

8 A cross-pollination of fame?

Star athletes and influencers on Instagram

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8.1 Introduction

Instagram was launched in October 2010 as a friendly, fun mobile app for sharing photos and applying various filters. Since its acquisition in April 2012 by Facebook, further business opportunities and complementarities have been explored (Rushe, 2012). Instagram has played on the simplicity of interconnection between it and Facebook and, having taken some characteristics from Twitter, has become a mixed social media platform situated between the latter two. The interaction and design features of Instagram mean that it has greater capacity to enhance its particularities (Quesenberry, 2019: 149–150). Since its acquisition, Instagram has been managed as an independent company. At the time, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg highlighted Facebook users' interest in photo sharing: 'But providing the best photo sharing experience is one reason why so many people love Facebook and we knew it would be worth bringing these two companies together' (Rushe, 2012).

Instagram and its interface are about the moment. Instagram is associated with an ephemeral flow, in which interaction modes are simplified as much as possible and speed and simplicity are rewarded (Zulli, 2018: 143). Its interaction model initially revolved around high-quality photos, with videos being introduced at a later stage (Zulli, 2018).

Like all other social media platforms, it has quickly become a means of personal communication for sports personalities and a space where celebrities and athletes can promote products and services by building their personal brand. While Facebook remains the platform with the largest number of users, Instagram has experienced strong growth. With 1.2 billion users worldwide, it is now one of the most influential social media platforms (Chaffey, 2021). As noted by Lee et al. (2015), the qualities that make Instagram a particularly attractive platform are: the ease of interaction, the ability to observe the private lives of other people using an archive of images and videos as a tool, and the configuration of psychological mechanisms that allow us to escape from reality for a few moments. Miles (2014) also notes that content posted on Instagram tends to have a longer life span than that posted on other social media platforms because it is less conversation focused than Facebook and Twitter are.

People who post their photos on Instagram do so thinking about the glance of others, about how they are going to be decoded and seen: ‘With the case of Instagram specifically, the glance is implicated in the name itself and interface design of the site’ (Zulli, 2018: 140–141).

On social media, user-generated content (Jenkins, 2006) is the basis of a form of communication that gives rise to a new peer-to-peer language that is more direct and sincere. Shifting away from the old hierarchies of mass media, such communication essentially becomes a conversation (Locke et al., 2001).

This work focuses on sports stars and fashion Instagrammers. Both groups share the concept of celebrity as an element of audience attention-grabbing, making it easier to get followers on social media.

First, we will analyse how both groups engage and interact with the audience. Second, we will situate Instagram as a social media platform within communication strategy, and explore whether there are any complementarities between digital presences across platforms, between a personality’s website and his or her presence on each of the platforms. In other words, we will examine whether there is a holistic vision of social media communication strategy, in which each different digital presence specialises in one type of content and one type of audience, and then transfers audiences to other platforms. We call this an integral strategy. It seeks complementarities and feedback between the different digital presences, which we refer to as ‘cross-pollination’ (Fernández Peña et al., 2011).

8.2 The complex, the systemic, and social media

To talk about the complex and the systemic is to talk about equivalent concepts (Capra, 1998). The systemic refers to things that are interrelated and interdependent, to something that functions as a whole. This holistic and linked vision of elements of reality in the area of science has the status of a theory, which has been variously called ‘dynamic systems theory’, ‘complexity theory’, ‘non-linear dynamics’, or ‘network dynamics’, among others (Capra, 1998). The most important property of systems is a pattern in the form of a network; ‘if we see life, we see networks’¹ (Capra, 1998: 100). And the outstanding feature of any network is that its operation is non-linear, that is, it goes in all directions and offers feedback and self-regulation, which are the fundamental characteristics of a systemic vision. Another of its characteristics is self-organisation: ‘A constant flow of matter and energy through the system is necessary for self-organisation to occur’ (Capra 1998, 103). At the same time, the systemic is contextual, as individual elements of data become meaningful in the whole (Capra, 1998: 58). Elements are not considered separate, and ‘the objects themselves are networks of relationships immersed in larger networks. For the systemic thinker, relationships take priority’ (Capra, 1998: 58).

Internet-based digital media have that systemic, integral, interconnected vision of reality in their DNA. In this vision, the different parts interact to form a harmonious whole. This holistic, systemic vision was present in Tim Berners-Lee’s idea for the design of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee, 2000) and in Steve Jobs’ inspiration for creating his Apple products (Isaacson, 2015), and is present in the operation of social media (Christakis & Fowler, 2011).

So, the history of the Internet and of the social media it has spawned is the history of the development of complex communication systems, each of which is based on the first Internet, a technological advancement that has gradually had new features added to the original architecture (Fernández Peña, 2016). The key concept is interconnection: non-linear, hierarchically egalitarian, network-based interconnection. The first Internet, ARPANET, expanded mainly from the 1980s and was based on the non-linear interconnection of computers forming nodes (Veà, 2013). The second major expansion occurred in 1993 with the advent of the World Wide Web. Based on the previous architecture of the Internet, it added multimedia capabilities, simplicity of use and the promotion of interconnected content through a system of hyperlinks (Berners-Lee, 2000). The third major development, which will be central to our work, is the interconnection between people through personal profiles. The outcome would be social media, which became available in the mid-2000s (Christakis & Fowler, 2011). Each of the previous developments formed the cornerstone of the next development. Thus, written in the genetic code of the first Internet and the World Wide Web is the subsequent development of its applications and commercial expansion.

8.3 The new and social media

Social media are territories of influence. Our friends influence us and we influence our friends in an influx of information that is not necessarily direct. Indeed, it can reach people who may not be directly connected with us, that is, they are indirectly connected through our friends (Christakis & Fowler, 2011).

In social life, the old or the traditional has always lost its power of attraction to the new, and the latter has been the raw material of the media's development since industrialisation (Fernández Peña, 2016). In his book *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* written in the 17th century, the Spanish writer Baltasar Gracián told us:

269 *Make use of the novelty of your position. ... Novelty pleases all because it is uncommon, taste is refreshed, and a brand new mediocrity is thought more of than accustomed excellence. Ability wears away by use and becomes old. However, know that the glory of novelty is short-lived: after four days respect is gone.*

(Gracián, 1892/1904: 162)

The new, novelty, is the raw material from which mass information is made, and it is what drives social media too. Information on paper, which became popular from the mid-19th century onwards, sells ephemeral news, whose etymological meaning contains the idea of the new. Journalistic information on paper was new until the next newspaper was published 24 hours later. After that, information based on novelty became a key piece of radio and television broadcasting until the 1980s, when entertainment became dominant in the audiovisual space (Postman, 2005). Social media base their ability to attract the audience's attention on a mix combining the novelty of user-generated content and the historical recovery of on-demand and always-interactive content (Jenkins et al., 2018).

Lipovetsky and Charles (2005) consider the taste for the new to be the driver of what he calls ‘the logic of fashion’. People consume the new simply because of its novel character, the present is exalted and people disassociate themselves from tradition (Lipovetsky, 1991). This neophilic driver dominates the dynamics of posting on Instagram and on other social media. Following the logic of traditional journalistic culture, Instagram and other social media give prominence to the newest photos and stories. At the same time, consumer fashion, whose marketing formula has always been based on the new, is represented by the products that Instagrammers endorse. However, also produced on social media is a set of meanings that can be interpreted according to the logic of Bourdieu’s distinction (2010), which focuses on the construction of consumption-based hierarchies, that is, on the capacity of consumer objects and, by extension, brands to distinguish between people. These two drivers, the logic of fashion and distinction, are present in an image-based medium like Instagram.

8.4 Fame, famous and celebrities: sport stars and fashion Instagrammers

Albeit with various nuances, fame and celebrity are close concepts. They are separate ones in the English-speaking world but not elsewhere, where other languages like Spanish are spoken. ‘Famous’ comes from the Latin *famosus*, and was incorporated into English in the Middle Ages through the influence of French. The word ‘celebrity’, which again came into the English language via France in the Middle Ages, began to be used much more from 1920 onwards as a result of the boom in mass media. From the outset, the concept of celebrity has been associated with audience interest (Lilti, 2017). In media societies, there has traditionally been a contrast between “‘false-value” celebrity and deserved glory’ (Wesolowski, 2020: 189). So, connected with these two concepts, we find others such as glory and reputation. ‘Glory’ is related to the attainment of goals that the average citizen would find hard to reach. It is associated with effort and talent and, for the purposes of our work, it is directly associated with sport and athletes. The second term, ‘reputation’, is a concept linked to the image people have of a person or a brand, that is, to the public image (Barclay, 2015). On the Internet, reputation has become fundamental (Madden & Smith, 2010).

Another concept surrounding fame is charisma. Since its modern articulation by Max Weber, it has been associated with what the German sociologist called ‘inspirational leaders’, be they political or religious. However, since the 1960s, charisma has also become associated with musicians, sports heroes, television stars, glamorous models and notorious rogues (Dickson, 2012: 764). This results in a transfer of the concept to personalities whose success is illuminated and increased by the social role of the mass media, and has reached new heights since the advent of social media.

Elite athletes base their success on talent, the competitive effort whose ultimate goal is to excel at what they do. The ethics of effort, the meritocracy of muscle versus the aristocracy of beauty. Dominating the attention economy always requires excellence. Professional excellence, but also excellence in the quality and selection of posts.

According to Sloterdijk (2012), in the 20th century and for the very first time, the culture of effort and self-improvement has been separated from religious practice. Until the modern age, the concept of asceticism, of exercise, was linked to the religious sacrifice practices of yogis, anchorites and hermits who devoted their lives to a god or gods. However, in the 19th century, it began to be associated with the modern concept of mass sports, whose emergence was linked to industrialisation (Ellul, 1963), the mass press and a new, broader world vision. The latter was a consequence of technical advances in the field of telecommunications such as the telephone, improvements in means of transport and the holding of universal expositions (Fernández Peña, 2016).

Asceticism, once exclusively religious, has since been transferred to people's day-to-day practices, and even more so to professional sport. According to Sloterdijk (2012), exercise had undergone a process of 'de-spiritualization of asceticism' (Sloterdijk, 2012: 94). That was how a new era began, an era in which sport is now a way of transforming people's lives, has a democratising capacity and is a promoter of social mobility, at least symbolically and momentarily.

The fame and celebrity associated with athletes is not a new phenomenon. In ancient Rome, Gaius Appuleius Diocles was one of the most famous and richest athletes. When he retired at the age of 42, after a long and successful career, he had earned 35,863,120 sestertii, the equivalent of \$15 billion today (Preskar, 2020).

Gaius Appuleius Diocles' successful career was based not only on his enormous talent, but also on an important strategic vision of distinction and a great sense of spectacle, and he became a master of drama (Preskar, 2020). In fact, he only won one-third of his races, but his huge sense of spectacle made him a favourite with the Roman audience.

Today, the social presence of sport, especially in the media, is unquestionable. That is why, among the world's 50 most followed influencers on Instagram, 11 are athletes, nine of whom are football players.

The processes of transnational connectivity have allowed elite athletes to engage with their audiences in an unprecedented way: via social media, they not only show their best sporting actions, but also the most intimate aspects of their private lives. And, at the same time, they promote products and brands, both their own and those of third parties. This tendency to publicly share aspects of their private lives is based on the fact that users identify with famous people or organisations when they perceive shared similarities (Soukup, 2006). Within the sporting context, these links occur with athletes, sports personalities or teams (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Thus, 'fandom', defined as 'the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text' (Sandvoss, 2005: 8), implies evoking a shared sense of emotional attachment to a club or player (Abosag et al., 2012).

In order to enhance this connection, athletes need to develop their personal brand, that is, to do branding. A well-defined and well-managed personal brand increases their capital value because, if the associated feelings are positive, their brand messages have greater influence than those of competing brands (Hsieh & Li, 2008). An influencer is therefore understood as someone who reflects his or her personal brand (Markos et al., 2011), and who endeavours to get as much

attention as possible. 'Authenticity', defined as 'the overall assessment of the credibility of a brand' (Jenkins et al., 2018: 95), becomes the main value judgment because a personal brand is now reaffirmed by convincing consumers of its inherent veracity (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). For this purpose, competitive sport is an ideal framework as it shows 'real individuals participating in unpredictable contests'. Andrews and Jackson (2001) argue that this gives sport stars an important veneer of authenticity, which sets them apart from other celebrities from 'other, more explicitly manufactured, cultural realms' (Andrews & Jackson, 2001: 8). Thus, sport becomes an ideal showcase for the promotion of a personal brand because it receives massive media attention on a daily basis while generating opinion and conversation on social media. Using this global conduit, a sport star becomes a source of cultural identification, through which the dominant narratives, sensitivities and ideals are presented to popular culture (Rojek, 2006).

Generally speaking, football players become famous because of their sporting achievements and the public's interest in their off-pitch activities. Their brands therefore depend to a large extent on these two elements of their lives (Wu et al., 2012). It is about establishing a personal brand that includes the life stories, values, charisma, authenticity and truthfulness of the athlete in question (Cortsen, 2013). This has given rise to co-branding, that is, 'a public relationship between independent brands' (Seno & Lukas, 2007: 123). However, for these alliances to achieve the expected results, there must be some consistency between a product's and an athlete's image. There are a number of intangibles such as team, personal life, physical characteristics, level of success, age or reputation (Burton & Chadwick, 2008) that make athletes better or worse suited to certain products. Such coordination is essential because the value of the brand image that an athlete has managed to create of him or herself plays a decisive role in his or her economic and social standing.

This is known as 'impression management', which, as explained by Hasaan et al. (2018), is the process of controlling the impact we have on others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Thus, an athlete must pay attention to his or her gestures, clothing, appearance or way of speaking in order to improve self-representation and win others over (St. James, 2010). The physical condition of an athlete's body becomes relevant to a sports personal brand since it can be understood as a symbolic message about his or her own self-esteem (Lau et al. 2008), and it may even have an influence on how sexually attractive the athlete is to others (van Amsterdam et al., 2012 and Daniels, 2009).

However, the development of a personal brand needs more than that. Braunstein and Zhang (2005) identified professional trustworthiness, likeable personality, athletic expertise, social attractiveness and characteristic style as factors influencing the evolution of a sports personal brand. Personal charm, that is, an athlete's charisma and inspiring behaviour in other aspects of life beyond sport, can also generate followers (Cortsen 2013). Choi and Rifon (2007) have added genuineness, competence, excitement and sociability to the aforementioned personality traits.

Of course, sports talent is also a differential factor, to the extent that some fans acknowledge that they are more interested in seeing certain players' special skills

than they are in seeing a team win (Theysohn et al., 2009). Kiefer (2014) also notes that good sports performances increase an athlete's market value. It is no coincidence that, of the nine most influential football players on Instagram, six are forwards. As Weiss (2001) showed, there is a positive relationship between scoring goals and achieving star player status.

The consequences of paying attention to all the factors mentioned above are, among others, that fans – by developing a positive perception of an athlete – tend to be more loyal to him or her. Such loyalty – understood as an emotional bond – tends to increase the intention to buy products and brands associated with that athlete (Hasaan et al., 2018).

Sports consumers with a strong attachment to a particular team or player are more likely to follow their social media accounts (Demirel & Erdogmus 2016), thus creating a virtuous circle between sports promotion, networking capabilities and their brand value. In addition, content linked to broadcasts of football matches usually gets the highest number of comments (Gallardo-Camacho et al., 2016), so using social media as a way of staying in touch with fans is, on the face of it, an unmissable opportunity for athletes. Even those who had refused to use them have ultimately yielded to the evidence that social media are an excellent tool for boosting brand image. Moreover, it has been proven that developing strong social connections can lead to better sports performances (Freeman et al., 2009). Some studies have shown that athletes who use social media during their competitions experience positive feelings of connection, relaxation and gratification (Hayes et al., 2019), since it can alleviate their nervousness, and messages of encouragement posted by fans can generate positive reinforcement.

8.5 Fashion influencers

Fashion influencers have seen the boundaries between their public and private lives become blurred. Also, the concept of meritocracy has ceased to be decisive and 'self-effort is replaced by self-sufficient uniqueness' (Hou, 2018: 551).

For commercial brands, having influencers promote their products and services on Instagram offers greater reliability and trust than other traditional forms of advertising. Consequently, Instagram influencers must appear authentic (van Driel & Dumitrica 2021; Hou, 2018). That compels them to maintain an ever shifting balance. They must appear authentic in relation to their audiences while managing to get enough followers to attract advertisers. One of the dangers of professionalisation is the standardisation of their content, which may lead to them being perceived as unauthentic. The challenge is to successfully overcome this difficulty (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

Instagram fashion influencers offering a unique, original and distinct image are the ones with the highest number of followers, and they are considered opinion leaders capable of influencing others. Coupled with that is the public's perception that they are creative. This leads the followers of an account to interact with it, and they then go on to recommend the account to others. This recommendation process helps to raise the account's value (Casaló et al., 2020: 6).

Taking an ecological view of Instagram as a fashion showcase, Suh (2020) considers that the platform allows space and time to be transcended through social connection. Sharing fashion photos via this social media platform seeks to turn the fashion and styling of our everyday lives into a work of art: '(it) can be seen as festivals of everyday life. They act as mediators of recent desires' (Suh, 2020: 14).

A study of the main Spanish influencers, both male and female, concludes that reference to the fashion brand sponsoring them is more explicit among male influencers than it is among female influencers. The latter combine sponsored posts with posts that are aimed more at looking after their community (González Fernández & Martínez-Sanz, 2018: 435).

Furthermore, Instagram influencers with the highest number of followers are perceived as more desirable. Popular success catches the eye and attracts new followers. However, if an Instagrammer follows few accounts, he or she is perceived as undesirable (De Veirman et al., 2017).

In turn, social media have amplified the word-of-mouth (WOM) effect to such an extent that a new term has been created: *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM). eWOM is usually defined as 'any positive or negative statement made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet' (Hennig et al., 2015: 39). While fashion influencers on social media are individuals with high levels of credibility as regards their followers (Jin and Ryu 2019), they often have considerable influence on the groups most likely to end up buying something (García-de-Frutos & Estrella-Ramón, 2021). This influence goes beyond the intention to buy: studies such as the one by Nash (2018) point out that it even has an impact on the very identity of fashion consumers.

Millennials, the demographic group born between the mid-1980s and early 2000s, and Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s, are together responsible for \$350 billion of spending in the United States alone. Generation Z alone already accounts for 40 per cent of global consumers (Amed et al., 2019). At the same time, those belonging to this generation are the ones that can easily see themselves becoming fashion opinion leaders and making it their profession (Schouten et al., 2020; Palfrey & Gasser, 2013). It is therefore logical for this new class of influencers to have become a powerful marketing tool, aware of its own mobilising and trending capabilities (Park & Kim, 2016). eWOM has the biggest impact when done by renowned personalities (Erkan & Evans 2018), hence the interest that brands have in becoming associated with them (Backaler, 2018 and Kim & Ko, 2012). However, the important role played by micro-influencers must not be overlooked. While it is true that users often feel more attracted to macro-influencers (those with more than 150,000 followers, as this influences the perception of their credibility and popularity) (Jin & Phua, 2014), a study by Pérez Curiel and Luque Ortiz (2018) revealed that, especially among women, micro-influencers are also relevant as they show products that are more affordable for consumers.

In any case, both large and small influencers should consider the effects of doing too many advertising campaigns because, when users recognise an Instagram post as advertising, they are more likely not to share it via eWOM (Evans et al. 2017).

Given that the attitude towards an influencer has proved to be a clear predictor of the intention to buy (Bergkvist et al., 2016), every influencer must pay attention to all the elements involved in the perception of their own image. In the case of fashion influencers, the way they dress plays a central role in their lives (O'Cass, 2004), so dressing fashionably becomes an especially important requirement.

8.6 Cross-pollination and engagement

In line with the notion of system applied to social media, in this work we propose the idea of cross-pollination (Fernández Peña et al., 2011; Fernández Peña, 2016: 192–193). Regarding social media strategy, we see it from the viewpoint of network marketing. In its holistic conception, this idea of cross-pollination integrates all the digital presences of an individual or organisation: website, YouTube channel, and Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok accounts. Thus, the idea of cross-pollination is a systemic, holistic, integral vision. Posts on Twitter or Instagram cannot be considered in isolation or separately. Instead, the entirety of an individual's or organisation's social media presences must be taken into account, seeking complementarities and feedback between them. This leads to specialisation in one type of content and one type of audience on the various social media platforms, and then drives traffic to others, for example, from Facebook or Instagram to an individual's or organisation's website.

In the case of the National Basketball Association, the specialisation of social media is as follows:

YouTube: Best plays, such as Daily Top 10 and outstanding performances.
Facebook: Mostly off-the-court, behind-the-scenes content, as well as images and graphics.
Twitter: Live events and breaking news, including score updates and in-game highlights.
Snapchat: Live events from beginning to end via photos and videos.
Instagram: Used for in-game and post-game highlights.
(Argüelles, 2018: 21)

Here, we can see that there are no overlaps; a strategy that pursues complementarities has been intentionally created, bearing in mind that each social media platform has its own audience and its own specificity as regards communicative characteristics (Quesenberry, 2019).

Relationships between social media accounts and websites are also present in this vision of cross-pollination. The World Wide Web has made it possible for us to have an interactive, user-friendly communication system that can be accessed from anywhere in the world, and has allowed content to be interconnected by hyperlink (Berners-Lee, 2000). However, because of its nature, an active attitude is required for users to access information. It is, in our view, a form of static communication (Fernández Peña, 2016). Social media are venues where people come to connect with others, view their profiles and comment on posted content, hence they are deemed more dynamic. Here, audience participation is spontaneous and is part of the DNA of the platforms themselves. From the viewpoint of marketing

on social media, there is considerable potential for feedback between individual's and institutions' social media accounts and websites, the latter of which are only visited if there is express and sufficient interest. Proposed within this cross-pollination model is that social media platforms and YouTube have the capacity to drive traffic to websites, the latter being understood as static communication elements (Fernández Peña et al., 2011).

On the other hand, in this social media environment, defined by the lead role that users have in creating and distributing messages, the key term is 'engagement', which refers to the public's participation or to its level of involvement in posts published by a third party, be it an organisation, firm or individual (Fernández Peña, Ramajo, & Arauz, 2014). From the corporate marketing perspective, engagement is defined as 'a behavioral manifestation toward the brand or firm that goes beyond transactions' (Verhoef et al., 2010: 247), and includes 'all consumer-to-firm interactions and consumer-to-consumer communications about the brand' (Gummerus et al., 2012: 858). Within this context, engagement can be viewed as a cognitive and affective link to a brand or product that a website or application embodies (Mollen & Wilson, 2010). Thus, user engagement turns out to be one of the main objectives of any firm, organisation, institution or individual with a presence on Instagram and other social media platforms. By its very nature, Instagram elicits an active response from the public.

The engagement rate on Instagram is much higher than on other social media platforms. Specifically, this platform offers a 669 per cent higher engagement rate than Twitter and a 70 per cent higher one than Facebook. It is, therefore, the best platform for achieving organic engagement, that is, unpaid. This has to do with outstanding content (Ahmed, 2017).

An engagement strategy on Instagram requires a friendly relationship with the audience, which includes responding to direct questions, and good management of hashtags, which focuses on niches relevant to the target audience. Specifically, the addition of anywhere between five and 12 hashtags is recommended, 'following the acronym CLEEP, which stands for category, location, emotion, event and product'. It is also essential to pay attention to the look of an Instagram account: 'good lighting, composition and consistent design are important' (Quesenberry, 2019: 148–9).

8.7 Method

This work is a qualitative study of the accounts of the top 10 star athletes on Instagram and the top 10 fashion Instagrammers by number of followers. The accounts were monitored between 1 May and 10 July 2021. The posts that had the highest levels of audience participation, that is, the most engagement, and the type of pre-eminent content in each one were analysed, with special attention being paid to advertising content. In addition, the degree of cross-pollination between the various social media accounts and websites was observed. Specifically analysed were potential transferrals of content and audiences between the official website of each of the celebrities and their respective YouTube channels and Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and Facebook accounts (Tables 8.1 and 8.2).

Table 8.1 Athletes analysed, and their Instagram accounts

<i>Athlete</i>	<i>Account</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Sport</i>	<i>No. of followers</i>	<i>Other accounts</i>
Cristiano Ronaldo	@cristiano	Portugal	Football	308,000,000	YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, website
Virat Kohli	@virat.kohli	India	Cricket	132,000,000	TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, website
James Rodríguez	@jamesdrodriguez10	Colombia	Football	46,700,000	TikTok, Twitter, Facebook
LeBron James	@kingjames	United States	Basketball	89,800,000	YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, website
David Beckham	@davidbeckham	England	Football	67,000,000	TikTok, Facebook, website
Zlatan Ibrahimovic	@iamzlatanibrahimovic	Sweden	Football	47,900,000	Twitter, Facebook, website
Leo Messi	@leomessi	Argentina	Football	224,000,000	YouTube, Facebook, website
Ronaldinho	@ronaldinho	Brazil	Football	55,900,000	YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, website
Marcelo	@marcelotwelve	Brazil	Football	48,000,000	YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook
Kylian Mbappé	@k.mbappe	France	Football	53,400,000	YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, website

Source: Own compilation. Number of followers as of 30 June 2021.

8.8 Results and discussion

8.8.1 Star athletes and fashion Instagrammers: engagement and content flow without cross-pollination

The first observation was that the three athletes with the highest average engagement rates were also the ones with the highest number of followers at the time of the analysis, that is, Cristiano Ronaldo, Leo Messi and Virat Kohli. Beyond this

Table 8.2 Fashion influencers analysed, and their Instagram accounts

<i>Influencer</i>	<i>Account</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>No. of followers</i>	<i>Other accounts</i>
Kylie Jenner	@kyliejenner	United States	248,300,000	YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, website
Kim Kardashian	@kimkardashian	United States	236,100,000	YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, website
Kendall Jenner	@kendalljenner	United States	175,100,000	YouTube, Twitter, website
Khloé Kardashian	@khloekardashian	United States	165,000,000	YouTube, Twitter, Facebook
Kourtney Kardashian	@kourtneykardash	United States	132,600,000	YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, website
Gigi Hadid	@gigihadid	United States	68,000,000	YouTube, Twitter, Facebook
Huda Kattan	@hudabeauty	United States	49,000,000	YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, website
Lele Pons	@lelepons	Venezuela/ United States	44,700,000	YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, website
Bella Hadid	@bellahadid	United States	44,100,000	TikTok, Twitter, Facebook
Cara Delevingne	@caradelevingne	United Kingdom	43,600,000	YouTube, Twitter, Facebook

Source: Own compilation. Number of followers as of 30 June 2021.

logical correlation, the case of French football player Kylian Mbappé stood out. With only 53 million followers, his content averaged around 2 million likes and comments. Mbappé was therefore the player with the best follower/engagement ratio out of all the athletes analysed. This indicates a very effective content strategy, based on the diversification of message types and the exclusion, as far as possible, of advertising posts. Paying attention to the content of posts to ensure that they do not become repetitive or monothematic is a key point in effective social media communication design (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). By prioritising sports content – Mbappé is often seen in athletic stances while playing for his club or the French national team – and not overlooking personal posts, which are often highly successful, he employs a diversified strategy that points to a closer connection with the audience. Earlier studies have concluded that putting ‘behind-the-scenes’ (BTS) content into posts on other social media platforms such as Facebook was beneficial to the athletes: ‘athletes have the opportunity to cultivate stronger relationships with fans via the sharing of personal aspects of the athlete’s life such

as family or hobbies' (Geurin-Eagleman and Clavio, 2015: 331). Thus, Mbappé (and all the athletes analysed, to a greater or lesser extent) shared photos of himself in non-sporting contexts, posing with his father or brother while using Instagram as a platform to promote the fact that he had been on the cover of the French magazine *L'Obs*.

Although Cristiano Ronaldo, with an average of more than 6 million, was the athlete – out of those studied – with the highest total engagement rates, Mbappé managed to be twice as efficient as the Portuguese football player. As already mentioned, a differential factor of Mbappé's success might lie in limiting advertising content, that is, not using too much of it in his profile. Advertising posts were classified as being the least important factor in the development of an athlete's image (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014); however, in the sample analysed, the explicit promotion of sponsors by athletes such as the Colombian James Rodríguez was overrepresented.

This study found that there was a tendency to post numerous messages revealing the athletes' most private sides: their homes, children, partners and family. For example, in the case of Leo Messi, his most successful post was a video in which his teammates congratulated him on his birthday. This post alone received 6 million likes and 120,000 comments. These results are consistent with studies (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hambrick et al., 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010 and Pegoraro, 2010) reaffirming that fans were more interested in athletes' personal lives than in their professional ones.

These posts were mostly photos (71 per cent), a far higher proportion than content posted in video format (29 per cent). The simplicity of posting one or two photos, often taken as selfies by athletes themselves, was the preferred option because it is cheaper and less time-consuming than making a video with high production costs. It was advertising that had the capacity to make such videos, using them mostly to communicate their messages.

Several of the most successful sports advertising posts, that is, the most popular ones with the fans, were those relating to their national teams. Thus, feelings of union, camaraderie and patriotism are values that followers seemed to favour, as observed in posts by Virat Kohli, posing with the entire Indian cricket team, or by Cristiano Ronaldo, posing with the Portuguese football team.

As for the content of non-sports posts, most sports stars tended to produce superficial, politically correct messages, staying away from controversial issues. From the sample selected in this work, basketball star LeBron James stood out for having a politically clear stance, unambiguously supporting the Democrat politician Joe Biden. His statements, urging his followers to vote for Biden and showing his solidarity with civil rights movements such as Black Lives Matter, stood apart from others because they were unusual and direct, and might have affected the view that fans on the opposite side of the political spectrum held of him. This is because people tend to choose media news aligned with their political opinions (Garrett, 2009) and might reject those personalities who are manifestly opposed to their ideas.

Regarding the fashion influencers, the first thing that stood out in our observation was the female dominance of the fashion world on Instagram, the opposite

to what happens in sport, where the 10 most followed influencers were men. Instagram, therefore, has inherited the traditional dynamics of content segmentation: sport is a male environment and fashion is a female one. In addition, in the case of fashion, members of the Kardashian family undisputedly held the top five positions. Together, they have almost a billion followers, whereas the next five influencers together have 250 million followers, a figure similar to that achieved by Kylie Jenner, the member of this popular family with the most fans. Given these facts, talking about fashion on Instagram is clearly synonymous with the Kardashians.

The posting dynamics of the Kardashian sisters were very similar. From an image viewpoint, considerable attention had been paid to the content. Even when they posted selfies, they were fully planned; within their empire, nothing could be left to chance. The format they used the most was the photo, precisely because it makes it easier to achieve that image of sought-after perfection. They posted very few videos, and the ones that they did often coincided with the launch of their respective brand products (Ahmed, 2017). However, there was a small number of videos showing scenes of their everyday lives, with family, with friends or having fun.

The behaviour of other fashion Instagrammers was similar. Fundamentally, Instagram was a huge promotional showcase for them. All the analysed Instagrammers advertised various products, mostly related to the fashion world (luxury clothing brands, beauty products or accessories), although the members of the famous family also lent their image to alcoholic beverages. Advertising posts accounted for 35 per cent of the total analysed, exceeding the recommended limit as a proportion of all content. Some studies (Hambrick et al. 2010; Hambrick & Mahoney 2011) have found that advertising content usually accounts for 5–12 per cent of total posts. In this regard, the dynamics followed by Huda Kattan are worth highlighting. The influencer is the founder of the Huda Beauty cosmetic line. Her Instagram account, @hudabeauty, is dedicated exclusively to promoting and selling her products. Of the total posts analysed for this account, only one did not focus on her products. It was a video addressing her followers, in which she advocated banishing negative and offensive comments from social media.

As with the Kardashian sisters and the athletes analysed, the preferred posting format was the photo, one that is capable of prompting a higher number of audience reactions. However, there were some exceptions among these influencers too: Huda Kattan showed followers how to use her products and, to do so, videos – as tutorials – were the chosen format. The rest of the content analysed used either format depending on the purpose of the post: poses were in photo format, and the catwalk, scenes of everyday life and the tutorials mentioned above were mostly in video format. In figures, one-quarter of the content corresponded to videos (26 per cent) and the rest (74 per cent) to photos. These data are consistent with the fact that photos yield a higher degree of engagement on Instagram. Of all posts on Instagram, 86 per cent are photos. Content in this format gets the highest level of audience participation in the form of engagement. Photos generate 1.1 per cent engagement and videos 0.8 per cent. Therefore, 38 per cent more engagement is achieved with photos than with videos (Ahmed, 2017).

When almost 250 million followers are reached, the anticipated engagement in posts within another context must also attain unthinkable rates. In this sense, Kylie Jenner managed to get just over 15 million likes and comments by posting a photo with her partner. But, her sister Kendall, with 75 million fewer followers, surpassed 16 million interactions with a video showing her favourite relaxation techniques. In both cases, they were not advertising posts, but instead were linked to the stars' most private circle. This pattern held true for the other Instagrammers studied: the content that generated greater engagement was related to their respective private spheres, in which they showed themselves with their family or in everyday scenes. Another example of such interest was the video of Lele Pons greeting Daddy Yankee. This Venezuelan-American woman is known on social media for offering videos with a touch of humour. In particular, that video got more than 12 million likes and comments from a community of followers of just over 44 million. It therefore had the best ratio between number of followers and engagement achieved.

At the opposite end of the spectrum was content that achieved the least engagement, where we found promotional product posts, once again demonstrating that the audience is more interested in the personal sphere of Instagrammers and less so in their commercial activities. Take, for example, the post by Kylie Jenner launching her new bath products, which only achieved a million interactions, and compare it to the 15 million she got for a photo of her and her partner. Or the one by Kourtney Kardashian promoting her website on wellness, health, nutrition and styling, which did not manage to reach a million likes and comments. In this sense, as Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) have already pointed out, celebrities can take advantage of social media to show themselves being 'themselves' with brands they are promoting around them, rather than posing with them in artificial advertisements.

In short, we can assert that the relationship between engagement achieved and content posted favours the private sphere side, which is consistent with the findings of Hou (2018). Little by little, that private sphere – an environment accessible to the few – is emerging into the public sphere, one where things are shared with a community of followers.

8.8.2 Cross-pollination as the integral management of digital presence

The absolute leader on Instagram and on other social media platforms was Cristiano Ronaldo, with more than 300 million followers of his Instagram account. However, he did not consider the website to be part of an integral communication system. In his case, and in the case of most athletes, there was no stratified content strategy adapted to social media and audiences. For example, most of them posted the same content on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. The only social media platform on which they published specific content was TikTok, whose communicative characteristics limit the type of content that can be shown, which, in this case, must be fun, family scenes. Compared to Ronaldo, Messi had a more active website, a snapshot of his sporting and promotional activities, but he did not have accounts on TikTok or Twitter. In the case of Facebook and

Instagram, the interoperability between the two made the content posted on them the same. This overlap between content on Instagram and Facebook – and sometimes on Twitter – was observed in other athletes like Virat Kohli, LeBron James and Ibrahimovic. The absence of cross-pollination in the case of sports stars was striking when compared to the use of this strategy by sports organisations such as the NBA (Argüelles, 2018) or the Olympic Channel (Fernández Peña & Ramajo, 2021).

The athletes' websites were repositories of biographical content, whereas the Instagrammers' websites were commercially orientated and designed to sell products, as in the case of Kim Kardashian. However, there were some exceptions, Kendall Jenner being one of them, whose website was a predominantly audiovisual biographical platform. All the influencers repeatedly used Instagram as a personal photo and product promotion platform. Unlike the athletes, the Instagrammers were very active on YouTube, a social media platform for which exclusive content is created, in which they told the audience about the products they were promoting. Channel specialisation was observed to a greater extent among Instagrammers than it was among athletes: Website: e-Commerce; Instagram: Personal and product photos; YouTube: Videos with explanations; TikTok: Fun videos of products and family members. In the case of Kylie Jenner, a promotional feedback process on Twitter was observed, which was sometimes used to promote YouTube videos. The presence of these Instagrammers on Facebook was generally marginal, and their Instagram content was often repeated on it.

8.9 Conclusions

The athletes analysed can be situated within the general concept of being famous; they are people in whom a glory acquired through effort and talent has been deposited. A ubiquitous media presence resulting from their fame won through merit has also turned them into celebrities who are followed by millions of people worldwide. Although athletes devote some of their Instagram posts to their professional activities, it is within the realm of their private lives and of brand promotion that the worlds of athletes and fashion Instagrammers converge. The meritocracy of muscle and effort and the aristocracy of beauty therefore meet.

Sports careers and their projection in the media not only rely on athletic skills and triumphs but, in quite a few cases, are also complemented by a mastery of communication skills that goes beyond sport per se: aesthetic aspects, appropriate management, and the quest for synergies between them and social media communication resources and brand promotion, among others.

For sports stars and Instagrammers alike, the engagement generated by personal content, such as photos of them with their families or funny videos arising from once private situations, is higher than that of any other type of content, far exceeding the engagement achieved by promotional themes. Social media are an opportunity for a direct relationship with the audience. Private videos or BTS ones of sport or professional activities help to weave a kind of complicity with the audience, which can be exploited in order to achieve greater engagement in content sponsored by brands.

The concept of cross-pollination, which operates in companies and institutions such as the NBA or the Olympic Channel, does not occur in the case of sports personalities, and is observed only very marginally among the fashion Instagrammers. Since the communicative and interaction characteristics of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter are similar, the same content is quite often repeated across the three platforms with very few changes. Instagram is a mixed social media platform, with a combination of the communicative qualities of Facebook and Twitter. The cases analysed did not opt for the audience segmentation that each of the platforms would have allowed them to achieve, and specific content for a specific platform was only created in a few cases. This occurred when the communicative specificities of a platform required a different type of content. That was so for TikTok and YouTube.

For fashion influencers, advertising content accounted for more than 30 per cent of total content, whereas for a sports star like James Rodríguez, it accounted for 18 per cent, above the desirable limit and potentially leading to audience saturation.

The observed players exhibited a behaviour that is now common among sports stars: they combined mostly sports-related posts – showing themselves while performing training exercises, during matches or celebrating goals or victories with their teammates – with more personal, promotional and advertising-related messages. With audiences in their millions, promotional content allows athletes to give visibility to their own brands and products, especially sports clothes and footwear, and, as in the case of Cristiano Ronaldo, to hotels and colognes too.

Fashion Instagrammers follow a very similar dynamic. More than anyone else, they represent the paradigm of beauty and body worship. Through their image, they ensure that any brand of their own or a third party that they are able to promote becomes the one to which their legions of followers aspire. The smartphone screen becomes the mirror in which everyone looks, seeing a reflected image that many want to identify as their own.

In future works, we will address a number of challenges relating to cross-pollination on social media. One of them is to check whether this systemic strategy is implemented by large organisations, as opposed to the personal accounts of famous people or celebrities. The other challenge we have set ourselves is to create an analysis methodology, complemented by software that allows cross-pollination in the digital presences of an organisation, personality or brand to be analysed.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain for the CSO2015-69289-R project and the predoctoral grant BES-2016-078978 associated with it.

Note

- 1 All quotes by Capra have been translated from Spanish.

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