Mediatization in Times of Pandemic: How German Grassroots Sports Clubs Employed Digital Media to Overcome Communication Challenges During COVID-19

Christiana Schallhorn[1] , **Daniel Nölleke**[2] , **Philip Sinner**[3], **Christof Seeger**[4] , **Jörg-Uwe Nieland**[5], **Thomas Horky**[6] and **Katja Mehler**[4]

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on all societal domains, including sports. Social distancing measures and the closure of sports facilities posed especially severe challenges for grassroots sports clubs, which thrive on joint activities and member social contact. Drawing on mediatization theory, the study examines the communication challenges faced by grassroots sports clubs and the perceived potential of digital media to overcome these obstacles during and beyond the pandemic. Based on in-depth interviews with 32 club officials of German grassroots sports clubs, the study identified ongoing uncertainty about COVID-19 regulations, preserving members' sense of belonging during social distancing, and involving everyone in formal processes as the major communication challenges. While most of the interviewees

[1]Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz, Germany
[2]German Sport University Cologne, Cologne, Germany
[3]Paris Lodron University Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria
[4]Stuttgart Media University, Stuttgart, Germany
[5]Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen, Germany
[6]Macromedia University Hamburg, Germany

Corresponding Author:
Christiana Schallhorn, Institute for Sport Science, Johannes Gutenberg-University, Albert-Schweitzer-Str. 22, Mainz 55128, Germany.
Email: christiana.schallhorn@uni-mainz.de

valued the potential of digital media to address these challenges, they acknowledged that the benefits of digital media for individual members would depend on their skill, motivation, and concerns, as well as on the availability of digital infrastructure. For that reason, digital media were not considered a substitute for face-to-face social contact or sporting activity but were seen to extend opportunities for communication and training. More generally, these findings raise new questions about the relationship between mediatization and social cohesion.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, digital communication, digitization, grassroots sports clubs, in-depth interviews, mediatization

Across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted significantly on all areas of life. In the sporting domain, it poses an existential threat to both professional (Horky, 2021) and grassroots clubs (MacInnes, 2021; Staley et al., 2021). At the same time, the impact of social distancing measures on sporting activities and events has increased our awareness of the wider importance of sports and sports clubs. Beyond the benefits for physical fitness, stress reduction, and enhanced psychological well-being (Judge, 2018), sports—especially team sports and group activities—promote social contact and face-to-face communication and increase social connectedness (Hoye et al., 2015). That sense of belonging is important for both individual well-being and wider social cohesion; to that extent, sport can be regarded as a form of "social glue" that brings people together, strengthens community wellbeing, stimulates interpersonal communication and supports social inclusion and connectedness (Spaaij, 2009).

The sudden disruption of the sporting world by the COVID-19 pandemic challenged this social integration function. At a time when sport and group activities were arguably more important than ever before for mental and physical health (McGuine et al., 2021), sports could only be practiced alone or in small groups, posing significant challenges for both professional and grassroots clubs. Non-professional clubs were especially impacted, as they tend to focus primarily on joint training and competition among their members. The impossibility of such joint activities during the pandemic challenged clubs' integral role in social connection and cohesion as vehicles of *social capital* (see Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Tacon, 2021).

In contemporary mediatized societies, digital media can help to bridge any such distance by extending the limits of human communication through alternative forms of social activity (Schulz, 2004). One large-scale survey of volunteers and participants in grassroots sports clubs identified digital communication as a key resource for engagement with club members during the pandemic (Sport England, 2020). This raises the question of how and to what extent sports clubs and their members have used digital media to overcome obstacles created by the pandemic. The present study addresses this question in the context of grassroots sports clubs in Germany. Drawing on

mediatization theory, we investigated how the crisis has contributed to digitization and the use of digital communication tools in such settings. More specifically, our in-depth interviews with 32 club representatives explored the communication challenges faced by grassroots sports clubs and the perceived potential of digital media in overcoming these difficulties during and beyond times of crisis. By investigating how mediatization processes differ across sports clubs and how exactly they can both foster *and* threaten social cohesion among members, we provide a nuanced picture of mediatization in the societal domain of sports.

Threats Faced by Grassroots Sports Clubs During the Pandemic

In Germany (as in most European countries), the term *sport* encompasses a wide range of recreational, health-related, and competitive physical activities. Within this broader understanding, there are three main types of sporting providers. Commercial providers include fitness studios and specialized sports centers (e.g., commercial dance schools), as well as health care facilities like physiotherapy practices and rehabilitation centers. State sports providers include public schools, universities, and the armed forces. However, Germany's most important sports provider is the non-profit or grassroots sports club, which caters for a broad segment of the population, largely independent of socio-demographic characteristics (Breuer et al., 2015, p. 187; Petry, 2013). The present study focuses on this third category.

Grassroots sports clubs typically share five characteristics: (1) voluntary membership; (2) orientation to members' interests and needs; (3) independence from third parties; (4) democratic decision making; and (5) voluntary services performed by members (Thiel & Mayer, 2009, p. 82). As anyone can become a member, these clubs are characterized above all by their non-profit, community-building, and intergenerational ethos. Their integral social role is especially evident in Germany, where the "community-oriented culture of sports clubs" was officially declared an element of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO (2021) in March 2021 at a time of severe threat from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As in other countries such as Australia (Staley at al., 2021) and England (MacInnes, 2021; Sport England, 2020), the pandemic posed unprecedented challenges for grassroots sports clubs in Germany in at least three respects. (1) As these clubs are financed primarily by membership fees (Breuer et al., 2015), the cancellation of training sessions—a crucial asset for members—posed an existential threat. It is unsurprising, then, that clubs perceived the risk of losing members as the greatest threat posed by the pandemic (Feiler & Breuer, 2021). This fear was confirmed by two surveys that reported significant membership losses of about 3% (Repenning et al., 2021) and 9% (Breuer et al., 2022), respectively. (2) As mentioned earlier, sports clubs depend largely on voluntary service provision, and club representatives identified the challenge of retaining volunteers as the second greatest risk posed by the pandemic (Feiler & Breuer, 2021). Again, both large-scale surveys confirm this perception, as 18% (Repenning

et al., 2021) and 13% (Breuer et al., 2022) respectively of German sports clubs experienced at least some loss of volunteers. (3) Club participation also centers on personal contact and conversations before, during, and after joint training sessions. In other words, attending training and participating in club activities is driven at least partly by social motives, and Repenning et al. (2021) reported a significant drop in the frequency of those activities during the pandemic.

In summary, the pandemic has severely impacted the pillars that underpin grassroots sports clubs. As well as threatening membership bonds, the crisis has challenged the prominent role of sports clubs as settings for joint exercise, conversation, and informal exchange. To protect these important societal functions, grassroots clubs have had to look for alternative ways of ensuring that officials, volunteers, and ordinary members can remain active and keep in touch in the absence of physical contact.

The Growing Importance of Mediatization for Grassroots Sport Clubs

Given their potential to bridge spatial, social, and cultural differences, media have increasingly replaced and extended traditional forms of communication (Schulz, 2004), contributing decisively to the transformation of culture and society (Hepp, 2020). The concept of *mediatization* captures this increasing importance of the media for culture, society, and social institutions (Hjarvard, 2018). As early as 2009, (Krotz, 2009, p. 21) described mediatization as "a concept with which to grasp media and societal change." Revisited and elaborated in multiple ways, the concept now informs a recognized theoretical approach, characterized by Krotz, 2014a, p. 137) as a comprehensive "meta process" and by Lunt and Livingstone (2016, p. 3) as a "sensitizing concept."

In studies of mediatization as process, two research traditions have emerged (Hepp, 2013), focusing respectively on how social actors adapt the logic of news media to manage public attention (Nölleke et al., 2021) and how everyday social practices are increasingly entangled with media technologies (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). The present study adopts the latter approach to explore how sports clubs have employed emerging media technologies to ensure and enhance communication by mitigating the effects of social distancing. Crucially, scholars emphasize that mediatization is not imposed or merely contingent but should rather be understood as a "pull" process, in which social actors (individual and collective) ascribe increasing meaning to the role of media in their everyday life and in pursuit of strategic objectives (Hepp, 2020; Nölleke et al., 2021). To that extent, the increasing strategic use of media technologies in social domains is a significant indicator of mediatization.

In recent times, digitization has triggered a new stage of mediatization, in which social actors are increasingly entangled with digital media; for example, practices like sport-based exercise (Frandsen, 2019), which were not previously regarded as media-related, increasingly blur the separation between communicative and physical action (Hepp, 2020). Hepp refers to this stage as *deep mediatization*, in which digital media

are not merely a means of communication but have transformed communicative practices across social domains (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018).

Sport has long been a focal domain for mediatization research. On the demand side, young people's broader understanding of sports is known to be shaped by their engagement with media platforms (Skey et al., 2018). There is also evidence that collective sports actors (e.g., federations and clubs) and individual actors (e.g., athletes) increasingly employ media logic and digital media to gain public attention and to connect with their stakeholders (Birkner & Nölleke, 2016; English, 2021; Naraine & Parent, 2017; Nölleke & Birkner, 2019). However, Frandsen (2016) has found significant differences between sports organizations in Denmark in terms of their use of digital media. While all acknowledge the potential of digital media to gain public attention and to maintain contact with members and volunteers, organizations differ in terms of the importance they ascribe to actual engagement in digital communication, which contributes to a digital divide.

Breuer and Feiler (2019) also identified considerable differences in the use of digital media channels among grassroots sports clubs in Germany. While the vast majority of these clubs maintain a website, only half provide information via Facebook or WhatsApp. Although these findings suggest that clubs are open to the innovative use of media, Ehnold et al. (2020) reported that digitization was not a high priority for German sports clubs prior to COVID-19.

Nevertheless, studies of mediatization confirm the potential of digital media for overcoming some of the challenges faced by sports organizations during the pandemic, including contact with their members and volunteers (Frandsen, 2016) and facilitation of joint exercise experiences (Frandsen, 2019) even during strict lockdown.

This in turn raises the question of whether the pandemic has triggered a new wave of mediatization among grassroots sports clubs, as their very survival may depend on finding a substitute for physical contact and group exercise. Indeed, one study (Mutz et al., 2021) reported that individualized home-based digital sports activities were a popular option for keeping active during the pandemic. As well as watching fitness videos on online platforms like YouTube, members also appreciated digital offerings from their own sports clubs and fitness studios. Goodyear et al. (2021) reported similar findings. They demonstrated that social media was especially helpful for isolated adults because it provided not only an opportunity for online workouts but also a space for interaction with family members and peers, thus facilitating daily life during the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, other studies have shown that online social connections effectively replaced offline interactions and were protective against social isolation's negative consequences during the pandemic (Marinucci et al., 2022). A large-scale survey of grassroots sports in England found that club members highly valued their clubs' communication efforts during the pandemic. Accordingly, the research report specifically highlighted the potential of digital media to foster social connections among club members, suggesting that communication in times of social distancing is not primarily about relaying information but rather about strengthening social bonds. The findings also indicate that clubs should not rely exclusively on digital

tools because these offerings also have their limitations (Sport England, 2020). For example, a study of the use of digital tools in boxing clubs during COVID-19 questioned the value of online training sessions, as athletes struggled to manage exercise at home and said they missed training as usual (Tjønndal, 2020). Nevertheless, digital media's advantages outweigh their disadvantages overall. Therefore, digital media are assumed to play a central role for sports clubs in maintaining members' social connectedness and social bonds, at least when personal contact and joint training are prohibited. However, Repenning et al. (2021) and Ehnold et al. (2020) found that digitization appears to be not a high priority for German grassroots sports clubs. Specifically, only one in five clubs in Germany perceived digitization as a positive opportunity during the pandemic (Repenning et al., 2021, p. 55). Similarly, "Horky et al. (2022)" found that while four in five sports clubs rely on the organization's website and WhatsApp to communicate with stakeholders, they use social networking platforms with some reluctance. We have some initial data on acceptance of home-based sporting activities and grassroots sports clubs' use of digital media during the pandemic, but we do not yet know how these clubs actually made sense of the potential of digital communication or what considerations and conditions shaped that engagement.

The first quantitative findings fail to confirm a possible new wave of mediatization in grassroots sports clubs during the pandemic; certainly, it is clear that grassroots sports clubs have not simply transferred their offline activities to digital environments. While the digitization of sporting organizations seems inevitable, and while COVID-19 required them to find some alternative to physical gatherings, sports clubs seem hesitant to respond. As a powerful communication tool, digital media offers a means of providing timely information and maintaining interaction through sporting activities and online courses. By helping members to maintain relationships during the pandemic, social media can strengthen shared values and the bond between clubs and members who are willing to engage.

Research Questions

Given the new wave of mediatization driven by digital media (Frandsen, 2016) and the assumptions of deep mediatization (Hepp, 2020), it seems conceivable that digital communication tools can help to mitigate the fundamental disruption of grassroots sports clubs caused by COVID-19. More specifically, digital media can be assumed to be an important means of maintaining social connectedness and, thus, staying in contact despite social distancing. To assess the perceived and experienced potential of digital media in this context, we must first identify the key communication challenges encountered by grassroots sports clubs during the pandemic. To that end, we formulated the following research question, which focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on the potential to maintain social relationships.

RQ1: What are the main communication challenges faced by grassroots sports clubs during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As previous studies on sports organizations' digitization have shown, digitization did not seem to be a high priority for most German grassroots sports clubs prior to COVID-19 (Ehnold et al., 2020). Consequently, sports clubs may differ regarding their technological infrastructure as well as concerning their members' average media skills and requisite expertise. Subsequently, it cannot be assumed that all clubs or their members use digital media to the same extent. Our next concern was, therefore, to determine the reasons for the varying use of digital media in the clubs, including the perceived advantages and difficulties of digitization for the clubs and their members. In this regard, the perceived potential of digital media as a tool for keeping the lines of communication open despite the cancellation of on-site training sessions and events was also investigated.

RQ2: What are reasons for the use or non-use of digital media as a means of addressing communication challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Finally, we wanted to explore how officials perceived their club's future use of digital media. To gain some insight into how the use of digital media has changed sports and training opportunities and the club's formal organization and communication arrangements, we asked officials about the likely use of digital communication after the pandemic, as it did not seem self-evident that COVID-19 would act as a catalyst for digitization.

RQ3: What are the perceived potentials and limitations of digital media as a communication tool for grassroots sports clubs after the pandemic?

Method

Following a quantitative online pilot survey exploring digital media use among German and Austrian grassroots sports clubs during the first lockdown in 2019 "Horky et al. (2022)", several respondents agreed to participate in the follow-up study reported here. Adopting an in-depth qualitative approach, we gained further insights into participants' experiences during the pandemic. As well as exploring how communication needs shaped digital media use in grassroots sporting organizations, we asked club officials about the post-pandemic potentials and limitations of digital media.

Based on the initial empirical data and our own reflections, we developed a semi-structured interview guide (Morse & Maddox, 2014) to address the research questions. The following are some examples of the interview questions. "Can you describe how your club has experienced the past year with COVID-19?" "To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted communications in your club?" "What were the biggest challenges and difficulties for club communication?" "Overall, how would you rate

your experience of new communications tools, and what is their potential for the future?"

After a successful pretest involving sports club representatives, we purposively selected a sample of deviant cases that was heterogeneous in terms of club size (ranging from 50 to 4000 members), sporting disciplines (single- and multi-discipline clubs), and regional location (rural and urban areas from different federal states in Germany). As we were interested mainly in club-level issues, we selected respondents on the basis of club rather than individual characteristics. The interviews were conducted between February and June 2021[1] by two team members and eight trained student assistants. As social distancing measures prevented a face-to-face approach, all interviews were conducted and recorded via *Zoom* and *Webex*. During the pandemic, *Zoom* proved to be an acceptable substitute for face-to-face meetings (Reñosa et al., 2021), and it has been deployed successfully in qualitative studies (Archibald et al., 2019). Before each interview, the interviewee signed a GDPR conform consent form.

In total, we conducted and analyzed 32 interviews, at which point the circular evaluation process clearly indicated that we had achieved data saturation. All 32 interviewees stated that they were responsible for communication at their club, and 24 were board members. Some were also active as coaches or treasurers or were responsible for organizing competitions. Of the 32 respondents, 27 were male and 5 were female, which is roughly representative of the gender distribution at board level in 2017 (Breuer & Feiler, 2020, p. 18f). The interviews lasted an average of 54 minutes. They were recorded and then transcribed.

Coding was performed by two trained coders using MAXQDA 2020 software. The coders regularly exchanged information to ensure consistency. A combined inductive-deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) derived categories based on assumptions about mediatization and grassroots sports and the quantitative pilot study that informed the interview guide. The categories included (1) perceived communication challenges of COVID-19 for sporting activities, voluntary work, and club life; (2) use of digital media for club communication; and (3) digital media as a communication tool for grassroots sports beyond COVID-19. To exploit the full potential and openness of qualitative methods, we also performed open coding to identify any further relevant issues or subdimensions that may not have been considered previously as subcategories related to the research questions.

Results

Communication Challenges of COVID-19 for Grassroots Sports Clubs

RQ1 sought to identify the communication challenges faced by grassroots sports clubs because of the lack of personal contact during the pandemic. Our results identified three main issues: communicating about the ever-changing COVID-19 regulations, social connectedness, and formal processes. All respondents agreed that their club's raison

d'être was severely undermined by the impossibility of normal club life and joint sporting activities.

Ongoing Uncertainty Related to COVID-19 Regulations. When asked how their club was affected by the pandemic, respondents initially referred (unsurprisingly) to the suspension of in-person sporting activities. All disciplines complained that sporting activities had to be cancelled because of physical distancing measures. However, although they expressed disappointment about the impossibility of meeting in person, participants acknowledged that these policies were mostly justified. For them, the perceived unpredictability and inconsistency of the measures was a more serious issue than the cancellation of training and competitions. In this regard, interviewees referred to the "back-and-forth" of politics and the constant stream of new requirements that had to be implemented and communicated to their members. In particular, they expressed frustration that despite their best efforts to meet hygiene requirements, these were continually tightened.

> At the moment, we have a patchwork. Everyone could live with it if you decided clearly 'sport yes' or 'sport no'. But this 'two people can maybe do something on 80 square meters; the other can do something back there in the gym' [...] this back and forth is exhausting (ID_04).

This uncertainty contributed to a sense that clubs were very much at the mercy of politics in attempting to support sporting activities and that all one could do was hope that the situation would improve. Although many clubs offered online training, this was less a strategic response by the club than a reflection of personal commitment. In general, the duration of the crisis and the unpredictability of political responses clearly created a sense of disillusionment in German grassroots sports clubs.

Social Connectedness Despite Social Distancing. Interviewees noted that club officials were particularly aware of their club's role in members' social life. For that reason, they regarded it as a priority to maintain contact with members and to offer as active a club life as possible. In particular, participants expressed regret that it was no longer possible to bring members together in person. This social dimension was seen to be at least as important as joint sporting activities, and its absence had a significant impact.

> I mean, sports always have to do with socializing, and the after-work beer is part of it. [...] And that's what's missing, of course—drinking a beer after exercising and talking a bit of nonsense before going home. That's actually what makes for sport in the club (ID_04).

Some respondents also noted the heightened sense of togetherness as members made an active effort to deal with the crisis. However, they felt that maintaining this sense of togetherness created particular communication challenges for their clubs in the absence of face-to-face meetings. While most initially feared a loss of revenue if members left,

they were proud in retrospect that there was no such wave of withdrawals. At the same time, they noted the near-impossibility of recruiting new members during the pandemic, as demonstration events could not be held. Interestingly, contrary to the evidence from other studies, there was almost no mention of potential impacts on voluntary activity.

Maintaining Formal Processes. Regarding challenges posed by the pandemic, interviewees (in their role as club officials) also referred to the fact that board meetings, which are especially relevant in times of crisis, could not be conducted face-to face as was usual. To that extent, the pandemic was seen to undermine formal processes as well as active club life. As interviewees varied in terms of their familiarity with digital media tools, they reported very different experiences of trying to reach people in formal meetings.

> We couldn't hold our general meeting last year. I am very ambivalent about digital media [...]. A lot of members are 70-plus, and I don't want to subject them to Zoom or Microsoft Teams or anything like that. We were unable to offer them an opportunity to participate in the meeting. That's why it's difficult (ID_04).

While many of our participants reported this problem, some found ways of conducting meetings even though some members were unable to participate.

> Of course, we also held online meetings of the board of management and the department heads, but you lose one or two people who do not attend such meetings because of their age or for other reasons. But [...] we communicated in advance by phone and then addressed their issues at the meeting (ID_03).

In summary, our findings in relation to RQ1 indicate that interviewees perceived the pandemic as a major existential threat for their club because they had to cancel training and competitions and because of the perceived inconsistency and unpredictability of policy measures. While they perceived threats to active club life beyond sporting activities as even more serious, they found ways to communicate with members to discuss the latest regulations, to stay connected socially, and to hold formal meetings. This raises the further question of whether digital tools were perceived as an adequate means of overcoming these challenges and whether and how clubs used those tools to compensate for the enforced lack of physical gatherings.

Use of Digital Media

RQ2 addressed respondents' explanations for the extent of digital media use to overcome club communication challenges during the pandemic. The predominant perception was that the pandemic has served as a catalyst for digitization. Email was seen as the most important channel for the dissemination of information to members.

Clubs relied mainly on WhatsApp for communication within training groups, and videoconferencing tools like Zoom are now an established option for digital training sessions and member meetings. These findings suggest that digital media use has indeed cushioned the threats posed to grassroots clubs by the pandemic. However, while these key tools have helped to keep members engaged and strengthened interaction and cohesion, some limitations were also noted in terms of utility and reach.

Digital Infrastructure. Many interviewees (especially those in rural regions) reported that, before the pandemic, they kept their members informed through a printed club magazine for members, and members and coaches usually made arrangements after training sessions. Some clubs already had a website and maintained Facebook accounts or WhatsApp groups. However, when the many COVID-19 rules and regulations had to be communicated rapidly to members, it became apparent that there was no established way of doing this through new media channels. WhatsApp was already popular among younger members, but the challenge was to reach those who did not use social media or did not have an email account—mainly the older generation. Some clubs sent letters by post to members who did not use email or other digital media; others spoke to members by phone just to inquire how they were doing. However, many clubs struggled because they lacked the digital infrastructure or expertise to initiate activities such as video conferencing, and some communication efforts failed because of poor regional Internet connectivity. As one respondent said, "It's actually the poor Internet connection here— it's really a catastrophe [...] the video is constantly lagging [...] the videos are distorted, and the music doesn't work" (ID_05).

The pandemic highlighted a lack of digital infrastructure that is likely to be problematic not only for sports but also for homeschooling and businesses. These findings also highlight the clubs' ambivalence to use of digital media, as some members cannot be reached and are therefore excluded from club communication and participation. This in turn prompted fears that long-time members and volunteers might be lost.

Skills and Motivation. Beyond issues of technology quality and access, interviewees identified motivation and skills as crucial factors in the use of digital technologies for communication and online training sessions. The transition to digital communication impacted two groups in particular: young children and the elderly. Individuals in the latter group tend to have fewer technical skills and were therefore less able to engage in digital forms of communication and social exchange.

> We have a lot of older members who ask, 'What is the Internet? What is that?' They are happy to get their information from newspaper reports [...]. We're trying to do that now via the Internet, but we're only reaching a small percentage of our members—that's the problem (ID_27).

It was impossible to keep these members informed about the current regulations, and they could not participate in online activities or meetings. Another interviewee summarized the experience of many older people as follows.

> There is one instructor for the seniors. He was usually very active, but he said that now he doesn't do anything. He doesn't like the online thing … he prefers to do nothing. That's stupid, of course, but you can't force him [to do it] if he doesn't want to (ID_05).

Children, were similarly affected, especially the younger ones.

> We have a lot of mother-and-child or children's gymnastics—it's the largest division here. As they can't leave children aged six or eight in front of the PC without supervision; the parents [now] have to be there if they want to do gymnastics. And how can they do gymnastics at home? There's no equipment, nothing (ID_27).

However, it also emerged that many members have engaged with digital media and have even enjoyed this form of social interaction during times of social distancing.

> I open the meeting a quarter of an hour before it starts, and now almost everyone arrives 15 minutes beforehand to chat with each other. Then you talk about your hairstyle and the fact that you haven't been to the hairdresser for a long time [laughter]. And you talk about the kids—you just gossip with each other (ID_05).

While it was problematic that not all people could not be reached through digital media, interviewees reported that many of their members acquired the requisite skills. For example, many people had to work with new software or digital platforms for professional purposes or homeschooling.

Enthusiasm and Concerns. In addition, we identified a number of other individual factors that hindered or facilitated participation. Among these, interviewees reported that some coaches expressed concerns about data protection—that is, they felt uncomfortable about being seen online and not knowing who was watching. While some regarded this as a serious problem, others resorted to humor when discussing their reluctance to engage in online training: "I said no, others can do that much better—younger people can do it much better, so I don't have to sit in front of a camera at 55 years of age and do jumping jacks for anyone [laughs]" (ID_06).

Coaches also expressed more serious concerns about digital exhaustion and information overload. For instance, one interviewee referred to feedback he had received from parents about online courses for children: "[...] we're so occupied with homeschooling and have to accommodate several things, so we're kind of sitting in front of the computer all the time—we don't need that [online training]" (ID_06). However, club boards also received many positive reports, including feedback that these online offerings helped to maintain a sense of connection with other members. Indeed, some

interviewees reported that more participants than usual attended training sessions and gatherings because it was easier for them to participate digitally than to travel to and from the gym and enabled them to participate without being observed by the coach (when the cameras were off).

Two key findings emerged regarding the role of digital media in club communication. First, collective use of social media tools like WhatsApp facilitated rapid information exchange, and digital interaction in the form of meetings and training sessions strengthened the sense of belonging and cohesion to the club during this challenging time of social isolation. On the other hand, it seems that those who lacked digital media skills or access may have felt even more isolated because they had to cope without club life and sporting activities and realized that they were excluding themselves by not participating. We can conclude that more optimistic assessments of digital media (and perhaps even initial euphoria) have given way to a sense of fatigue. In the worst cases, people were completely excluded from the social opportunities that club membership had previously offered. At the same time, our findings clearly indicate that the pandemic has triggered increased digitization and has convinced clubs and their members of digital media's potential to enhance communication.

Digital Communication Beyond COVID-19

RQ3 explored club officials' views regarding the potential future use of digital media tools in grassroots sports clubs.

Digital Media are No Substitute for Personal Face-to-Face Meetings. All of our interviewees expressed the view that digital media will never replace the personal contact and joint on-site activities that grassroots sports clubs are built on. They also expressed their anticipation and impatience to meet up again with other club members. As one respondent said, "[I wish] it would start again … (laughs)—that we could return to sports [and] the whole social life … that we could meet again … that we could drink a beer in the club restaurant or have a coke or a curry sausage" (ID_27).

Many respondents expressed similar thoughts in relation to the importance of volunteer work.

> Perhaps society will also pay a little more attention in future to the immense value of all this voluntary commitment. (...) We have learned what happens when that is no longer there from one day to the next. Yes, what these volunteers do in the background. (...) under certain circumstances, the entire recreational sector of a small town is gone overnight (ID_30).

Digital Media Extend Club Communication and Training Opportunities. In general, interviewees acknowledged the potential of digital media to shape club activities in the future. and believed that the processes of digitization enforced by the pandemic would have lasting consequences. Accordingly, they felt it would be impossible and unwise to

ignore the emergence of the new formats, competencies, and patterns of media usage. As one club official put it, "The coronavirus situation will change at some point, and then we will build on the many offers that we have launched." He continued: "You notice that people have gained a basic level of familiarity with the media. Whether it's a Zoom meeting or another tool … people no longer have problems with getting their camera or sound to work" (ID_08).

Interviewees agreed that WhatsApp groups in particular helped to keep club life going during the pandemic and were increasingly used by members to stay connected. For that reason, club officials felt that WhatsApp has great potential as a means of strengthening the bond between the club and its members and among members themselves. Participants also highlighted the potential of videoconferencing tools like Zoom, referring in particular to their intention to use it for board meetings even after pandemic restrictions are lifted. As these meetings need not depend on participants' physical presence, they can more easily be conducted online, building on the expertise acquired during the pandemic. As one interviewee put it, "When I feel like discussing three things, do I have to ask the board members to come out, or can we just do it quickly online?" (ID_05). In similar vein, another respondent said "I guess that in future such board meetings will be held quickly via Zoom. I think that will remain" (ID_12).

Some participants also argued that these tools have the potential to make grassroots sports clubs more sustainable. While digital tools have contributed to sustainability in other social domains like science, this potential seems more limited in the sporting realm; beyond the obvious fact that most competitions depend on physical gatherings, our interviewees felt that even training sessions should be conducted in person. However, they did acknowledge that online training sessions might be an alternative on certain rare occasions—for example, to maintain training continuity for athletes who are unable to physically attend due to illness or a stay abroad. According to one interviewee, recorded or streamed training sessions may prove particularly useful to support beginners.

> Recorded training sessions can certainly be used to say to rookies 'Take a look at this; it will make it easier for you to get started'—as an introductory aid, but it is not an alternative [to on-site training] at all (ID_10).

More importantly perhaps, respondents suggested that recorded training sessions could be uploaded to YouTube as a tool to recruit new members.

In summary, participants recognized the potential of digital media technologies for board meetings and information exchange between members, as well as for training purposes and to reach out to potential new members through social networking platforms. In particular, they noted that the pandemic had enforced the further digitization of German grassroots sport. Nevertheless, they felt that digital media could never replace on-site contact, and this raises questions about how strategically and to

what extent grassroots clubs will use digital media technologies when things (eventually) return to normal.

Discussion and Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic confronted German sports clubs with enormous challenges, especially in terms of organization and communication with their members. Many club officials referred to a great solidarity that was strengthened by clubs' constructive handling of a situation in which regulations and health protocols changed constantly. Participants identified the issues related to the *ongoing uncertainty of COVID-19 regulations* as the biggest challenge arising from contact restrictions, which made planning and implementation difficult. In these circumstances, maintaining members' *sense of belonging despite social distancing* was seen as a key mission. Further communication challenges included concerns about how to involve everybody in *formal processes* such as meetings (RQ1). Digital media tools, especially messaging providers like WhatsApp and online videoconferencing platforms like Zoom, enabled rapid exchange of information and facilitated joint activities that included online sports courses and virtual meetings. However, digital media were seen to offer only a partial solution to these communication challenges for three reasons (RQ2). First, many interviewees noted the limitations of the existing *digital infrastructure*, especially in rural regions. Second, members differed widely in terms of their technical *skills and motivation*. Finally, individual *concerns* (e.g., about data protection) and *enthusiasm* (e.g., for online training sessions) also differed widely. In short, people with fewer digital skills, lower motivation or greater concerns, and those from rural regions were more likely to be less able to participate in (digital) club life. Looking to the future (RQ3), club board members recognized the potential of digital communication tools beyond COVID-19. However, the unanimous opinion was that while digital media are a useful support, they are *not a substitute* for on-site social contact or joint sports activities. Nevertheless, respondents agreed that digital media *extend* club communication and training opportunities. For that reason, clubs could be expected to continue using digital tools after the pandemic in light of their potential to enhance activities such as participation in meetings and recruitment of new members.

In general, then, interviewees expressed some ambivalence about the role of digital media in grassroots sports clubs. While acknowledging the many benefits, participants also noted some limitations of digital communication, and it seems useful at this point to interpret and discuss these in greater detail. According to mediatization theory (e.g., Frandsen, 2016), media and media tools have gained increasing importance across social domains and cultural practices, including sports (Hjarvard, 2018). However, we should also keep in mind that most coaches and board members serve their clubs on a voluntary basis and cannot be expected to engage at a professional level with digital media (Frandsen, 2016). As club members may also lack the requisite technical competences to engage with these new technologies, this has at least two important implications.

First, the mere availability of digital media resources does not mean that they will necessarily or immediately be implemented. While our findings confirm that volunteer-based club management does not in itself prevent digitization (Ehnold et al., 2020), we also found that the use of digital communication tools varies considerably among grassroots sports clubs. In this context, our results clearly show that the degree of mediatization cannot be primarily predicted by sports clubs' formal characteristics, such as their sports offered, location, or club size. Rather, it is the individual skills and motivations of club officials, coaches, and club members that are decisive in determining the extent to which clubs engage in digital communication. In grassroots sports, mediatization seems to depend more on individual members' acceptance of digital media technology, preferences, and skills than on clubs' formal characteristics. However, individuals' engagement is limited in that they must rely on available infrastructure (Ehnold et al., 2020; Frandsen, 2016), which proved to be a limiting factor in some clubs during the pandemic. In summary, our findings suggest that mediatization occurs at varying paces in grassroots sports clubs. Rather than driving a new wave of mediatization, the pandemic appears to be widening the digital divide among grassroots sports clubs (Frandsen, 2016; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).

Hence, our findings indicate that mediatization is far from equally distributed across society, across sports, or even within a given sporting organization. Instead, this gradual and multi-level phenomenon (Marcinkowski, 2014) is contingent upon field- and organization-specific as well as individual priorities and capacities. Our findings further suggest that digital media will be used in post-pandemic times primarily for formal meetings (such as board meetings) or to supplement information provided by traditional media (such as club magazines).

In contrast, training classes (including pre- and post-workout chats) seem likely to revert completely to personal face-to-face interaction. In relation to mediatization theory, then, digital media is likely to extend rather than replace traditional forms of communication and social interaction (Schulz, 2004). This finding raises the question of how 'deep' the mediatization of sports actually is. Deep mediatization is characterized by the intricate entanglement of all the elements of our social world with digital media (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), which sport—or at least grassroots sport—seems to resist to some extent.

Second, as sports clubs are committed to bringing all their members along, they must consider how to include those beyond the immediate reach of digitization. Invoking the concept of social capital, Burrmann et al. (2022) argued that members of voluntary associations (including sports clubs, hobby associations, political parties, volunteer fire brigades, etc.) are more sociability-oriented and view society as helpful and trusting. This highlights the important social role of grassroots clubs in facilitating social contact in and through sports. In the past, media skills were not an issue in sports clubs because the emphasis traditionally was on face-to-face interpersonal relationships that enabled social connectedness, social cohesion, and community wellbeing (Hoye et al., 2015; Spaaij, 2009). For grassroots sports clubs, hence, digitization may even undermine

these wider goals, as physical contact remains the most important mode of communication.

Our findings allow for further conclusions related to mediatization theory. As Krotz (2014b) described, our study confirms that the overarching metaprocess of mediatization changes social worlds and realities by affecting, for instance, ordinary (club) life, social relationships, and processes within clubs. It seems that this change can also have detrimental effects because it may lead to the exclusion of those who are unfamiliar with digital media. In this case, mediatization would indeed shape social realities in a way that would create new conditions for participation in previously nonmedia domains. To further contribute to social cohesion, grassroots sports clubs are therefore called upon to deploy a media ensemble that also includes channels beyond digital media. This finding confirms earlier results on the pandemic (Sport England, 2020) and underscores that mediatization is more than digitization.

As is always the case, this study has some limitations. While self-selection undoubtedly helped to recruit participants who were willing to devote time to the interview process, so enhancing the quality of our data, it is important to acknowledge that this approach can produce biased results. For example, those who volunteered for follow-up interviews may have coped well during COVID-19 and felt proud of their crisis management capabilities. This is borne out by the findings, which point to constructive handling of the crisis rather than frustration or failure. As other clubs may well have suffered more and struggled harder to maintain contact with their members, self-selection is both an opportunity and a limitation.

The study is also limited to the extent that the long-term consequences of the pandemic for clubs and for sport were not foreseeable at the time of the interviews. Since then, the situation has evolved, and club representatives' conclusions might differ somewhat now. Moreover, as the study was confined to Germany, where grassroots sports clubs are of great social and cultural importance, it would be worthwhile to explore how the pandemic affected sports club communication in countries where grassroots sports are less organized. Based on initial findings from Australia (Staley et al., 2021) and England (MacInnes, 2021), it seems likely that comparable developments may be observed in other countries (with some country-specific differences). In England, for example, the financial pressure on grassroots sports clubs during COVID-19 seemed even greater than in Germany (Grix et al., 2021), and it seems likely that the challenges for grassroots sports in different countries varied on multiple dimensions.

Finally, as our data only provide insights into club representatives' perceptions, it would be interesting to ask club members about their experiences, including which digital media (if any) they were able to use and to what extent this caused them to feel integrated or isolated. Many other questions remain to be explored regarding the role of digital media in grassroots sport beyond the pandemic. Our findings confirm that the relationship between clubs and members and among members themselves, as well as their willingness to volunteer, is developed and sustained primarily through personal contact. While digital media may be an appropriate tool in times of crisis, it is no

substitute for the direct interaction that keeps like-minded people engaged in grassroots sports clubs.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Other Declarations

This is a non-interventional study (interviews) for which no ethical approval is required (due to national laws). Survey participants agreed to participate voluntarily in the study and agreed that the results are used for scientific purposes (e.g. publications). Participants were informed about the aim of the study.

ORCID iDs

Christiana Schallhorn https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1564-2658
Daniel Nölleke https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3494-3897
Christof Seeger https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0600-485X
Thomas Horky https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4082-7793

Notes

1. It is important to note that the pandemic situation changed during this period. Things were quite tense in February 2021 because of severe lockdown restrictions, but conditions eased during the spring and early summer with the gradual return to group training and sporting competition. While interview timing undoubtedly affected respondents' general mood, it did not seem to influence their assessment of the challenges and potentials of digital media.

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