Fencing on Instagram: Examining self-presentation as branding strategies of professional fencers

Esgrima en Instagram: examinando la autopresentación como estrategia de marca de los esgrimistas profesionales

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Abstract

Instagram has impacted how athletes present themselves and communicate with their audiences without the need for mass media mediators, such as journalists. Hence, this study explores the opportunities for professional fencers to develop self-presentation and communication strategies on the platform. The methodological approach is based on netnography and content analysis, evaluating the top 10 fencers accounts (FIE). The findings point out how these athletes build their brand by increasing fan engagement and interaction through sharing training videos, competition photos, and personal stories, while also collaborating with sponsors and brands to open up business opportunities and revenue streams. Therefore, fencers' active use of Instagram enhances their self-presentation and positively influences the image of fencing as a sport.

KEYWORDS

Sport communication, social media studies, Instagram, athletes branding, fencing

Resumen

Instagram ha impactado la forma en que los atletas se presentan y se comunican con sus audiencias sin la necesidad de mediadores de medios masivos, como los periodistas. Por lo tanto, este estudio explora las oportunidades para que los esgrimistas profesionales desarrollen estrategias de autopresentación y comunicación en la plataforma. El enfoque metodológico se basa en la netnografía y el análisis de contenido, evaluando las cuentas de los 10 mejores tiradores (FIE). Los hallazgos señalan cómo estos atletas construyen su marca al aumentar el compromiso y la interacción de los fanáticos al compartir videos de entrenamiento, fotos de competencias e historias personales, al mismo tiempo que colaboran con patrocinadores y marcas para abrir oportunidades comerciales y fuentes de ingresos. Por lo tanto, el uso activo de Instagram por parte de los esgrimistas mejora su autopresentación e influye positivamente en la imagen de la esgrima como deporte

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Comunicación deportiva, estudios de redes sociales, Instagram, atletas branding, esgrima.

1. INTRODUCTION

The accessibility of athlete-related information has significantly increased through news websites since the 1990s, with contemporary sport communication providing an overview of their training and competitions. However, much of this content is 'media-processed,' capturing fleeting moments rather than presenting a comprehensive view of athletes' lives (Ma, 2021). More recently, the advent of social media platforms enabled athletes to express their thoughts and experiences in a more authentic and relatable manner (Kutzer, 2016). Instagram, in particular, offers them a unique visual-centered way that bypasses traditional media and provides the public with a broader perspective. Hence, this study has the objective of exploring the opportunities brought by the platform to professional fencers in developing self-presentation as sport communication strategies, with a focus on personal branding.

The study's relevance lies in its contribution to the field of sport communication and social media studies, besides its novelty in analyzing online branding strategies among a specific group of sportspeople. Despite the extensive

study of sport communication, fencing remains a less explored subject within this domain, possessing unique characteristics that distinguish it from other sports. For instance, fencers compete with their faces covered, temporarily concealing aspects of their identity despite their names being printed on their outfits, thus partly limiting what the audience can see from the person. Additionally, Instagram has become one of the most popular visual social media globally, accounting for more than two billion active users in 2023 (Kemp, 2023), and its use has been investigated in other sports (Lobillo Mora and Aja Gil, 2020), but there is still a lack of scientific knowledge about its application for branding in fencing.

Furthermore, professional athletes hold a unique position as social and cultural influencers, utilizing social media platforms to voice their opinions and impact not only specific topics or events but the broader society as well (Kutzer, 2016). Instances of sportspeople making public political statements or expressing opinions on social media have generated extensive discussion and garnered attention from diverse sectors of society. Moreover, young sports fans and students often observe professional athletes on social media, seeking to learn from and emulate their healthy lifestyles, training methods, and competitive attitudes.

To investigate this phenomenon, the authors adopt a methodological approach based on netnography (Kozinets, 2010) and content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), focusing on evaluating the top 10 fencers' accounts from the International Fencing Federation (FIE). Moreover, the study addresses two primary research questions: (RQ1) What are the sport communication trends regarding professional fencers' self-presentation on Instagram? (RQ2) How does the Instagram content of professional fencers affect the perception of fencing as a sport? By examining how fencers portray themselves on this platform, the study seeks to identify the strategies and techniques employed to create a compelling personal brand that resonates with their followers, while also shaping the perception of fencing as a whole.

The findings reveal that professional fencers encounter some opportunities offered by social media to interact with their audiences, share sport-related and behind-the-scenes footage, and promote their brand values. In this sense, the platform enables them to increase fan engagement and interaction by sharing training videos, photos of their competitions, and personal stories that offer a glimpse of their daily lives to the public. Furthermore, collaborations with sponsors and brands open up additional business prospects and revenue streams. Therefore, Instagram enables these athletes to showcase their competitive spirit and their skill level to a larger audience, thereby attracting more individuals to participate in and follow the sport. In the next section, we present an overview of the literature regarding contemporary sport communication, and social media, and explain relevant characteristics of fencing to the study.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. SPORT COMMUNICATION AS A DIVERSE PRACTICE

Sport communication studies have traditionally focused on analyzing media coverage of sports events, games, and athletes' lives (Bernstein and Blain, 2002; Abeza *et al.,* 2014; Hambrick, 2017). However, since the emergence of the Internet, particularly social media like Instagram, professional athletes, and other sportspeople have been able to reach and engage a far big-

ger audience than previously (Kutzer, 2016). Bernstein and Blain (2002) noted that "sport and the media have become associated to such an extent that it is often difficult to discuss sport in modern society without acknowledging its relationship with media" (p. 3).

Since 1980, sport communication research and practice has experienced significant growth, with this professional activity being recognized as one of the four functions of sport management (Hambrick, 2017). Scholars have studied the role of communication within the realm of sports, which is evident through the emergence of new textbooks, journals, associations, and conferences dedicated to sport communication, facilitating the dissemination of ideas and fostering advancements in the field (Abeza *et al.*, 2014).

According to Pedersen *et al.* (2007) and Billings (2016), sport communication is a dynamic process through which individuals engage in the sharing of symbols and create meaning within the context of sports. It encompasses a diverse set of activities, including observing and analyzing meaning-making processes, managing and directing communication, and exploring the impact of sports on individuals and society. This results in an interplay of roles, since there are at least three areas in which sport communication exists in the sports industry. Namely:

First, sport communication is communication in sports;

Second, sport communication is communication in a sport setting;

Third, sport communication is communication through sport.

Furthermore, people participating in sport communication may serve as both senders and receivers of messages, as these two spectrums are not always separated. For example, within media organizations, senders could consist of sports editors, producers, journalists, broadcasters, and other personnel involved in content production, while the receivers are their audience (e.g. listeners, viewers, readers, etc.), customers, advertisers, and any individual or group responsible for interpreting sports-related information (Pedersen *et al.,* 2007). However, sports fans expressing discontent with their team's performance also act as senders whose message could affect these relationships (e.g. influence changes in the team management).

As outlined above, the sport communication process involves multiple components such as sports institutions, media, spectators, and other entities associated with the sports environment. Furthermore, Pedersen *et al.* (2007) argue that sport communication can be intentional or unintentional, complex, cyclical, irreversible, transactional, irreducible, dynamic, multidimensional, and encompasses both verbal and non-verbal aspects. In this context, Wenner (2017) suggests that communication plays a relevant role in shaping the social power and cultural significance of sports. In the following section, we explain how sport communications intersects with social media.

2.2. SPORT COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA BRANDING

Social media is defined as "a set of Internet-based applications that are built on Web 2.0 ideas and technologies and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, pp. 59-58). As a functional definition, it refers to the interaction between people and also to the creation, sharing, exchange, and commenting of content in virtual communities and networks (Toivonen, 2007). Among the most popular social media platforms nowadays, Instagram accounts for

over two billion users in 2023 (Kemp, 2023), impacting how we communicate, share, and consume content online (Veloso, 2021). Since its launch in October 2010, Instagram has seen rapid growth in the number of users and uploads (Hu et al, 2014), providing users with an instant way to share moments of their lives with friends through a series of (filtered) images and videos (Veloso, 2018), thus having a strong visual focus (Serafinelli and Villi, 2017).

Not surprisingly, social media have become popular tools for sport communication (Hutchins, 2011; Sanderson, 2011) and differ from traditional media in at least two ways: They are not resource-limited by time (broadcasting) or print space (newspapers). Hence, these platforms, more specifically Instagram, offer an abundance of content and play an important role in the delivery of multimedia messages to sports audiences (Romney and Johnson, 2020a), while enabling interpersonal and mass communication spaces that can increase audience engagement (Romney and Johnson, 2020b). Espinosa (2021) indicates that the emergence of social networks has given rise to a distinct form of communication, characterized by rapid conversations and effortless transmission of information (p. 11).

For Meraz (2009), social media are "architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration, and community" (p. 682). Since sports are by nature a highly visual exercise, with images of athletes capturing excitement, effort, and emotion (Romney and Johnson, 2020a), the integration of visual platforms such as Instagram into sport communication seems a strategic choice. Professional athletes from all fields already take advantage of these online opportunities. This is especially important for those who do not receive daily mainstream media coverage to generate publicity, as social media provides a promotional vehicle to raise awareness and build their personal brand (Eagleman, 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

A study of MotoGP pilot Jorge Lorenzo on Instagram, conducted by Lobillo Mora and Aja Gil (2020), has pointed out nine main topics being covered in the user's content during the season 2018, but with a prevalence of posts related to competition (25%) and training (25%). The pilot's personal life (11%), endorsement and sponsorship (11%), and other miscellaneous topics (10%) appeared in the sequence. Less prevalent themes included declarations (7%), recognition of other public figures (6%), lesions (3%), and season summary (2%). The authors also show that 73% of the posts covered discussions related to the pilot's career and activities that may influence it (p. 111). Finally, the research on Lorenzo's Instagram reveals that he primarily used single images for quick consumption, focusing on his professional identity as a pilot, while adding English in short, simple descriptions.

Benavides *et al.* (2021) surveyed 2,410 people in Santiago de Chile to evaluate the social perceptions of the Chilean National soccer team as a brand. The authors point out that the national team holds a strong brand image and is highly regarded by the majority of Chileans. Despite differences among socioeconomic groups and age ranges, the overall evaluation of the team and the emotions it evokes are positive, contrasting with the perception of the country itself. Older generations may have a more pessimistic outlook based on past experiences, while younger individuals tend to be more optimistic due to recent victories. Moreover, the national team is seen as a unifying force in Chilean society, promoting good coexistence and serving as role models.

Previous studies (Poletti, 2011) have also demonstrated that the process of sharing narratives on social media platforms contributes to 'intimacy' and 'community bonds' between the communicator and the audience (p. 76). Moreover, researchers have examined how Instagram can be used to engage fans for sporting, business as well and social purposes (Kim and Hull, 2017); as a self-presentation tool by Olympic athletes in specific (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016), or by professional athletes more in general (Smith and Sanderson, 2015). The public's perception of an athlete is relevant to their career as it can also influence the athlete's endorsements and contract negotiations.

Historically, their self-presentation was constrained by the influence of mass media, relying heavily on how sports journalists portrayed them. However, athletes now have more control over the dissemination of information and can showcase aspects of their identity that they consider most important, enabling a more personalized and authentic representation. In this scenario, the term "athlete brand" is defined by Arai et al (2013) as "a public persona which has already established their own symbolic meaning within their name, face, or other elements in the market" (p. 391).

To better understand the key components of athlete brands, *Arai et al.*, (2013) developed a conceptual Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI), which outlines how athlete brands are a cumulative result of how they are perceived in both frontstage and backstage settings. The MABI specifically posits that consumer perceptions of athlete brands are influenced by perceptions related to:

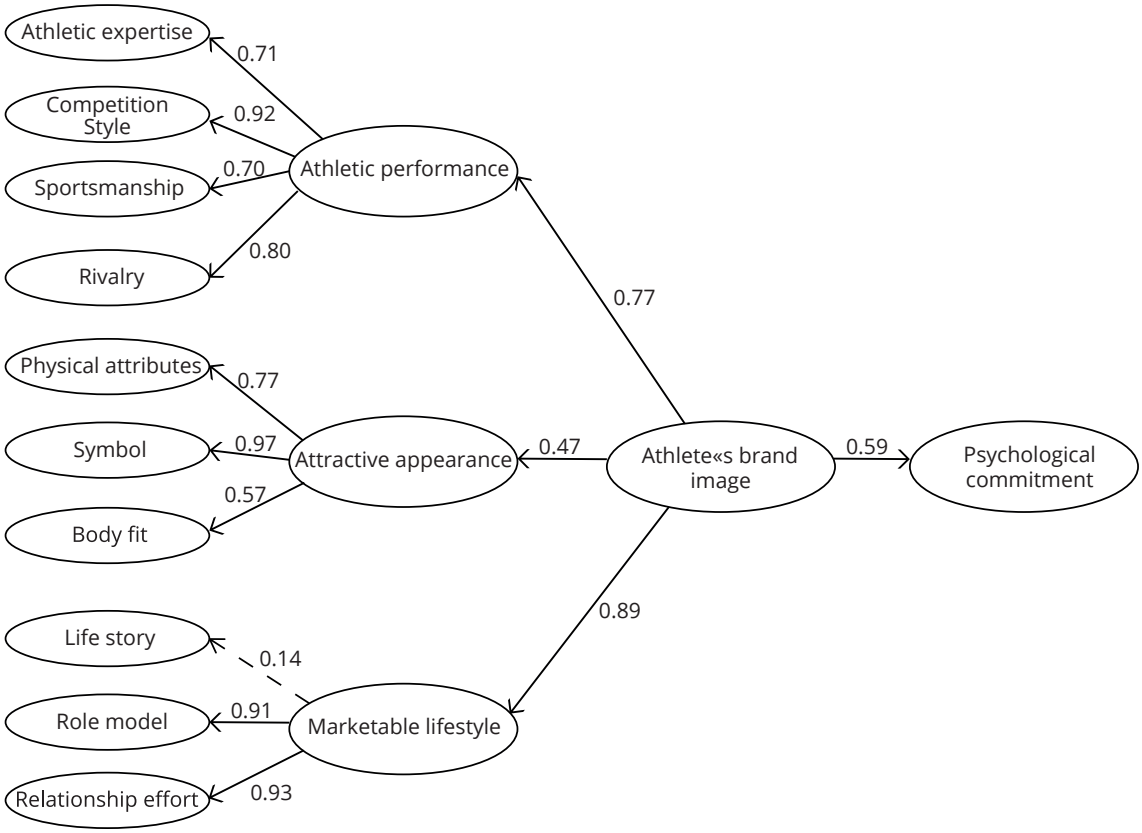
- Athletic Performance
- Attractive Appearance
- Marketable Lifestyle

"Athletic performance" refers to an athlete's on-field characteristics and athletic expertise, which play a relevant role in building their brand image and differentiating them from other athletes. "Attractive appearance" involves showcasing an athlete's physical attributes, such as hairstyles, tattoos, body attributes, and muscle forms. Finally, "Marketable lifestyle" encompasses an athlete's off-field interactions with fans and activities outside of sports, their life story, allowing them to connect with their audience and share aspects of their personal lives.

Consumers' perception of an athlete's brand is influenced by the information surrounding the sportsperson, including their own brand management and self-presentation strategies (Walsh and Williams, 2017). The process requires them to emphasize their uniqueness during the promotion, and it can be achieved through their on-the-field performance and off-the-field activities (Lobpries *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, effective branding strategies can provide athletes with added value, extended job markets, and increased income through endorsement (Arruda and Dixson, 2007; Mogaji *et al.,* 2020; Na *et al.,* 2020).

Figure 1

MABI by Arai et al.



Note: Conceptual Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) by Arai et al. (Source: Arai et al., 2013, p. 397).

2.3. FENCING: SPECIAL FEATURES

Fencing is one of the oldest sports, having that has evolved with the development of new metal forging techniques, military training, and the influence of different cultures (Porzio and Mele, 2002). Throughout history, fencing has even been considered an art form (Labat, 1696); in 1604, it was officially introduced as a discipline (Agrippa, 1604), and in 1896, it became part of the Olympic Games held in Athens. Although it is not particularly dangerous, there is only a thin line between a fatal injury and a simple knife wound. For this reason, fencers are required to wear a standard fencing uniform, masks, gloves, and socks while competing, and must wear them throughout the competition (except during the prescribed breaks between matches).

Fencing is a martial sport characterized by skillful movements and non-contact between athletes and international fencing competitions can last several hours, but the actual match time comprises only a small portion, ranging from 17 to 48 minutes (Roi and Bianchedi, 2008). Because it is a physically demanding activity, factors such as age, gender, level of training, and tactical strategies employed against opponents influence the performance of fencers. Moreover, the physical demands of fencing are closely intertwined with perceptual and psychological aspects, which evolve continuously throughout

a match based on the opponent's behavior. The fencer must anticipate and deceive the opponent while maintaining mental and physical readiness to avoid lapses in concentration and fatigue (Roi and Bianchedi, 2008).

Furthermore, wearing a mask for safety also means that the fencer cannot show their face while competing, which makes the fencer appear more mysterious to the spectators and also adds to the tension and spectacle of the competition, which is one of the special features of the fencer. Although their identity and emotions cannot be shown through facial expressions, fencers can still show their strength and even identity (e.g. signature moves) through their skills and movements during a match.

Beyond the competition venues and training settings, fencers can now demonstrate more of their personalities on social media platforms, such as Instagram. This represents a unique new aspect for fencers, as they unmask themselves and can showcase other characteristics of their private life, building on sport communication in a personalized way, which has not been vastly researched in communication science yet. In the following section, we explain the methodological approach used to collect data and analyze this phenomenon.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research relied on a multimodal methodological approach based on netnography (Kozinets, 2010) and qualitative content analysis (Allen and Reser, 1990) for the data collection and analysis, thus offering an exploratory qualitative perspective that does not aim for generalization. We collected Instagram data (visuals only) from the top 10 men's and women's fencing (Epee) athletes worldwide for the 2021/2022 season, which was the latest consolidated ranking. The sample consisted of all their visual posts (photos and videos) published until April 30th, 2023 (N = 6.400) and the evaluation took place in the first four months of the year.

Netnography is a method inspired by traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2010) that uses digital data from the internet, such as web pages, forums, social media, etc., to study consumer behavior and social interactions. During the study, data was collected and analyzed from the fencers' Instagram accounts, including their interactions with other users, content posted, number of followers, etc. This provided insight into the athletes' self-presentation and interaction patterns. Additionally, Instagram was chosen due to its popularity, accounting for more than two billion active users (Kemp, 2023), and to the opportunity it offers fencers to share

multimedia content directly with their audiences in an easy way (mostly consumed mostly on mobile phones), bypassing editorial constraints that they could face in traditional media outlets.

Moreover, we applied a qualitative content analysis (Allen and Reser, 1990) to better understand the brand image, attitudes, opinions, and marketing strategies of fencers, including images and videos. This process was achieved by manually analyzing the content posted on the platform and then categorizing and coding it according to the different post types.

As one of the most widely used analytical tools today, content analysis has been used fruitfully in a variety of research applications (Allen and Reser, 1990), and can be applied for quantitative or qualitative purposes. In this study, we developed a qualitative content analysis, which is defined as a research approach that involves the subjective analysis of data by systematically categorizing and identifying themes or patterns through a coding process (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

Through the initial survey of the 20 athletes (top 10 males and top 10 females), five out of 20 fencers set their accounts to private and, as their Instagram accounts are not highly visible, the content was not included in the analysis. The final list (Table 1) consists of 15 fencers (Epee) who meet the following criteria: 1) Are ranked in the top 10 in the world for the 2021-2022 season; 2) had an open/public Instagram account throughout the research period. Moreover, an additional in-depth analysis is provided with examples of the two athletes' accounts with the highest number of followers.

Table 1

Fencers selected for the research

Name	Gender	Code	Instagram Account
CANNONE Romain	Male	H1	www.instagram.com/romaincannone/
BOREL Yannick	Male	H2	www.instagram.com/yannickborelofficiel/
LIMARDO GASCON Ruben	Male	H3	www.instagram.com/rubenlimardo/
REIZLIN Igor	Male	Private	Omitted
KANO Koki	Male	H5	www.instagram.com/kanokoki3568/
KOCH Mate Tamas	Male	Private	Omitted
BARDENET Alexandre	Male	Private	Omitted
KURBANOV Ruslan	Male	H8	www.instagram.com/kurbanov_ruslan_13/
MINOBE Kazuyasu	Male	H9	www.instagram.com/minobe_kazuyasu/
VISMARA Federico	Male	H10	www.instagram.com/federicovismara/
CHOI Injeong	Female	Private	Omitted

SONG Sera	Female	M2	www.instagram.com/sera.song/
KUN Anna	Female	Private	Omitted
CANDASSAMY Marie-Florence	Female	M4	www.instagram.com/candassamymarieflorence/
FIAMINGO Rossella	Female	M5	www.instagram.com/rossellina91/
KONG Man Wai Vivian	Female	M6	www.instagram.com/vmwkong/
DIFFERT Nelli	Female	M7	www.instagram.com/nellidiffert/
SANTUCCIO Alberta	Female	M8	www.instagram.com/albertasantuccio/
NDOLO Alexandra	Female	M9	www.instagram.com/alexandrandolo/
LEHIS Katrina	Female	M10	www.instagram.com/katrinalehis/

Note: List of fencing athletes selected for the research

When analyzing the data, in addition to evaluating each athlete's account individually, we classified their publications according to four variables, based on previous analysis conducted through the netnography. For this purpose, we coded each image (see Table 2) based on the activities they depicted, namely: Training and competition (T/C), daily life (DL), charity or volunteer campaign (C/VC), and athlete branding or endorsement ads (A/E). It is important to note that this approach aimed for an initial exploration of their self-presentation strategies from a qualitative perspective, which we combine with examples from the athletes' content. In the next section, we present the main results of our research.

Table 2

Coded content for each Instagram post per athlete

Athletes	T/C	DL	C/VC	A/E	Total posts
H1	52	43	2	16	113
H2	201	105	5	31	342
H3	348	563	40	55	1006
H4	Privado	Privado	Privado	Privado	0
H5	21	13	2	7	43
H6	Privado	Privado	Privado	Privado	0
H7	Privado	Privado	Privado	Privado	0
H8	18	53		1	72
H9	87	80	16	73	256
H10	34	30	1	1	66
M1	Privado	Privado	Privado	Privado	0
M2	30	51	1	2	84
M3	Privado	Privado	Privado	Privado	0
M4	58	59	3	9	129
M5	368	1499	35	231	2133
M6	53	157	57	27	294
M7	82	133	5	11	231
M8	126	460	0	5	591
M9	162	617	18	19	816
M10	127	78	4	15	224

Note: Classification of fencers' posts per category in the content analysis

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1. OVERVIEW OF TOP FENCERS ACTIVITY ON INSTAGRAM

This section is weighted towards the following findings: Firstly, the data collection presentation and interpretation of the netnography data from the Instagram accounts of the top 10 male and female fencing (Epee) athletes worldwide for the 2021/2022 season. Secondly, we provide a brief content analysis to reflect on the activities covered by their images. Finally, we evaluate these categories more in-depth and provide examples of the two most popular athletes on Instagram, based on the total number of followers.

Table 3 shows the number of followers and the number of publications from each of the top 10 male and female fencers (Epee) in the world for the 2021-2022 season. As can be observed in the data, the athletes have a very diverse activity on the platform, with two females ranking as the most popular (F5 and F6) with more than 200,000 followers by the time of this analysis. Among the males, the most followed one (M3) had 75,000 people in their audience.

Furthermore, when comparing their number of posts, some of those with a larger follower base tended to share more often, which was the case for F5 (2.133 posts) and M3 (1.006 posts). However, other least popular accounts (e.g. F8 and F9) also maintained a frequent posting activity (591 and 816 posts, respectively), while the second most followed male (M1) had a significantly lower number of images (113) when compared to the others. It is important to note that many factors can impact the amount of content shared on their accounts, such as when the profile was created and their intentions to publish daily activities. In addition, female athletes communicated more regularly on the platform than their male counterparts.

Table 3

Top 10 fencers' activity on Instagram

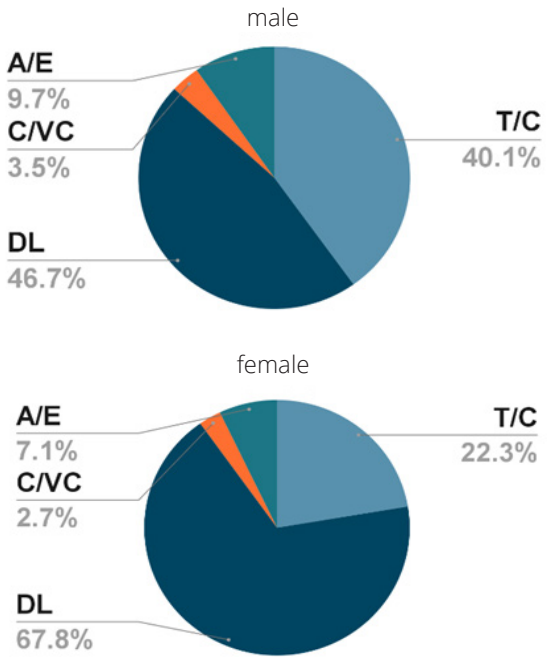
Athlete	Followers	Posts	Athlete	Followers	Posts
H1	19.000	113	F1	Private	Private
H2	17.000	342	F2	7.079	84
H3	75.000	1006	F3	Private	Private
H4	Private	Private	F4	1.490	129
H5	3.026	43	F5	300.000	2133
H6	Private	Private	F6	207.000	294
H7	Private	Private	F7	945	231
H8	991	72	F8	8.651	591
H9	7.661	256	F9	8.581	816
H10	1.605	66	F10	9.071	224

Note: Fencers followers and posting activity on Instagram

Through the survey and analysis, we noticed that there is a positive correlation between the number of posts and the number of followers of professional fencers, suggesting that their self-presentation strategies on Instagram can attract more followers and potentially increase their personal brand value and influence. This also reflects the effectiveness of professional fencers' use of Instagram as a sport communication channel, which is likely to help increase the attention and awareness of fencing.

Figure 2

Types of posts on Instagram by gender



Note: Types of posts on Instagram by the top 10 male (left) and female (right) fencers

To further assess these strategies, we evaluated the activities that these athletes covered in their Instagram content. As can be seen from Figure 2, the most frequent category was daily life (DC), which refers to visual information that depicts their experiences beyond sports settings and could be related to two dimensions of the MABI (Arai et al., 2013), namely "Attractive appearance" and "Marketable lifestyle". The representation of activities varies between genders, with females sharing more of their quotidian (67.8%) than males (46.7%) in the analyzed sample.

Hence, the platform acts as a place where athletes use their accounts to share their private lives, depicting routine events, such as travel, food, beverages, recreational activities, etc. An example is shown in Figure 3, with fencers F6 photographed while enjoying ice cream in a garden and M1 in a home setting with casual clothing while holding a big fish. Compared to professional competition content, daily life posts are more relaxed, fun, and easy to interpret and, therefore more palatable for the general audiences.

Figure 3

Fencers' daily life content

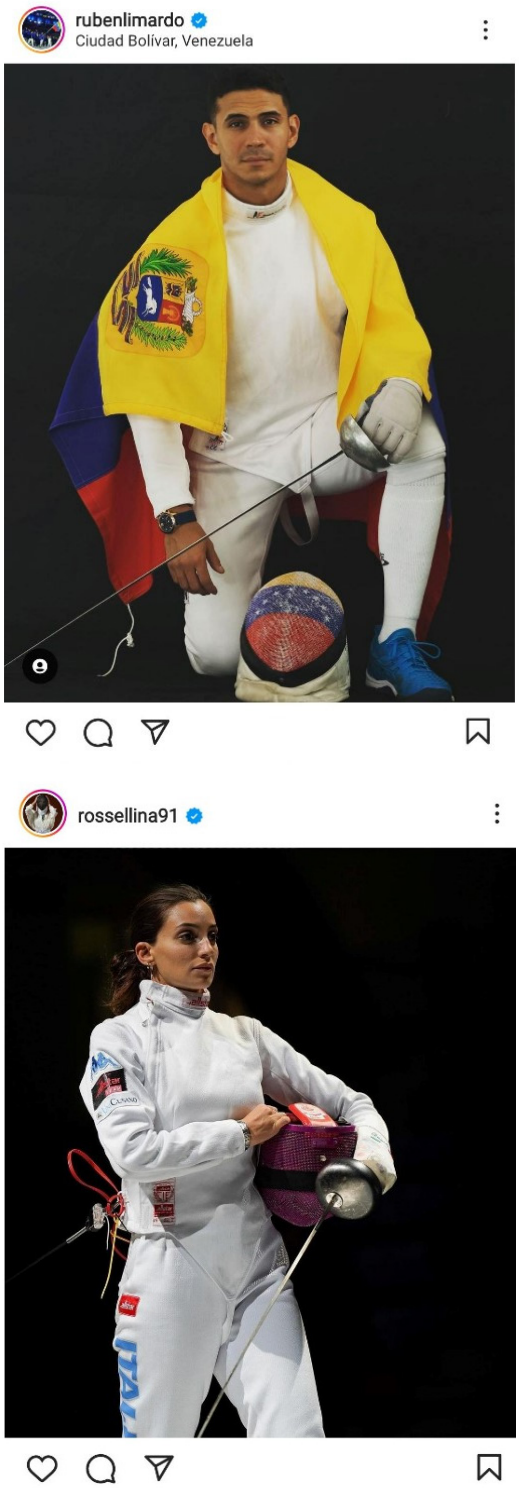
Note: Fencers F6 (left) and M1 (right) representing their daily life on Instagram. Source: Instagram/Screenshot

Training and competition events (T/C) only appear in second place, but do not reach nearly the same proportion of daily life content, pointing out a less prevalent use of the "Athletic performance" dimension from the MABI (Arai et al., 2013) among these athletes. Additionally, male athletes seem to be almost twice as likely to represent their sport-related activities on Instagram (40.1%) than females (22.3%). This comparison demonstrates a variation in the modes of self-presentation adopted by professional fencers according to their genders. However, as indicated previously, female athletes were more popular and posted more regularly, which could explain this variation.

What fencers post about training and competitions can have a positive impact on the general public perception of fencing as a sport and result in increased exposure for athletes. A closer look at what they share related to this type of content shows moments of celebration after victories, medal awards on the podium, and practice with their masters. Moreover, by depicting their professional activities, fencers can increase their career visibility in the fencing world while reinforcing their technical skills and experience. Additionally, it can inspire more people to take up fencing, thus expanding the base and influence of the sport.

Figure 4

Fencers professional life content



Note: Fencers M3 (left) and F5 (right) showing their professional activity Source: Instagram/Screenshot

The two other categories, volunteerism and brand endorsements (Figure 2), are relatively low on the list of posts by the athletes evaluated, but they can still have a positive impact on the performance of fencing as a sport, although in some cases (e.g. paid advertising) they fall outside the 'athletic performance' dimension of the MABI (Arai et al., 2013). By participating in these activities, professional fencers can spread the message of fencing to a wider audience and increase the visibility of fencing to the public. Some examples of what they portray when they post about themselves include educational work in schools related to fencing (for volunteering) and promoting specific products, such as dietary foods, to their audiences (endorsements and advertisements).

Endorsement activities, especially those that include paid partnerships with companies, can provide more financial support and resources to promote the marketability and commercialization of fencing. Furthermore, by participating in voluntary work professional fencers can create a positive image and reinforce a sense of social responsibility and mission, which consequently helps to enhance the social image of fencing. However, these two activities are not necessarily an exclusive practice from fencers, as other athletes have historically dedicated themselves to both engaging in social work also using their personal brand to sell products.

4.2. MOST POPULAR FENCERS' CONTENT AND ACTIVITY

After analyzing the content of the top fencers, we focused on the two most popular fencers on Instagram, F5 and F6, to better understand their sharing practices and interaction with followers. For the frequency of interaction, we calculated the average interactions (average number of likes + average number of comments on all posts) of the two fencers with the highest number of followers on the platform (Table 4).

Table 4

Average interaction

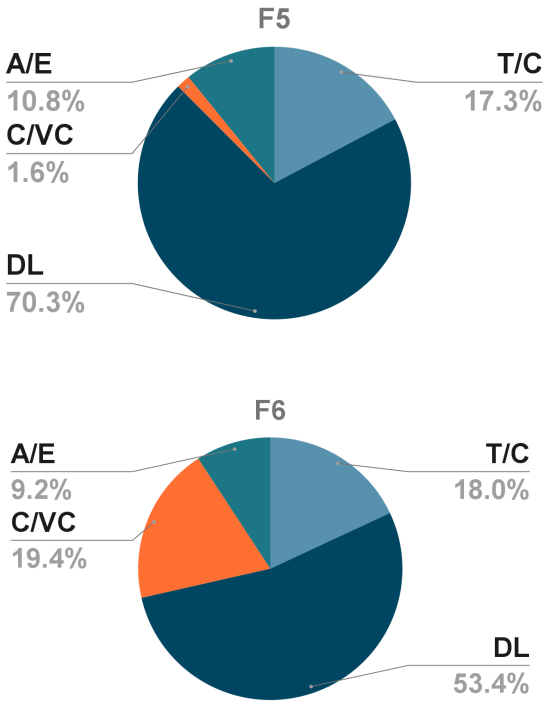
Athlete	Followers	AVG LIKES	AVG COMMENTS	AVG INTERACTIONS
F5	300000	8946.31	58.81	9005.12
F6	207000	8439.06	68.94	8508

Note: Most popular fencers' average interaction on Instagram

A closer look at the content shows that different types of posts receive different levels of interaction on average. For example, when comparing Training & Competition (T/C), Daily Life (DL), Charity & Volunteering (C/VC) and Athlete Branding & Endorsement (A/E), we noted that T/C and DL were the most popular types of posts. Hence, visual content depicting their professionalism and everyday life obtained more attention from followers. For example, humorous content, and photos with other celebrities or athletes attracted more likes, thus increasing the average number of interactions on their posts.

Figura 5

Tipo de publicación por esgrimistas



By looking at the data on professional fencers' F5 and F6 post types (Figure 5), we found that they post mainly about their daily lives (70.3% and 53.4%, respectively), with training and competition appearing in second place for F5 (17.3%) and third place for F6 (18%). They share their daily life outside the training ground, family gatherings, travel, healthy lifestyle during rest and recovery, interactions with coaches and teammates, etc. This content allows followers to gain a better understanding of the athletes' lives and build a closer connection with them.

Figura 6

Actividad voluntaria y benéfica de la esgrimista M6

Note: Fencer F6 volunteer and charity activity content on Instagram

A clear distinction between the two most popular professional fencers on Instagram refers to F6's volunteer and charity activity (Figure 5), which reached second place (19.4%), even more than their training events. A large proportion of these volunteer and charity posts are about participating in or organizing fencing competitions for children and young people, or attending fencing courses in public schools (see Figure 6), which to an extent connects with their professional practice.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The fact that visual social media, such as Instagram, have become a relevant tool for athletes branding demonstrates the relevance of contemporary sport communication, which is still an evolving area of research. Centered on photo and video sharing, Instagram provides a global platform for sportspeople to connect with others, share their training and competition events, and also depict their private lives. This allows athletes to be more actively involved in their public speaking and self-presentation (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Sanderson, 2008), influencing the development of the communication process.

Professional fencers use Instagram to interact with fans and viewers, share moments and behind-the-scenes footage of events, and promote their brand values, simultaneously incorporating into their online communication multiple dimensions of the MABI concept (Arai *et al.*, 2013). This is important for sport communication and promotion, as it allows athletes to engage more directly with their audiences.

This paper examines how professional fencers use Instagram to communicate about sports and finds that their active use of social media has multiple nuances and possible implications. In response to our RQ1 *"What are the sport communication trends regarding professional fencers' self-presentation on Instagram?",* the study shows some directions in the athletes' self-representation. For example, the number of posts and followers seem to be slightly correlated, suggesting that these users adopt the platform to actively showcase their fencing skills and personalities in order to attract more viewers. The findings also suggest that fencers' content focuses more on the dimensions of 'attractive appearance' and 'marketable lifestyle' than directly on 'athletic performance', although this was also part of their self-presentation strategies. Hence, they look for ways to showcase their life beyond the piste, giving a face and a story to the competitor behind the fencing equipment, which contrasts with the practice observed by Lobillo Mora and Aja Gil's (2020) in their discovery of pilot Jorge Lorenzo's Instagram content.

In regards to our second research question, "How does the Instagram content of professional fencers affect the perception of fencing as a sport?" The exploratory qualitative research shows that professional fencers' online content may result in a positive impact on the image of fencing as a sport. By posting photos and videos of their practices and competitions, they promote their skills and competitive standing, attracting the attention of Instagram users. Moreover, this practice increases the general public's knowledge of the sport, making its characteristics more palatable through diverse visual elements (photos, videos, etc.). In addition, by sharing content about their behind-the-scenes footage, and social involvement in charity work, brand endorsements favor the reach of fencing-related messages to new audiences that may be interested in these topics and, as a result, learn about the sport.

Finally, this research has identified trends, challenges, and opportunities in sport communication for the self-presentation of professional fencers on Instagram. They raise the profile and performance of fencing as a sport through diverse content and interaction with their audience. The presence of athletes on the platform is an important contribution to the sport communication market on a general level and to the modality in particular. By actively engaging and posting engaging content, they are able to attract more followers and viewers to themselves, increasing the visibility of the individual and the sport.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study aims to explore the contribution of professional fencers' self-presentation on Instagram as a sport communication strategy, with a focus on personal branding. Hence, it is important to note that it only covers content on one platform and, therefore, does not provide representative data of fencers' performance on all social media. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of an athlete's self-presentation and impact on social media, future research could allow for cross-platform comparisons. Moreover, we conducted qualitative exploratory research based on visuals only, and other researchers could further evaluate the topic from

a quantitative perspective or on text-centered platforms.

Since the number of current studies on fencers' online self-presentation remains low and no established theoretical framework has been established, this paper provides a tentative approach that offers support for research in this area. Therefore, future analysis and exploration could be undertaken by other researchers to reveal the wider impact and strategies adopted by fencers on social media, thereby enhancing the understanding of their online branding.

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