN, M.: Marketing the Acceptably Athletic Image: Wheelchair Athletes, Sport-Related Advertising and Capitalist Hegemony. In *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 2003, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 108-125.

7 See: MACKOVÁ, V., TRUNEČKA, O.: You Don't Have a Leg? Don't Worry, You Can Still Be a Star! Media Image of Cyclist Jiří Ježek. In *Communication Today*, 2015, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 78-85. See also: MACKOVÁ, V.: Disability Is Still a Minority Topic: An Interview with Daniel Jackson. In *Mediální studia*, 2017, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 189-196.

8 Note: This problem is further addressed in the second chapter of the study.

9 *Paralympic.org – History of the Movement*. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://m.paralympic.org/the-ipc/history-of-the-movement>>.

10 *Paralympic.org – History of the Movement*. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://m.paralympic.org/the-ipc/history-of-the-movement>>.

11 *Paralympic.org – Paralympic Movement*. [online]. [2018-09-26]. Available at: <[www.paralympic.org/paralympic-games](http://www.paralympic.org/paralympic-games)>.

12 NĚMCOVÁ TEJKALOVÁ, A.: *Ti druzí sportovci. Mediální stereotypizace a rámcování handicapovaných v tisku v letech 1948-2008*. Prague : Karolinum, 2012, p. 67-69.

13 NĚMCOVÁ TEJKALOVÁ, A.: *Ti druzí sportovci. Mediální stereotypizace a rámcování handicapovaných v tisku v letech 1948-2008*. Prague : Karolinum, 2012, p. 69-71.

14 BRITTAİN, I.: *The Paralympic Games Explained*. New York : Routledge, 2016, p. 88.

15 MACKOVÁ, V.: Disability Is Still a Minority Topic: An Interview with Daniel Jackson. In *Mediální studia*, 2017, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 189-196.

16 ELLIS, K., GOGGIN G.: *Disability & the Media*. London : Palgrave, 2015, p. 77.

17 *Aktualne.cz – Parasport*. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://sport.aktualne.cz/parasport/>>.

18 *XII. zimní paralympijské hry 2018 Pchjongčchang – Zpravodajství z průběhu paralympijských her*. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ivysilani/12198191441-xii-zimni-paralympijske-hry-2018-pchjongcechang/218471290251110/titulky>>.

19 ELLIS, K., GOGGIN, G.: *Disability & the Media*. London : Palgrave, 2015, p. 35.

20 NELSON, J. A.: Invisible No Longer: Images of Disability in the Media. In LESTER, P. M., DENTE ROSS, S. (eds.): *Images That Injure*. Westport : Praeger Publishers, 2003, p. 274-292.

21 BRITTAİN, I.: *The Paralympic Games Explained*. New York : Routledge, 2016, p. 86.

serious obstacles complicating their lives.<sup>22</sup> As 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.”<sup>23</sup> Fans have a passion for sports also because 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.”<sup>24</sup> However, a sporting performance itself is just one of the elements through which the media present sporting events.<sup>25</sup> Goggin and Newell also mention that “representation of people with disability within mainstream media is found in portrayals of brave, elite athletes who overcome their disability.”<sup>26</sup>

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...”<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.”<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> “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.”<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Lindemann and Cherney argue that the new communication technologies are being commonly implemented into the sports field.<sup>33</sup> From this point of view, it is obvious that social media, which take an important part of daily routine of our (and future) generation,<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup>

22 NELSON, J. A.: Invisible No Longer: Images of Disability in the Media. In LESTER, P. M., DENTE ROSS, S. (eds.): *Images That Injure*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003, p. 274-292.

23 NIGEL, T., SMITH, A.: *Disability, Sport and Society: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 137.

24 GOGGIN, G., NEWELL, C.: Crippling Paralympics? Media, Disability and Olympism. In *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 2000, Vol. 97, No. 1, p. 78.

25 DĚKANOVSKÝ, J.: *Sport, média a mýty*. Prague: Dokořán, 2008, p. 159.

26 GOGGIN, G., NEWELL, C.: Crippling Paralympics? Media, Disability and Olympism. In *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 2000, Vol. 97, No. 1, p. 71.

27 BRITTAIN, I.: *The Paralympic Games Explained*. New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 108.

28 REAL, M.: Sports Online: The Newest Player in Mediasport. In RANEY, A. A., BRYANT, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Sports and Media*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 180.

29 LINDEMANN, K., CHERNEY, J. L.: Communicating Legitimacy, Visibility, and Connectivity: The Functions of New Media in Adapted Sport. In BILLINGS, A. C., HARDIN, M. (eds.): *Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media*. New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 354.

30 ELLIS, K., GOGGIN, G.: *Disability & the Media*. London: Palgrave, 2015, p. 105.

31 HARDIN, M.: Marketing the Acceptably Athletic Image: Wheelchair Athletes, Sport-Related Advertising and Capitalist Hegemony. In *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 2003, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 1.

32 WALSH, P. et al.: Differences in Event Brand Personality between Social Media Users and Non-Users. In *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 2013, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 214-223.

33 LINDEMANN, K., CHERNEY, J. L.: Communicating Legitimacy, Visibility, and Connectivity: The Functions of New Media in Adapted Sport. In BILLINGS, A. C., HARDIN, M. (eds.): *Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media*. New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 353-363.

34 WATKINS, S. G.: *The Young and the Digital: What the Migration to Social Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009, p. 5.

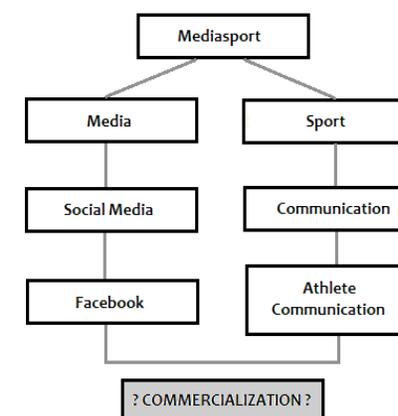
35 BOYD, D., ELLISON, N. B.: Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. In *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2007, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 211. [online]. [2018-07-13]. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x>.

According to Boyd and Ellison, the first-multifunctional social networking site was the network called *SixDegrees* 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 *SixDegrees.com* did 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. *SixDegrees* ceased activity in 2000.<sup>36</sup>

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,<sup>37</sup> and also in the Czech Republic.<sup>38</sup>

The areas of media production and sport are mutually linked, influencing each other and falling under the sphere nowadays called “MediaSport”.<sup>39</sup> Although the commercialisation of sport has already been recognised as a trend,<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> Real talks about this phenomenon in relation to TV production,<sup>42</sup> but recent communication phenomena suggest that sports presented via social media can be commercialised quite efficiently as well.<sup>43</sup>

Chart 1: Connection between media and athletes’ communication on social networking sites



Source: TURKOVÁ, K.: *The Commercialisation of Sport by Social Media: Analysing Facebook Content of Professional Athletes in the Czech Republic. Contribution to the 2nd International Conference on Communication and Media Studies*. Vancouver, Canada, presented on 17th November 2017.

36 BOYD, D., ELLISON, N. B.: Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. In *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2007, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 210-230. [online]. [2018-07-13]. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x>.

37 KALLAS, P.: *Top 15 Most Popular Social Networking Sites and Apps (August 2018)*. Released on 2nd August 2018. [online]. [2018-09-26]. Available at: <https://www.dreamgrow.com/top-15-most-popular-social-networking-sites/>.

38 CHLEBOUNOVÁ, P.: *TZ Zahraniční komunitní weby vedou nad českými, roste popularita LinkedIn i Google+*. Released on 17th June 2015. [online]. [2018-09-26]. Available at: <https://www.nielsen-admosphere.cz/press/tz-zahranični-komunitní-weby-vedou-nad-českými-roste-popularita-linkedin-i-google/>.

39 WENNER, L. A.: Preface. In WENNER, L. A. (ed.): *MediaSport*. New York: Routledge, 1998, p. XIII-XIV.

40 BOURDIEU, P.: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 93.

41 REAL, M. R.: Technology and the Commodification of Postmodern Sport. In WENNER, L. A. (ed.): *Media Sport*. New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 18.

42 REAL, M. R.: Technology and the Commodification of Postmodern Sport. In WENNER, L. A. (ed.): *Media Sport*. New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 14-26.

43 HUTCHINS, B.: Twitter: Follow the Money and Look Beyond Sports. In *Communication & Sport*, 2014, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 122-126. [online]. [2018-10-14]. Available at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2167479514527430>.

As Walsh, Clavio, Lovell and Blaszkas mention, social media such as *Facebook* or *Twitter* allow immediate interaction, thus representing another crucial channel for sports communication and building athletes' personal brands.<sup>44</sup> Acknowledging this fact, Arai, Ko and Ross have coined and defined the term "athlete's brand" as "a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the market".<sup>45</sup> Internationally, a number of studies focus on messages posted by athletes on social media channels, applying various theoretical frameworks and a wide range of research methods.<sup>46</sup> Pegoraro's case study of athletes' use of *Twitter* proves that the most common format of tweets is direct news, and that NFL athletes are the most active on *Twitter*. It also reveals that athletes on *Twitter* communicate with their fans, but they do not fully use the marketing potential of this social network to promote their sponsors or specific products.<sup>47</sup>

The study conducted by Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh and Greenwell<sup>48</sup> has a similar ambition as Pegoraro's study mentioned above.<sup>49</sup> Like Pegoraro,<sup>50</sup> the authors have found that athletes use *Twitter* mostly to interact and directly communicate with their fans, while its promotional potential remains unfulfilled. Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen and Burch<sup>51</sup> aim to explore relationship marketing of professional athletes affiliated with American 'Big Four' sports on *Twitter* through the parasocial interaction theory. The authors indicate a shift in thinking about athletes' communication through social media over the past two years. The results of this analysis further support the relevance of all findings presented by the studies described above. The authors discuss the use of *Twitter* for commercial purposes, claiming that it is very efficient to promote products via athletes' accounts. Promotional messages respecting this recommendation are more natural and convincing. Hambrick and Mahoney analyse communication of two highly popular athletes, the cyclist Lance Armstrong and the tennis player Serena Williams, on *Twitter*. Unlike in case of the previously mentioned studies, the authors identify a notable amount of promotional messages present on the accounts of the given athletes. Moreover, a significant share of all promotional tweets (about 33%) is targeted to a specific product. Athletes' accounts also frequently contain charity contributions, promotions of their own and their family members' activities, and notifications on upcoming sporting events.<sup>52</sup>

Sponsorship, professionalism and commercialisation are involved in the creation of sports celebrities.<sup>53</sup> Sponsoring is an important part of sport because sporting events are good places to present products and services. Many products enter the sphere of media and social networks directly through popular athletes or international sports events.<sup>54</sup> A similar phenomenon also appears in relation to disability sport. As Brittain mentions, "on the one hand, the IPC is doing everything it can to project a strong and dynamic vision and image for the Movement and on the other, changes in the way disability sport is viewed within both society in general and the media in particular are having a positive impact upon the ability of the IPC to raise funding through marketing, sponsorship and fundraising opportunities."<sup>55</sup>

44 WALSH, P. et al.: Differences in Event Brand Personality between Social Media Users and Non-Users. In *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 2013, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 214-223.

45 ARAI, A., KO, Y. J., ROSS, S.: Branding Athletes: Exploration and Conceptualization of Athlete Brand Image. In *Sport Management Review*, 2014, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 98. [online]. [2018-10-14]. Available at: <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259160325\\_Branding\\_athletes\\_Exploration\\_and\\_conceptualization\\_of\\_athlete\\_brand\\_image](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259160325_Branding_athletes_Exploration_and_conceptualization_of_athlete_brand_image)>.

46 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.

47 PEGORARO, A.: Look Who's Talking – Athletes on Twitter: A Case Study. In *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2010, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 501-514. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://journals.humankinetics.com/doi/10.1123/ijsc.3.4.501>>.

48 HAMBRICK, M. E. et al.: Understanding Professional Athletes' Use of Twitter: A Content Analysis of Athlete Tweets. In *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2011, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 454-471. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.3.4.454>>.

49 PEGORARO, A.: Look Who's Talking – Athletes on Twitter: A Case Study. In *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2010, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 501-514. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://journals.humankinetics.com/doi/10.1123/ijsc.3.4.501>>.

50 PEGORARO, A.: Look Who's Talking – Athletes on Twitter: A Case Study. In *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2010, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 501-514. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://journals.humankinetics.com/doi/10.1123/ijsc.3.4.501>>.

51 FREDERICK, E. et al.: Choosing Between the One-Way or Two-Way Street: An Exploration of Relationship Promotion by Professional Athletes on Twitter. In *Communication & Sport*, 2014, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 80-99. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479512466387>>.

52 HAMBRICK, M. E., MAHONEY, T. Q.: 'It's Incredible – Trust Me': Exploring the Role of Celebrity Athletes as Marketers in Online Social Networks. In *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 10, No. 3-4, p. 161-179. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2011.044794>>.

53 SEKOT, A.: *Sociologické problémy sportu*. Havlíčkův Brod: Grada Publishing, 2008, p. 175.

54 SEKOT, A.: *Sociologické problémy sportu*. Havlíčkův Brod: Grada Publishing, 2008, p. 179.

55 BRITTAİN, I.: *The Paralympic Games Explained*. New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 109.

As it seems, the old media model of sport, in which the information about professional athletes was provided mostly by sports organisations or 'traditional' media (e.g. by television, radio and the press), is no longer efficient. Today's athletes have many new opportunities to present themselves (e.g. via social media). The Internet and social media also allow popular athletes to endorse products of their sponsors.<sup>56</sup>

## Methodology

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, comparing the amounts of posts made by the individual athletes within the given time periods. However, posts on the said *Facebook* pages are also examined qualitatively. We analyse each post of the selected skiers published during the observed period in detail. We aim to identify their communication patterns and indicate 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 indicate a prevalence of photos with passive poses on the social media profiles of female athletes.<sup>57</sup> From the marketing point of view, the analysis of the communications posted by tennis players active on *Twitter* conducted by Lebel and Danylchuk shows that male athletes focus more on sports fandom, while female athletes are predominantly brand-oriented.<sup>58</sup> 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:

- Tereza Kmočová – the Czech hearing impaired alpine skier,<sup>59</sup>
- Šárka Strachová – the Czech alpine skier,<sup>60</sup>
- Henrieta Farkašová – the Slovak world-class visually impaired skier,<sup>61</sup>
- Mikaela Shiffrin – the American champion in alpine skiing.<sup>62</sup>

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?

56 MAHAN, J. E., MCDANIEL, S. R.: The New Online Arena: Marketing, and Media Coverage in Cyberspace. In RANEY, A. A., BRYANT, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Sports and Media*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 416-417.

57 SMITH, L. R., SANDERSON, J.: I'm Going to Instagram It! An Analysis of Athlete Self-Presentation on Instagram. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 2015, Vol. 59, No. 2, p. 342-358. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2015.1029125>>.

58 LEBEL, K., DANYLCHUK, K.: How Tweet It Is: A Gendered Analysis of Professional Tennis Players' Self-Presentation on Twitter. In *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 2012, Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 461-480. [online]. [2018-10-31]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.5.4.461>>.

59 Tereza Kmočová. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/terezakmochova.skier/>>.

60 Šárka Strachová. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/sarkastrachovaofficial/>>.

61 Henrieta Farkašová & Nataly Šubrtová. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/HeypersoNic/>>.

62 Mikaela Shiffrin. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/MikaelaShiffrin/>>.

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.<sup>63</sup> 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,<sup>64</sup> who examined *Twitter* as a marketing tool of celebrity athletes, in combination with the approach used by Guerin and Clavio<sup>65</sup> who focused on *Facebook* as a tool of sports marketing in general.

The **communication categories** we use are inspired by Hambrick and Mahoney,<sup>66</sup> Guerin and Clavio<sup>67</sup> and Turková:<sup>68</sup>

- **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<sup>69</sup> and Turková):<sup>70</sup>

- **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.

63 WHITE, M. D., MARSH, E.: Content Analysis: A Flexible Methodology. In *Library Trends*, 2016, Vol. 55, No. 1, p. 22-45. [online]. [2018-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/3670/ResearchProcess.pdf?sequence=2>>.

64 HAMBRICK, M. E., MAHONEY, T. Q.: 'It's Incredible - Trust Me': Exploring the Role of Celebrity Athletes as Marketers in Online Social Networks. In *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 10, No. 3-4, p. 161-178. [online]. [2018-07-13]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2011.044794>>.

65 GEURIN, A., CLAVIO, G.: Utilizing Social Media as a Marketing Communication Tool: An Examination of Mainstream and Niche Sport Athletes Facebook Pages. In *International Journal of Sport Management*, 2015, Vol. 16, No. 2, p. 316-334.

66 HAMBRICK, M. E., MAHONEY, T. Q.: 'It's Incredible - Trust Me': Exploring the Role of Celebrity Athletes as Marketers in Online Social Networks. In *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 10, No. 3-4, p. 161-178. [online]. [2018-07-13]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2011.044794>>.

67 GEURIN, A., CLAVIO, G.: Utilizing Social Media as a Marketing Communication Tool: An Examination of Mainstream and Niche Sport Athletes Facebook Pages. In *International Journal of Sport Management*, 2015, Vol. 16, No. 2, p. 316-334.

68 TURKOVÁ, K.: *The Commercialization of Sport by Social Media: Analysing Facebook Content of Professional Athletes in the Czech Republic*. Contribution to the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Communication and Media Studies. Vancouver, Canada, presented on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017.

69 HAMBRICK, M. E., MAHONEY, T. Q.: 'It's Incredible - Trust Me': Exploring the Role of Celebrity Athletes as Marketers in Online Social Networks. In *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 10, No. 3-4, p. 161-178. [online]. [2018-07-13]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2011.044794>>.

70 TURKOVÁ, K.: *The Commercialization of Sport by Social Media: Analysing Facebook Content of Professional Athletes in the Czech Republic*. Contribution to the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Communication and Media Studies. Vancouver, Canada, presented on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2017.

## Comparison of Female Skiers' Communication on Social Media

Tereza Kmočová won two golds and three silvers at the 2017 World Deaf 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 Farkašová 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 Natálie Šubrtová. 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 medallist (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 1: The numbers of followers, shares, likes and comments

	Tereza Kmočová (CZE)	Šárka Strachová (CZE)	Henrieta Farkašová (SVK)	Mikaela Shiffrin (USA)
<b>Followers in 2017</b>	1,252	52,405	1,301	373,622
<b>Shares</b>	39	1,040	88	3,644
<b>Likes</b>	2,377	49,196	1,583	222,601
<b>Comments</b>	123	1,329	174	4,418
<b>Followers in 2018</b>	1,259	52,546	2,399	388,280

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)<sup>71</sup> 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."*<sup>72</sup> This statement corresponds with the results of our observation.

Table 2: Reactions to content posted by the able-bodied and disabled skiers on their official Facebook pages (a comparison)

	Tereza Kmočová (CZE)	Šárka Strachová (CZE)	Henrieta Farkašová (SVK)	Mikaela Shiffrin (USA)
<b>Minimum of shares</b>	0	3	0	0
<b>Maximum of shares</b>	23	292	23	359
<b>Mean of shares</b>	2	40	5	85

71 WASIKE, B.: Gender, Parasocial Interaction, and Nonverbal Communication: Testing the Visual Effects of Sports Magazine Cover Models. In *International Journal of Communication*, 2018, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 180. [online]. [2018-10-30]. Available at: <<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/7577/2222>>.

72 WENNER, L. A.: Sports and Media Though the Super Class Mirror: Placing Blame, Breast-Beating, and a Glaze to the Future. In RANEY, A. A., BRYANT, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Sports and Media*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 53.

Minimum of likes	11	553	18	455
Maximum of likes	289	5,645	291	18,001
Mean of likes	140	1,892	83	5,176
Minimum of comments	0	4	0	7
Maximum of comments	37	251	25	371
Mean of comments	7	51	9	103

Source: own processing, 2018

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, Šárka 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. Šárka 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).

Picture 1: Henrieta Farkašová's most shared, liked and commented post



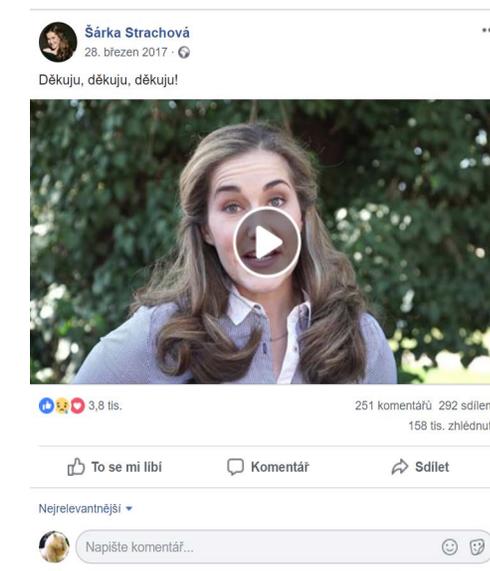
Sources: Henrieta Farkašová & Nataly Šubrtová. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/HeyepersoNic/>>; Mikaela Shiffrin. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/MikaelaShiffrin/>>.

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 Šubrtová, 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 one athlete from our sample who uses two different languages in all posts (her native language and English).

Picture 2: Mikaela Shiffrin's most liked post (and also the most often liked post included in the analysis)



Picture 3: Šárka Strachová's most commented and shared post



Picture 4: Tereza Kmochová's most commented and shared post



Sources: Tereza Kmochová. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/terezakmochova.skier/>>; Šárka Strachová. [online]. [2018-11-11]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/sarkastrachovaofficial/>>.

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!"<sup>73</sup>

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 (a comparison)

	Tereza Kmočová (CZE)	Šárka Strachová (CZE)	Henrieta Farkašová (SVK)	Mikaela Shiffrin (USA)
The number of posts (total)	17	26	19	43
The number of posts in the category of "Interactivity"	1	0	5	2
The number of posts in the category of "Sport"	7	6	3	6
The number of posts in the category of "Diversity"	0	2	7	2
The number of posts in the category of "Fandom"	0	6	0	8
The number of posts in the category of "Promotion"	9	12	4	25
The number of posts mentioning Sponsors	8	1	14	16
The number of posts containing Promotional Picture(s)	9	14	6	26
The number of posts containing Promotional Video(s)	2	0	0	8
The number of posts containing Promotional Link(s)	9	0	0	32
The number of posts containing Promotional Hashtag(s)	8	1	15	27

Source: own processing, 2018

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 (Tereza Kmočová) posted more promotional content than Henrieta Farkašová 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, Tereza Kmočová'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 Kmočová's, Strachová's and Shiffrin's *Facebook* pages can be evaluated as promotional. However, in the case of Henrieta Farkašová, the share of promotional posts is relatively low, but she almost always encloses her posts belonging to other category by promotional hashtag(s). She is also only one 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.<sup>74</sup> 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 Farkašová (the highly successful visually impaired Slovak skier) and Tereza Kmočová (the hearing impaired Czech skier). However, we have to keep in mind that Henrieta Farkašová 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.<sup>75</sup> Promoting products through social networks is one of the opportunities to use celebrity athletes and their star power.<sup>76</sup> 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."<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> Our research supports this fact. For example, Henrieta Farkašová promoted a city bags brand called Douchebags and Tereza Kmočová repeatedly mentioned Audi and an international consulting company Adastra. 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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74 PURDUE, J. A., HOWE, B.: See the Sport, Not the Disability: Exploring the Paralympic Paradox. In *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 2012, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 194. [online]. [2018-07-25]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2012.685102>>.

75 HARDIN, M.: Marketing the Acceptably Athletic Image: Wheelchair Athletes, Sport-Related Advertising and Capitalist Hegemony. In *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 2003, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 2, 11, 13. [online]. [2018-07-24]. Available at: <[www.cds.hawaii.edu/dsq/](http://www.cds.hawaii.edu/dsq/)>.

76 HAMBRICK, M. E., MAHONEY, T. Q.: 'It's Incredible – Trust me': Exploring the Role of Celebrity Athletes as Marketers in Online Social Networks. In *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 10, No. 3/4, p. 161-178. [online]. [2018-07-13]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2011.044794>>.

77 KINNEY, L.: Sports Sponsorship. In RANEY, A. A., BRYANT, J. (eds.): *Handbook of Sports and Media*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 295.

78 HAMBRICK, M. E., MAHONEY, T. Q.: 'It's Incredible – Trust Me': Exploring the Role of Celebrity Athletes as Marketers in Online Social Networks. In *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 2011, Vol. 10, No. 3-4, p. 163. [online]. [2018-07-13]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2011.044794>>.

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