**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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ARTICLE

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**51**

OBRA DIGITAL, 24, December 2023, pp. 51-71, e-ISSN 2014-5039 DOI: 10.25029/od.2023.384.24

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**Abstract**

Instagram has impacted how athletes present themselves and communicate with their audi- ences without the need for mass media me- diators, such as journalists. Hence, this study explores the opportunities for professional fencers to develop self-presentation and com- munication strategies on the platform. The methodological approach is based on netnog- raphy 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 collab- orating with sponsors and brands to open up business opportunities and revenue streams. Therefore, fencers’ active use of Instagram en- hances their self-presentation and positively in- fluences the image of fencing as a sport.

***KEYWORDS***

Sport communication, social media studies, In- stagram, athletes branding, fencing

**Resumen**

Instagram ha impactado la forma en que los atletas se presentan y se comunican con sus

# INTRODUCTION

The accessibility of athlete-related informa- tion has significantly increased through news websites since the 1990s, with contemporary sport communication providing an overview of their training and competitions. Howev- er, much of this content is ‘media-processed,’ capturing fleeting moments rather than pre- senting 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 au- thentic and relatable manner (Kutzer, 2016).

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 desa- rrollen estrategias de autopresentación y co- municación en la plataforma. El enfoque meto- dológico 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 au- mentar el compromiso y la interacción de los fanáticos al compartir videos de entrenamien- to, fotos de competencias e historias persona- les, al mismo tiempo que colaboran con patro- cinadores y marcas para abrir oportunidades comerciales y fuentes de ingresos. Por lo tanto, el uso activo de Instagram por parte de los es- grimistas mejora su autopresentación e influye positivamente en la imagen de la esgrima como deporte

**PALABRAS CLAVE:**

Comunicación deportiva, estudios de redes so- ciales, Instagram, atletas branding, esgrima.

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 develop- ing 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, pos- sessing unique characteristics that distinguish it from other sports. For instance, fencers com- pete with their faces covered, temporarily con- cealing aspects of their identity despite their names being printed on their outfits, thus part- ly 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 influenc- ers, 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 pub- lic political statements or expressing opinions on social media have generated extensive dis- cussion and garnered attention from diverse sectors of society. Moreover, young sports fans and students often observe professional ath- letes on social media, seeking to learn from and emulate their healthy lifestyles, training meth- ods, 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 eval- uating the top 10 fencers’ accounts from the International Fencing Federation (FIE). Moreo- ver, the study addresses two primary research questions: (RQ1) What are the sport commu- nication 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 them- selves on this platform, the study seeks to iden- tify the strategies and techniques employed to create a compelling personal brand that res- onates 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 en- gagement and interaction by sharing training videos, photos of their competitions, and per- sonal stories that offer a glimpse of their daily lives to the public. Furthermore, collaborations with sponsors and brands open up addition- al business prospects and revenue streams. Therefore, Instagram enables these athletes to showcase their competitive spirit and their skill level to a larger audience, thereby attract- ing more individuals to participate in and follow the sport. In the next section, we present an overview of the literature regarding contem- porary sport communication, and social media, and explain relevant characteristics of fencing to the study.

# THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

* 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 In- ternet, 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 manage- ment (Hambrick, 2017). Scholars have studied the role of communication within the realm of sports, which is evident through the emer- gence of new textbooks, journals, associations, and conferences dedicated to sport commu- nication, 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 pro- cess 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 analyz- ing meaning-making processes, managing and directing communication, and exploring the im- pact of sports on individuals and society. This results in an interplay of roles, since there are at least three areas in which sport communica- tion exists in the sports industry. Namely:

First, sport communication is communication in sports;

Second, sport communication is communica- tion 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, broad- casters, and other personnel involved in con- tent production, while the receivers are their audience (e.g. listeners, viewers, readers, etc.), customers, advertisers, and any individual or group responsible for interpreting sports-relat- ed information (Pedersen *et al.,* 2007). Howev- er, 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 envi- ronment. Furthermore, Pedersen *et al.* (2007) argue that sport communication can be in- tentional or unintentional, complex, cyclical, irreversible, transactional, irreducible, dynam- ic, 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 follow- ing section, we explain how sport communica- tions intersects with social media.

# SPORT COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA BRANDING

Social media is defined as “a set of Inter- net-based applications that are built on Web

2.0 ideas and technologies and allow the crea- tion 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, shar- ing, 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 up- loads (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 (broad- casting) 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 interperson- al 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, char- acterized by rapid conversations and effortless transmission of information (p. 11).

For Meraz (2009), social media are ‘‘architect- ed by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration, and community’’ (p. 682). Since sports are by na- ture a highly visual exercise, with images of ath- letes capturing excitement, effort, and emotion (Romney and Johnson, 2020a), the integration of visual platforms such as Instagram into sport communication seems a strategic choice. Pro- fessional 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 Ins- tagram, 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 pi- lot’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 dis- cussions related to the pilot’s career and activ- ities that may influence it (p. 111). Finally, the research on Lorenzo’s Instagram reveals that he primarily used single images for quick con- sumption, 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 per- ceptions 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, con- trasting with the perception of the country it- self. Older generations may have a more pessi- mistic 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 so- ciety, promoting good coexistence and serving as role models.

Previous studies (Poletti, 2011) have also demonstrated that the process of sharing nar- ratives on social media platforms contributes to ‘intimacy’ and ‘community bonds’ between the communicator and the audience (p. 76). Moreover, researchers have examined how In- stagram can be used to engage fans for sport- ing, 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 ath- lete’s endorsements and contract negotiations.

Historically, their self-presentation was con- strained by the influence of mass media, rely- ing heavily on how sports journalists portrayed them. However, athletes now have more con- trol over the dissemination of information and can showcase aspects of their identity that they consider most important, enabling a more per- sonalized 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 mean- ing 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 percep-

tions of athlete brands are influenced by per- ceptions 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” en- compasses 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 re- quires 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). There- fore, effective branding strategies can provide athletes with added value, extended job mar- kets, and increased income through endorse- ment (Arruda and Dixson, 2007; Mogaji *et al.,* 2020; Na *et al.,* 2020).

**Figure 1**

*MABI by Arai et al.*

Athletic expertise

0.71

Competition Style

0.92

Sportsmanship 0.70 Athletic performance

0.80

Rivalry

0.77

Physical attributes 0.77

Symbol

0.97 Attractive appearance

0.57

0.47

Athlete«s brand image

0.59

Psychological commitment

0.89

Life story

0.14

Role model

0.91

Marketable lifestyle

0.93

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

# FENCING: SPECIAL FEATURES

Fencing is one of the oldest sports, having that has evolved with the development of new met- al 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 sim- ple 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 skill- ful movements and non-contact between ath- letes 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). Be- cause it is a physically demanding activity, fac- tors such as age, gender, level of training, and tactical strategies employed against opponents influence the performance of fencers. Moreo- ver, 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 op- ponent 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 ap- pear 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 emo- tions cannot be shown through facial expres- sions, 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 them- selves and can showcase other characteristics of their private life, building on sport commu- nication in a personalized way, which has not been vastly researched in communication sci- ence yet. In the following section, we explain the methodological approach used to collect data and analyze this phenomenon.

# METHODOLOGY

The research relied on a multimodal method- ological approach based on netnography (Koz- inets, 2010) and qualitative content analysis (Al- len and Reser, 1990) for the data collection and analysis, thus offering an exploratory qualitative perspective that does not aim for generaliza- tion. 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 tradition- al ethnography (Kozinets, 2010) that uses digi- tal 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 interac- tion patterns. Additionally, Instagram was cho- sen 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 audienc- es 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 un- derstand 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 quantita- tive 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 vis- ible, the content was not included in the anal- ysis. The final list (Table 1) consists of 15 fenc- ers (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 In- stagram account throughout the research pe- riod. 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/](http://www.instagram.com/romaincannone/) |
| BOREL Yannick | Male | H2 | [www.instagram.com/yannickborelofficiel/](http://www.instagram.com/yannickborelofficiel/) |
| LIMARDO GASCON Ruben | Male | H3 | [www.instagram.com/rubenlimardo/](http://www.instagram.com/rubenlimardo/) |
| REIZLIN Igor | Male | Private | Omitted |
| KANO Koki | Male | H5 | [www.instagram.com/kanokoki3568/](http://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/](http://www.instagram.com/kurbanov_ruslan_13/) |
| MINOBE Kazuyasu | Male | H9 | [www.instagram.com/minobe\_kazuyasu/](http://www.instagram.com/minobe_kazuyasu/) |
| VISMARA Federico | Male | H10 | [www.instagram.com/federicovismara/](http://www.instagram.com/federicovismara/) |
| CHOI Injeong | Female | Private | Omitted |

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

*Note: List of fencing athletes selected for the research*

When analyzing the data, in addition to eval- uating each athlete’s account individually, we classified their publications according to four variables, based on previous analysis conduct- ed 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 brand- ing 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 com- bine 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*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ath- letes** | **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*

# DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

* 1. **OVERVIEW OF TOP FENCERS ACTIVITY**

# ON INSTAGRAM

This section is weighted towards the following findings: Firstly, the data collection presenta- tion and interpretation of the netnography data from the Instagram accounts of the top 10 male and female fencing (Epee) athletes world- wide 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 ath- letes 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 activi- ty 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, respective- ly), while the second most followed male (M1) had a significantly lower number of images

(113) when compared to the others. It is impor- tant 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*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ath- lete** | **Follow- ers** | **Posts** | **Athlete** | **Follow- ers** | **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 communi- cation channel, which is likely to help increase the attention and awareness of fencing.

**Figure 2**

*Types of posts on Instagram by gender*

male



female



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

To further assess these strategies, we evaluat- ed 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 set- tings and could be related to two dimensions of the MABI (Arai et al., 2013), namely “Attrac- tive appearance” and “Marketable lifestyle”. The representation of activities varies between gen- ders, with females sharing more of their quotid- ian (67.8%) than males (46.7%) in the analyzed sample.

Hence, the platform acts as a place where ath- letes 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 inter- pret and, therefore more palatable for the gen- eral 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 ap- pear in second place, but do not reach nearly the same proportion of daily life content, point- ing out a less prevalent use of the “Athletic per- formance” dimension from the MABI (Arai et al., 2013) among these athletes. Additionally, male athletes seem to be almost twice as like- ly 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 profes- sional fencers according to their genders. How- ever, as indicated previously, female athletes were more popular and posted more regularly, which could explain this variation.

What fencers post about training and compe- titions can have a positive impact on the gen- eral 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 evaluat- ed, 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 au- dience and increase the visibility of fencing to the public. Some examples of what they por- tray when they post about themselves include educational work in schools related to fencing (for volunteering) and promoting specific prod- ucts, 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 commercial- ization of fencing. Furthermore, by participat- ing in voluntary work professional fencers can create a positive image and reinforce a sense of social responsibility and mission, which con- sequently 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.

# 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 fol- lowers. For the frequency of interaction, we cal- culated the average interactions (average num- ber 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*

A closer look at the content shows that dif- ferent 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 Ath- lete 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 ce- lebrities or athletes attracted more likes, thus increasing the average number of interactions on their posts.

*Note: Most popular fencers’ average interaction on Instagram*

**Figura 5**

*Tipo de publicación por esgrimistas*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Ath- lete** | **Followers** | **AVG LIKES** | **AVG COM- MENTS** | **AVG INTER- ACTIONS** |
| F5 | 300000 | 8946.31 | 58.81 | 9005.12 |
| F6 | 207000 | 8439.06 | 68.94 | 8508 |



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, fami-

ly 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 pop- ular 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 pro- portion 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.

# DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The fact that visual social media, such as Ins- tagram, have become a relevant tool for ath- letes 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 competi- tion 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 communi- cation process.

Professional fencers use Instagram to inter- act 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 commu- nication 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 com- munication trends regarding professional fenc- ers’ self-presentation on Instagram?”,* the study shows some directions in the athletes’ self-rep- resentation. 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 per- sonalities in order to attract more viewers. The findings also suggest that fencers’ content fo- cuses more on the dimensions of ‘attractive ap- pearance’ and ‘marketable lifestyle’ than direct- ly 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 discov- ery of pilot Jorge Lorenzo’s Instagram content.

In regards to our second research question, “How does the Instagram content of profes- sional fencers affect the perception of fencing as a sport?” The exploratory qualitative re- search 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 stand-

ing, attracting the attention of Instagram users. Moreover, this practice increases the gener- al public’s knowledge of the sport, making its characteristics more palatable through diverse visual elements (photos, videos, etc.). In addi- tion, by sharing content about their behind-the- scenes footage, and social involvement in char- ity 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, chal- lenges, and opportunities in sport communi- cation for the self-presentation of profession- al fencers on Instagram. They raise the profile and performance of fencing as a sport through diverse content and interaction with their au- dience. The presence of athletes on the plat- form is an important contribution to the sport communication market on a general level and to the modality in particular. By actively engag- ing and posting engaging content, they are able to attract more followers and viewers to them- selves, increasing the visibility of the individual and the sport.

# LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study aims to explore the contribution of professional fencers’ self-presentation on Ins- tagram as a sport communication strategy, with a focus on personal branding. Hence, it is im- portant 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 explorato- ry research based on visuals only, and other re- searchers could further evaluate the topic from

a quantitative perspective or on text-centered platforms.

Since the number of current studies on fenc- ers’ online self-presentation remains low and no established theoretical framework has been established, this paper provides a tentative ap- proach 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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