Professional Athletes' Visual Self-Presentation Strategies: An Investigation on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine how professional athletes in different branches perform their visual self-presentation on Instagram, a social media platform. Embedded design, one of the mixed methods, examined 24 professional athletes. To create the group for study in this research, including football, basketball, tennis and track and field athletes, we used criterion sampling, a purposeful sampling method. Specifically, a total of 5030 posted photos and 854 videos were analysed. In the study, we used thematic coding to conduct content analysis by the subject and purpose of the research (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) as well as open coding. Chi-squared was calculated to measure gender differences. Most of the athletes' shared contents and their likes and comments fell under the theme of business life, followed by personal life content. The professional athletes showed differences according to gender and sport in the themes of what they posted on Instagram. The men posted much more actively than the women. Athletes in individual sports also posted less content than team sport athletes. It was striking how little content these professional athletes, especially women and individual athletes, produced about their fans. This research can contribute to the diversification of research on the brand development and strengthening strategies of athletes in the Instagram application and to better understand the use of Instagram by professional athletes. It can also provide a perspective on Instagram usage strategies for professional athletes and athletes with high-performance potential.

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INTRODUCTION

The sports industry has a highly dynamic structure, consisting of many closely related dimensions (Eschenfelder & Li, 2007) that continue to evolve as societies change. Today, the sports industry has evolved to incorporate Internet-based new media technologies and spreads via digital globalisation, playing a decisive role in societies. New media technologies that enable bidirectional communication significantly affect the production, distribution, and consumption of professional sports (Dart, 2014).

While professional sports have affected the masses socially and culturally, they have gained a feature that has increased competition between individuals and organizations for economic power. Professional sports organizations now command worldwide fan bases and revenues, broadcasting rights, and commercial resources (licensed product sales, sponsorship, etc.) that provide decisive advantages. Undoubtedly, these advantages to organizations are closely related to the performance of the professional athletes on their teams. However, the athlete's name and image recognition also provide critical competitive advantages. Sports organizations work with athletes on recognition, positive brand image, and superior performance to attract large masses (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Professional athletes exhibit the peak technical and tactical skills of their chosen sports, but in addition to representing their professional leagues, they also represent their brands (Babiak et al., 2012). Large audiences follow these athletes closely and get to know them better. Aware of this inclination, professional athletes present themselves to society by exhibiting socially and culturally approved behaviors to control their general impressions. Social media tools offer important opportunities for professional athletes to express themselves online (Sanderson, 2011). These tools, especially social networking sites, and application, attract large masses in a concise time and strengthen interpersonal relations. In this respect, social media tools have an essential place and play strong supporting roles in professional athletes' career development.

Instagram, particularly among social media platforms, maintains a strong position and increases its number of participants daily by providing interpersonal and intercultural socialisation. Professional athletes have increasingly used Instagram to display curated images, interact with their fans, and strengthen their brands. In this respect, Instagram can help us understand the visual self-presentation strategies of professional athletes. This research can contribute to the diversification of research on the brand development and

strengthening strategies of athletes in the Instagram application and to better understand the use of Instagram by professional athletes.

Social Media in Sports

Social media is a field of study given great importance by academics and practitioners, most importantly because nearly half of the world's population uses social media (We Are Social, 2020). Individuals today spend an average of more than 145 minutes a day on social media platforms (Tankovska, 2021). Social media is an important tool in organizational and individual branding efforts because of its cost advantage as well as the rich content it offers (Filo et al., 2015; Shilbury et al., 2020). Indeed, these platforms have become essential parts of organizations' strategic communications (Lamirán-Palomares et al., 2019).

Social media messages from celebrated athletes for unrecognized brands have positive effects on consumers (Brison et al., 2016; Maderer et al., 2018). Achen (2017) stated that could organizations can quickly establish two-way relationships with target audiences using celebrated athletes on social media. For this reason, marketing professionals frequently use professional athletes in branding strategies; marketing activities on social media improve customer perceptions of sponsor companies (Zauner et al., 2012). However, celebrated athletes also use social media for promotional purposes (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011).

An examination of the social media literature reveals the predominance of Facebook (Leng & Chiu, 2019; Nankervis et al., 2018; Salinda Premadasa et al., 2019; Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Zapata & Ulbinaitė, 2017); Twitter (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Fan et al., 2020; Jungherr, 2016; Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019; Pegoraro, 2010; Wang, 2020; Witkemper et al., 2012; Zanini et al., 2019) or both (Achen et al., 2020; Moreau et al., 2021). One of the most apparent reasons for the most popular reason to Facebook is that these applications are historically older. However, Instagram is a unique social networking site for posting and sharing photos with the audience around you (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020), and users between the ages of 25 and 34 make up the largest share of the global Instagram audience (Statista, 2021). With this transformation, Instagram is becoming a popular platform in the sports industry because it provides easy access to the masses.

Instagram is a platform that individuals use to strategically design and display their identities like organizations (Zhou, 2017). Nearly all professional athletes now use Instagram for global communication with fans, sharing their experiences in their fields and their individual lives (Hipke & Hachtmann, 2014). Professional athletes can reach large audiences by sharing about themselves and their social environments. They create coherence between themselves and these audiences by following the trends and increasing their value (Korzynski

& Paniagua, 2016). For these reasons, this research focused on Instagram usage strategies by professional athletes.

There has been considerable research on Instagram in the field of sports focused on sports organizations (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Baena, 2019; Santomier et al., 2016; Siguencia et al., 2017; Toffoletti et al., 2019) and athletes (Arai et al., 2014; Bireline, 2014; Dumont, 2017; Green, 2016; Nankervis et al., 2018; Romney & Johnson, 2020; Thorpe, 2017), though there is short exploration of gender differences in athletes' Instagram use. A few scholars have investigated Instagram use by female athletes only (Barnett, 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). However, no long-term research has been found that specifically approaches the visual self-presentation styles of professional athletes in the Instagram application regarding approaches explicitly gender.

Visual Self-Presentation

Goffman (1978) maintained that individuals calculate their behaviors to create specific reactions and express themselves deliberately and consciously as required by their group and social status. As individuals perform to express themselves, they develop themselves according to the understanding and expectations of society (Goffman, 1978). Professional athletes attempt to sculpt their images to increase their recognition in society, likely partly because they live their professional lives in highly competitive environments. In line with these efforts, the athletes display their experiences while redefining their behaviour, particularly by visually keeping them behavior in the foreground (Bireline, 2014). In line with Goffman's (1978) assertion that we develop ourselves in alignment with societies' expectations, professional athletes consider the expectations of their industries and their societies as they display their experiences. Professional athletes perform in line with the responsibilities required by their professions. However, the masses follow them closely to track their social and personal lives as well as their performances on the field. Thus, athletes model themselves according to societal understanding and expectations, but they also influence the masses who follow them, particularly through exposure on Instagram, which creates vast opportunities for strategic branding. For instance, professional athletes are at the forefront of their physical appearance, and Instagram offers significant opportunities for them to reflect on their appearance in every aspect of their lives. This situation, which can provide critical competitive advantages (Green, 2016), also contributes to strategic branding for the athletes as they share images that reflect their performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle dimensions (Arai et al., 2014).

Male dominance in sports is steadily decreasing, and media coverage of women and men in male-dominated sports is growing increasingly similar. However, few researchers have studied athletes' self-presentations on Instagram according to gender differences (Gainor, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). In the related literature, although a limited number of researchers have examined the visual self-presentations of professional athletes on Instagram according to gender differences, we found no examination of differences in their visual self-presentation based on their chosen sports. Therefore, this study aimed to determine how professional athletes in different sports branches perform their visual self-presentation on Instagram, a social media platform.

METHODS

For the qualitative portion of this mixed-methods research, we examined the visual self-presentations of professional athletes on Instagram, a social networking site. The main problem of the study was how worldwide professional athletes portray themselves visually on Instagram, supported by the following research questions:

RQ-1: With what kind of posts do professional athletes display their brands on Instagram?

RQ-2: What is the relationship between professional athletes' posts on Instagram and their fans' likes and comments?

RQ-3: How do professional athletes' visual self-presentation strategies on Instagram differ according to gender?

Research Model

Embedded design, one of the mixed research methods, was used in this study. In the embedded design, one of the qualitative or quantitative methods is more prominent than the other (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 1999). The qualitative dimension of the research carries more weight. We focused on delving into the qualitative data as a starting point to reveal the differences behind the large volumes of qualitative data collected and then on revealing the gender differences in the data from the qualitative data. The visual self-presentation strategies of professional athletes in the Instagram application were collected with the qualitative research method. Then the quantitative analysis method was used to see the gender differences.

Study Group Selection

For research, Ethical permission was taken from Ege University Social Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Protocol No: 48-2018). To create the

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group for study in this research, including football, basketball, tennis and track and field athletes, we used criterion sampling, which is a purposeful sampling method. For the study, we applied two separate criteria to select the study group: athletes from the countries ranked in the top three in the world by international federations for each sport and the three female and male athletes who posted the most on Instagram.

Before data collection began, we first studied the Instagram accounts of all the athletes in the national teams of the countries in the top three in the world rankings to determine their suitability for the study. Then, we observed and ranked the athletes who posted the most by the criteria and selected three men and three women for each sport. The final study group consisted of 24 professional athletes (12 female and 12 male) in four sports (Table 1). We studied the Instagram posts of these athletes between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2017 for evaluation. In addition, the professional athletes examined in this study continue (Date: 01.01.2023) their professional careers and increase the number of their followers, which are millions, day by day, by producing content on their Instagram accounts.

Table 1
Sports of the Professional Athletes in the Study Group

Sport	Gender	Athletes and Their Country Codes
Football	Female	C. Lloyd (USA), L. Dallmann (DEU), J. Scott (GBR)
	Male	L. Podolski (DEU), C. Ronaldo (PRT), W. Pereira da Silva (BRA)
Basketball	Female	A. McCoughtry (USA), L. Pascua (ESP), D. Tchatchouang (FRA)
	Male	J. McGee (USA), W. Hernangomez (ESP), V. Stimac (SRB)
Track and Field	Female	E. Coburn (USA), C. Semenya (ZAF), S. Pearson (AUS)
	Male	M. Farah (GBR), M. E. Barshim (QAT), R. Guliyev (TUR)
Tennis	Female	G. Muguruza (ESP) C. Wozniacki (DNK) K. Pliskova (CZE)
	Male	R. Nadal (ESP) D. Thiem (AUT) D. Goffin (BEL)

Data Collection

Document analysis should be linked to research questions developed in the conceptual framework of a study (Edwards & Skinner, 2009). For this research, we used document analysis of the study group's electronic data posted on Instagram. To ensure the validity of the results, we studied a diverse array of materials, specifically the athletes' photos, videos, and the numbers of likes and comments on their Instagram pages.

Data Analysis

In the study, we used thematic coding to conduct content analysis by the subject and purpose of the research (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) as well as open coding. During the coding within the general content analysis framework, we added incomplete or different data

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that emerged with an inductive approach to the previously determined code list or revised old codes; we began the data analysis using preexisting codes to guide the process (Creswell & Poth, 2016) but shifted to open coding once it became necessary to add codes. Open coding, questioning, and continuous comparisons enable researchers to overcome subjectivity and bias (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), increasing the research's reliability.

For the open coding, we created codes individually, worked with two researchers to create a standard code list, and then transformed these codes into subthemes, themes, and categories. Content analysis can combine qualitative and quantitative techniques in one study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, to diversify the data analysis, we examined the data obtained from the sharing categories by chi-squared analysis in SPSS 22.0 to measure the gender differences among the athletes in the study group.

Validity and Reliability

Multiple-analyst triangulation refers to the participation of more than one researcher and more than one analyst in research (Patton, 2014). To ensure the validity of the study findings, we sought support from an expert who conducted communications research on social media. Using a pre-prepared code list increases the validity of the research analysis findings, and as noted earlier, we worked separately to code the categories and themes and then together to produce a final list. We calculated Cohen's kappa to measure the reliability between the coders. We arrived at .89 for the sharing categories and .92 for categories related to an athlete's appearance, findings that indicated excellent inter-rater reliability (McHugh, 2012). Consistency in general patterns derived from the data obtained from different sources contributes to the reliability of the findings (Patton, 2014).

RESULTS

In this study, we analyzed professional athletes' Instagram shares of photos, videos, likes, and comments. Also, we compared the posts according to the athletes' gender and their sports. Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 present the findings regarding RQ-1, 'With what kind of post do professional athletes display their brands on Instagram?' The table presents the findings according to sport and image themes.

Table 2 presents the themes and subthemes we identified through the thematic and content analysis of the study group's photos and videos within visual self-presentation. As the table shows, the main themes identified were as follows: Athlete's personal life, athlete's business life, athlete's sport, other sport or athlete, reposted fan content, pop culture, landmarks, Internet memes, and screen captures. Among the original personal life subthemes,

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we moved charity work to business life because for professional athletes who have become brands, displaying their charity efforts on social media directly affects their professional identities. However, charity work is virtuous; it is also a means for athletes to increase their recognition, reinforce the branding dimension of their professional identity, and strengthen their professional images.

Table 2
Themes and Subthemes of Professional Athletes' Instagram Postings and Content*

Categories of Postings	Content
Athlete's Personal Life	Personal content, e.g., daily routine, weather, parties, family life, hanging out with friends, celebrations
Athlete's Business Life	Business-related content, e.g., training, travelling for competition, game/meet preparation, promoting products, charity work, awards, posters, magazine and newspaper coverage, gala dinners
Athlete's Sport	Content related to the athlete's sport but not directly to the athlete, e.g., other games or athletes in their league/sport, college or minor league games of the same sport, equipment, mascots, veteran athletes
Other Sport or Athlete	Content focused on other sports, including athletes or nonathletes, e.g., coaches, general managers, owners, broadcasters, managers, masseurs, sports doctors, publishers, etc.
Fan Reposts	All posts about the fans
Pop Culture or Landmarks	Content about athletes' favourite TV shows, movies, musicians or groups, actors or actresses, politicians, famous landmarks, entrepreneurs, painters
Internet Meme or Screen Capture	Internet memes or screen captures taken from the Internet (not from Instagram) and reposted on the athlete's Instagram account

Category definitions have been created using the research of Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016)

Table 3 presents the athletes' appearance-related themes and subthemes.

Table 3
Photo and Video Content Related to Athletes' Appearances*

Themes	Content
Athletic Action	Athlete is actively engaged in a sport and dressed in athletic apparel.
Dressed but Posed	Athlete is dressed in athletic apparel but posed for the image. Athlete is not engaged in athletic activity at the time of the image.
Nonsport Setting	Athlete is dressed in nonathletic apparel and photographed/recorded in a nonathletic setting, such as at home with family.
Sexually Suggestive	Athlete is dressed provocatively or photographed/recorded in such a way as to focus solely on sexual attributes.
Combination	Multiple images of an athlete appear in the photo, such as in a collage, and the images fit more than one category above.
Out-of-Sight	The athlete does not appear in the image.

Category definitions have been created using the research of Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016)

We initially identified five themes from the photos in which athletes appeared, from following Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016). However, we added the theme out of sight to examine the number of likes and comments regarding images in which the athlete was not visible.

Table 4
Study Group Athletes' Instagram Posts (P-n), Likes (L-n), and Comments (C-n) by Sport

Theme		Football	Basketball	Track and Field	Tennis
Athlete's Personal Life	P-n	475	440	361	222
	L-n	428,940,561	2,811,751	2,056,653	6,869,232
	C-n	3,557,571	28,614	11,601	70,401
Athlete's Business Life	P-n	1,016	539	745	491
	L-n	974,109,419	4,080,491	6,706,544	21,680,834
	C-n	5,979,798	39,922	56,504	188,988
Athlete's Sport	P-n	167	99	93	88
	L-n	103,639,621	953,247	756,393	4,186,422
	C-n	641,534	7,668	4,660	26,978
Other Sport or Athlete	P-n	71	48	98	54
	L-n	37,976,279	376,389	567,179	2,180,343
	C-n	177,882	3,099	2,141	9,207
Relating to Fans	P-n	44	52	5	15
	L-n	15,291,657	577,547	24,413	789,893
	C-n	72,341	8,243	214	10,643
Pop Culture or Landmarks	P-n	91	203	91	69
	L-n	33,439,137	542,394	612,182	2,054,034
	C-n	168,904	3,388	4,142	14,032
Internet Meme/Screen Capture	P-n	65	71	150	21
	L-n	10,707,807	318,746	140,668	941,371
	C-n	75,958	4,460	1,717	7,173
TOTAL	P-n	1.929	1,452	1,543	960
	L-n	1,604,104,476	9,660,565	10,861,696	38,802,849
	C-n	10,673,988	95,393	80,984	327,422

Note: P-n: number of posts, L-n: number of likes, C-n: number of comments

As in Table 4, most of the Instagram posts of the professional athletes in this study are related to business life. For the football, track and field, and tennis stars, the least-posted content was under the fan-related theme, and the basketball players' least-posted content was on other sports or athletes. For football and basketball players, the theme with the least liked content was Internet memes and screen capture. Regarding the comments, most related to the athletes' business life content; the themes with the fewest comments were the fan-related content for football and track and field athletes, other sports and athletes in basketball and

Internet memes and screen captures for tennis players. Table 5 presents the comments, likes, and shares related to the study group athletes' postings that specifically related to their appearance by sport.

Table 5
Posts, Likes and Comments by Sport on Posts Related to the Athletes' Appearance

Theme		Football	Basketball	Track and Field	Tennis
Athletic Action	P-n	392	279	340	204
	L-n	429,744,036	2,295,875	3,559,377	8,293,165
	C-n	2,200,167	24,436	23,476	55,306
Dressed, but Posed	P-n	372	225	295	243
	L-n	268,990,777	2,062,841	2,358,064	7,450,088
	C-n	1,503,640	18,269	14,164	62,564
Nonsport Setting	P-n	571	564	411	336
	L-n	620,261,770	3,203,028	3,369,141	13,425,247
	C-n	4,809,794	29,724	25,516	122,766
Sexually Suggestive	P-n	33	14	39	33
	L-n	74,630,878	106,036	813,176	1,216,533
	C-n	590,643	1,577	3,199	16,292
Combination	P-n	259	60	77	42
	L-n	70,529,725	351,262	687,305	3,582,771
	C-n	598,799	4,501	5,611	40,613
Out of Sight	P-n	302	310	381	102
	L-n	139,947,290	1,641,523	956,633	4,835,045
	C-n	970,945	13,886	9,018	29,881
TOTAL	P-n	1,929	1,452	1,543	960
	L-n	1,604,104,476	9,660,565	10,861,696	38,802,849
	C-n	10,673,988	95,393	80,984	327,422

Table 5 indicates high Instagram user engagement, reflected as posts, likes and comments, with athletes' posted content on the themes of athletic action, dressed but posed, and nonsport settings. The most posted content was from the nonsports setting theme, and the least posted was sexually suggestive content; the nonsports content also received the most comments, with sexually suggestive content receiving the fewest.

Regarding RQ-2, 'What is the relationship between professional athletes' posts on Instagram and their fans' likes and comments?' Tables 6 present the findings for each individual athlete by sport.

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Table 6
The Number of Posts (P-N), Likes (L-N), and Comments (C-N) of the Content Produced by Professional Athlete

	Athlete's Branch	Photo			Video		
		P-n	L-n	C-n	P-n	L-n	C-n
FOOTBALL	Podolski	493	28.573.567	197.817	89	3.297.978	37.673
	Weverton	179	809.304	9.548	13	42,199	878
	Ronaldo	438	1.443.544.340	9.166.557	63	121.477,60	1.238.144
	Lloyd	193	5.293.419	16.971	28	558.780	1.777
	Dallmann	173	254.621	2.607	19	22.761	436
	Scott	235	225.719	1.526	6	4.187	54
	Total	**1.711**	**1.478.700.970**	**9.395.026**	**218**	**125.403.506**	**1.278.962**
BASKETBALL	McGee	336	4.682.306	51.147	121	1.068.099	19.319
	Hernangomez	154	1.601.353	10.092	19	138.806	3.246
	Stimac	102	443.216	2.367	18	29.082	219
	McCoughtry	276	1.172.969	5.375	99	416.964	2.739
	Pascua	160	44.712	347	10	2.039	10
	Tchatchouang	148	58.090	623	9	2.929	20
	Total	**1.176**	**8.002.646**	**69.951**	**276**	**1.657.919**	**25.553**
TRACK & FIELD	Farah	195	5.204.177	26.642	19	436.250	4.107
	Barshim	211	753.632	5.028	42	210.072	4.315
	Guliyev	111	369.030	4.854	28	49.409	540
	Coburn	220	3.772.007	10.726	45	2.703.573	15.666
	Semenya	300	237.710	3.503	33	11.638	449
	Pearson	267	402.568	3.669	72	111.630	1.485
	Total	**1.304**	**10.739.124**	**54.422**	**239**	**3.522.572**	**26.562**
TENNIS	Nadal	140	19.020.287	128.781	38	4.474.419	54.026
	Thiem	106	2.033.080	15.464	10	139.501	1.524
	Goffin	152	1.312.282	10.741	22	84.381	854
	Muguruza	165	5.078.835	55.563	27	476.828	5.086
	Wozniacki	123	4.376.794	41.104	16	337.898	3.652
	Pliskova	153	1.426.850	10.339	8	41.694	288
	Total	**839**	**33.248.128**	**261.992**	**121**	**5.554.721**	**65.430**

The Table 6 shows more photo posts by football players and video shares by basketball players than other athletes' content shares, and the football players' photo and video posts received the most likes and comments. Although basketball players posted the most videos, the numbers of likes and comments on these videos were low. In contrast, tennis players posted relatively few posts but had the second-most likes and comments on these shares. Meanwhile, the track and field posts showed high shares and like but few comments.

Regarding RQ-3, 'How do professional athletes' visual self-presentation strategies on Instagram differ according to gender?', Table 7 presents the chi-squared test results for gender differences for general content and content specifically related to athletes' appearance.

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Table 7

The Results of the Chi-square Tests for the Gender Variable Regarding the "Photo & Video Category" and the "Category of Photo & Video Related to Athlete's Appearance."

Photo&Video Category	Female		Male		X^2	d_f	P	C
	N	%	N	%				
Relating to Athlete's Personel Life	821	54,8	677	45,2	45.040	1	.000	,087
Relating to Athlete's Business Life	1196	42,9	1595	57,1	42.742	1	.000	,085
Relating to Athlete's Athlete's Sport	167	37,4	280	62,6	19.295	1	.000	,057
Other Spor tor Athlete	88	32,5	183	67,5	25.162	1	.000	,065
Relating to Fans	21	18,1	95	81,9	40.552	1	.000	,083
Pop Culture or Landmark-Focused Photos/Videos	286	63,0	168	37,0	48.420	1	.000	,090
Internet meme/Screen Capture	206	67,1	101	32,9	50.780	1	.000	,093

Category of Photo& Video Related to the Athlete's Appearance	Female		Male		X^2	d_f	P	C
	N	%	N	%				
Athletic Action	520	42,8	695	57,2	12.623	1	.000	,046
Dressed, but Posed	496	43,7	639	56,3	7.439	1	.000	,036
Nonsport Setting	933	49,6	949	50,4	5.585	1	.010	,031
Sexually Suggestive	48	40,3	71	59,7	2.384	1	.020	,073
Combination	167	38,1	271	61,9	16.081	1	.000	,052
Out-of-Sight	621	56,7	474	43,3	47.490	1	.000	,089

All sharing categories showed significant statistical differences according to the athletes' genders. Table 7 shows that professional female athletes produced more content than men related to their personal lives, pop culture and landmarks and Internet memes, and screen captures. In contrast, the men shared more posts than the women related to their business lives, own sport, other sports or athletes, and fan-related content.

Table 7 also indicates significant differences by gender in the professional athletes' appearance-related content. Specifically, the men posted more content in all appearance categories, and the women posted the most under the out of sight theme. Overall, except for the "out-of-sight" category, across categories and sports and within the subtheme of content related to appearance, the professional male athletes we studied here produced more Instagram content than the professional female athletes.

DISCUSSION

Professional athletes have the skills to demonstrate their profession at the highest level. In today's globalized structure, they desire to present their superior abilities and other characteristics to the masses through the proper channels in the right areas. Professional athletes, including those we studied here, follow many strategies regarding the use of social media (Sanderson, 2011), including diverse approaches to their visual self-presentation on Instagram.

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Fans follow professional athletes with great interest and curiosity. The first research question in this research is ''With what kind of posts do professional athletes display their personal brands on Instagram?'' Song et al. (2018) observed that Instagram users shared images of their personal lives and close social circles, whereas in our study, the professional athletes' posted Instagram content related primarily to their business and personal lives (Table 4). These individuals have high recognition worldwide, and their social media presence and visibility are important for their profession. Because they are brands, also it is rather essential for the economic value of their performances. The fact that their business and personal life posts received more likes and comments than did content from the other themes supports this importance.

Professional athletes' control over their self-presentation has increased with social media (Song et al., 2018), and the athletes we studied here show high Instagram awareness. Although most of the athletes posted large amounts of business-related content, it was noteworthy that they posted the least content related to their fans; the fact that professional athletes posted very little fan-themed content reveals that they are extremely selective in this regard. Goffman (1978) argued that when individuals realize they do not exhibit a self that conforms to ideal standards, they sometimes attempt to hide this. Therefore, in professional team sports, the fact that athletes play for different teams throughout their careers might cause them to limit their fan-themed content. However, we think that athletes in individual sports should produce more fan-themed content for personal brand development.

The fact that most of the professional athletes' posted Instagram content was in the category of nonsports settings indicates their desire to present features of themselves that fans might not easily see (Table 5). Watched by tens of thousands of eyes and hundreds of cameras on the field, professional athletes return to their worlds after each competition, and Instagram allows athletes to present their desired features by reflecting their nonsports lives to their target audiences to support their brands. As stated by Goffman (1978), this situation arises from the fact that individuals seek to present different selves in their daily lives according to the requirements of the environment.

In the content related to the athletes' appearances, they least often shared material under the sexually suggestive theme. This might have been because the athletes we included in our study were at the top in their sports in the world rankings, and they might, therefore, have preferred to post only sports-related and socially approved content; these findings might have been different for athletes who were lower in the rankings. This situation is our possible explanation, and it deserves additional research to confirm or dismiss the hypothesis. Despite

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the few sexually suggestive posts, the high number of likes of these relatively rare posts reflects that they do command attention from followers. However, it is quite striking that there were very few comments regarding these posts. This shows that followers hesitate to comment on this theme. The athletes' athletic bodies' presentation in Instagram posts should make to encourage them to respond to the fans' comments and produce more posts like these.

The second research question in this research ''What is the relationship between professional athletes' post on Instagram and their fans' likes and comments? By sport types, the professional football players in this study produced posts the most, followed by the athletes in track and field, basketball, and tennis (Table 6). The high numbers of football players' posts and likes reflect that football has the largest fan base (Biscaia et al., 2016) and is the most-watched sport worldwide (Barnfield, 2013). However, the fact that tennis players received the most likes and comments about their posts after football players indicates that tennis players attract great attention from their followers, revealing the popularity of the sport. This might be because of international tennis organizations' extremely effective use of social media platforms for branding and marketing (Thompson et al., 2018).

The third research question in this research is ''How do professional athletes' visual self-presentation strategies on Instagram differ according to gender?'' Our finding that male athletes posted more than female athletes (Table 7) did not support the findings by Smith and Sanderson (2015), although our finding that the women posted more about their personal lives than the men supported Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016). Sun (2008) stated that women enjoy and value different roles, such as motherhood versus professional careers, and they attempt to balance the different aspects of their lives. Although professional sports offer prominent roles for women, many different roles (e.g., mother, wife, homemaker, etc.) and related responsibilities shape their social lives (Sen, 2020). This could be why women share more content on their personal lives.

The fact that men shared more appearance-related content than did women could reflect their desire to be more prominent with their athletic appearance. Although it is consistent with Gainor's (2017) work that the female and male athletes here posted similar amounts of nonsports content, our findings differed from Gainor's in that the men in this study posted more nonsport content.

Social norms could meanwhile explain why the female athletes we studied posted less sexually suggestive content in the materials related specifically to athlete's appearance. Kane et al. (2013) stated that elite female athletes reflect femininity for male audiences in sports media; the fact that media frequently includes such features even along with women's success

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as athletes could be the reason for the low number of posts with sexually suggestive content by female athletes. Moreover, the athletes in our research are the best in the world in their sports, and they might not want their target audiences to focus on any aspects other than their athletic success.

Professional athletes have the most important place in the sports field. However, this is not enough. As stated by Aitchison (2007), the sports field is produced by the fans and many stakeholders in the sports system, as well as the athletes. Therefore, the sports field is open to the influence of these other factors. Fans are as important and determining factors in the field of sports as athletes. Therefore, female athletes, in particular, need to interact with fans by producing more content about them.

That professional female athletes share more than professional male athletes on the theme "Out-of-sight" differs from the research results of Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016). This suggests that the female athletes in our study attach importance to sharing many different aspects of their daily lives on Instagram.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we investigated how professional athletes at the top of their sports in world rankings use Instagram to support their professional careers and personal brands. Although these athletes performed their visual self-presentations on many different themes, they mainly shared posts about their business and personal lives, and the men posted much more actively than the women. Athletes in individual sports also posted less content than did team sport athletes, and it was striking how little content these professional athletes, especially women (Table 7) and individual athletes (Table 4), produced about their fans.

The fact that football players were the most content-producing athletes on Instagram and that their posts had more likes and comments than the posts of other athletes reflect that football is the most popular sport on today's Instagram. Professional athletes who have become brands in sports fields should continue to strengthen their brands in nonsports fields, and Instagram makes great contributions to professional athletes in terms of brand strengthening. Because, in this study, it is seen that every post made by professional athletes receives many likes and comments. More diverse research on social media brand development and strengthening strategies of professional athletes can provide significant contributions.

The research focused only on professional athletes who are good at sports and the most share on Instagram. In line with the results that we obtained here, future findings could increase the effectiveness of social media policies and related training programmes for

athletes. Moreover, in addition to professional athletes, research on social media usage strategies could assist athletes with high-performance potential, and future examinations of content that sports fans frequently like and comment on will contribute to refining future social media strategies. In future research, qualitative research methods can be suggested to gain an in-depth understanding of the causes of social media use in professional athletes' careers for questions. In addition, the same research can be studied again with different athletes.

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Authors' contributions

The first author who contributed to this research carried out the conceptualization and design of the study. The first author also carried out the data collection and analysis, as well as the writing of the original draft. The second author contributed to consist of the validation of the methodology governing this study, the supervision and critical reviewing of the original draft, as well as the approval of the final draft.

Declaration of conflict interest

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

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