



FASHION, DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL CONTEXT: CROATIAN BRANDS BETWEEN INSTAGRAM AND GLOBAL SYSTEM

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Abstract: Purpose: *This paper examines how Croatian fashion brands employ Instagram as a communication tool to build identity and visibility within the global fashion system, with particular attention to how digital communication can enhance recognition despite the structural constraints of semi-peripheral markets.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *The study applies a mixed content analysis that combines quantitative engagement metrics (likes, comments, views) with qualitative interpretation of visual and narrative strategies. A sample of posts from three brands—IZAKOVA, KLISAB, and eNVy room—was analyzed for the period January–March 2025, following the typology of Russmann and Svensson (2016) and the visual categories of Kusumasondjaja (2019).*

Findings: *Results indicate that posts combining aesthetic appeal with personal storytelling and celebrity collaborations achieve the highest levels of engagement, whereas purely promotional content attracts less interest. IZAKOVA achieved the highest average engagement, KLISAB distinguishes itself through artistic campaigns, and eNVy room builds visibility through luxury aesthetics and international recognition.*

Originality: *By integrating sociological theories of fashion with communication studies, the paper contributes to understanding Instagram as both a branding tool and a cultural arena. It highlights how brands from semi-peripheral contexts seek global visibility while facing systemic limitations in production and distribution.*

Keywords: *fashion communication, Instagram, digital branding, Croatian fashion brands, sociology of fashion, world-systems theory*

1. Introduction

The development of social media, particularly Instagram, has significantly transformed the ways in which fashion brands communicate with their audiences (Phua, Jin and Kim, 2017; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). As a predominantly visual social network, Instagram enables brands to construct identity, create recognizable narratives, and build interactive relationships with consumers (Marwick, 2015;

Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2017). Key elements in this process include visual attractiveness, emotionally driven aesthetics, and the application of storytelling, all of which contribute substantially to the formation of an engaged community of users (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Escalas, 2004). Research further confirms that visual narratives and telepresence increase users' emotional connection with a brand (Lim and Childs, 2020), while the differences in the strategies of luxury and fast fashion brands on Instagram are reflected in distinct forms of visual aesthetics (Yoo, 2023). Emotional branding in fashion, particularly when combined with storytelling, plays a crucial role in strengthening consumer loyalty and engagement (Kim and Sullivan, 2019). User engagement is additionally shaped by social and cultural factors, which means that fashion communication on Instagram is necessarily linked to intimate and personalized portrayals of the brand (Simatzkin-Ohana and Frosh, 2022), as well as to patterns of social participation in the digital sphere (Naeem and Ozuem, 2021).

In the global context, the fashion industry represents one of the domains in which communicational, economic, and cultural processes intersect, with digital platforms further accelerating these transformations. Croatian fashion brands operate under conditions of limited resources and a peripheral position within the world-system of fashion (Wallerstein, 1974), which creates challenges in terms of visibility, distribution, and sustainability. Fashion can therefore be understood not only as an economic activity but also as a cultural and social phenomenon connected to consumption, identity, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Lipovetsky, 2002). Existing research on fashion is often focused on global fashion centers, while the analysis of local markets and their digital practices remains underrepresented. This paper analyzes the content of Instagram profiles of selected Croatian fashion brands, with an emphasis on types of posts, levels of audience engagement, and communication strategies. The study focuses on the visual and textual dimensions of posts and their impact on user interaction and audience engagement. The study seeks to answer how Croatian fashion brands use Instagram to build identity and recognition, and to what extent digital communication can mitigate the structural constraints of their peripheral position within the global fashion industry. The aim of the research is to analyze communication strategies and types of content that achieve the highest audience engagement, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the relationship between digital branding and the social context of fashion.

Although a growing body of research examines fashion brands on Instagram, digital branding strategies, and social media engagement, most studies focus on global luxury brands and large fashion markets, while smaller markets and semi-peripheral fashion industries remain insufficiently explored (Kim & Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016; Kusumasondjaja, 2019; Tafesse & Wood, 2021; Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2024). Research on fashion brands from smaller markets and semi-peripheral countries remains limited, particularly in the context of digital communication and brand positioning on Instagram. Therefore, this study contributes to the existing literature by analyzing Croatian fashion brands and their communication strategies on Instagram, combining communication, sociological, and digital branding perspectives, and placing the analysis within the broader context of the global fashion system.

2 Theoretical and conceptual background

Fashion is examined in the literature through communicational, cultural, and social aspects. On the communicational level, clothing and fashion brands act as means of symbolic expression that convey values and identities and shape social relations (Kawabata and Niwa, 1989; Castaldo Lundén, 2020; Rosenfeld and Plax, 1977). Social networks have generally transformed the way communication with audiences takes place, as they enable direct interaction without the mediation of traditional media. More recent studies emphasize that digital platforms, particularly Instagram, allow brands to develop a recognizable identity and establish closer relationships with consumers through visual messages,

narratives, and storytelling (Vázquez-Atochero and Romero-Sanz, 2025). Digital platforms, especially Instagram, have accelerated these processes by enabling immediate and visually rich interaction with audiences (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Escalas, 2004). Fashion thus becomes a form of branding that transcends mere product promotion and includes the creation of a desired lifestyle (Pérez del Castillo, Díaz Soloaga and McColl, 2020). In the digital environment, branding is increasingly based on symbolic value, visual identity, and storytelling rather than purely informational communication. Social media platforms enable brands to construct identity, lifestyle, and symbolic meaning through visual communication and narratives. Digital branding, therefore, involves not only product promotion but also identity construction and symbolic positioning in the digital environment (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Entwistle, 2015; Kawamura, 2018). Instagram, as a highly visual platform, is particularly suitable for fashion branding because it allows brands to communicate aesthetics, values, and lifestyle through images, videos, and narratives, which significantly influences audience engagement and brand perception (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2017; Lim and Childs, 2020; Yoo, 2023).

Visual communication functions as a bridge between the product and its broader cultural meaning, whereby the audience does not merely purchase clothing items but also the narratives that accompany them (Lim and Childs, 2020; Cheung and Choi, 2022). A more recent study confirms that post design, such as image composition, colors, and emotional tone, has a strong influence on user engagement (Gao et al., 2025). As Joy et al. (2012) highlight, brands are increasingly incorporating sustainability and ethical values into their communication strategies, seeking to respond to consumer expectations in the digital environment. Research shows that communicating sustainability through Instagram can foster positive dialogue and audience engagement. Furthermore, fast fashion posts that employ aesthetic innovation and emotional narratives often achieve higher engagement than traditional promotional posts (Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2024).

In sociological theory, fashion has long been understood as a means of both differentiation and integration (Entwistle, 2015; Kawamura, 2018). Simmel (1957) emphasizes the dual nature of fashion: it connects the individual to the group while simultaneously differentiating them from others. Veblen (1992) explains fashion through the concept of conspicuous consumption, whereby clothing becomes a symbol of social status and power. Barthes (1983), in his semiotic approach, defines fashion as a system of signs and a means of nonverbal communication, while Bourdieu (1984) underscores that clothing choices are linked to cultural capital and the reproduction of social differences.

At the global level, Wallerstein's world-systems theory (1974) positions countries such as Croatia within the semi-periphery, characterized by creativity in design but dependent on dominant centers for production and distribution. Lipovetsky (2002) emphasizes that in postmodern society, fashion becomes an instrument of hyper-consumption and individualization, while the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) points to the manipulative nature of consumer culture and the creation of false needs.

Contemporary research on digital fashion builds upon these classical theories. Yoo (2023) demonstrates that luxury and fast fashion brands employ different visual strategies to increase engagement on Instagram. Cruz et al. (2024) confirm the importance of influencers' content characteristics (sentiment in captions, text length, engagement in comments) for the success of fashion posts. Research also highlights the role of user-generated content (UGC) and two-way interaction in strengthening the relationship between brands and audiences (Naeem et al., 2025). Recent research emphasizes that Instagram is not only a communication channel but also a platform for brand identity construction and symbolic positioning. Fashion brands use Instagram to create brand narratives, connect with audiences, and position themselves within specific lifestyle and cultural contexts. Influencer collaborations, storytelling, and visual aesthetics play a crucial role in this process, as they increase engagement and strengthen brand identity in the digital environment (Naeem and Ozuem, 2021; Kusumasondjaja, 2019;

Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2025; Kanaveedu and Kalapurackal, 2024). This indicates that digital fashion communication should be understood not only as marketing communication but also as a cultural and social practice. Fashion can therefore be understood as a space where symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), global centers of power (Wallerstein, 1974), the dynamics of consumption (Lipovetsky, 2002), and ideological control (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) intersect. In the digital era, fashion simultaneously serves as a means of constructing identity and narrative (Escalas, 2004; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2012), as well as reproducing social and economic inequalities (Wallerstein, 1974; Crane, 2012; Kawamura, 2018). The combination of communication and sociological perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of fashion: digital platforms create opportunities for the global visibility of peripheral brands but do not eliminate the constraints arising from their position within the world-system. Based on the reviewed literature, this study combines sociological theories of fashion (Simmel, Veblen, Bourdieu), theories of consumer culture and branding, and research on digital branding and social media communication. Fashion is understood as a system of symbolic communication and social differentiation, while Instagram is observed as a platform for digital branding, identity construction, and audience engagement. The research therefore connects sociological theories of fashion with communication and digital branding perspectives in order to analyze how Croatian fashion brands use Instagram to construct identity, visibility, and symbolic value within the global fashion system.

3 Methodology

The research was conducted using content analysis, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, with the aim of identifying the communication strategies of Croatian fashion brands on Instagram and determining patterns of audience engagement. The sample consists of posts from three brands - IZAKOVA, eNVy room, and KLISAB - which stand out for their continuous presence in the fashion scene and their active engagement on social media. The brands were selected using purposive sampling, as they represent recognizable Croatian fashion brands with active Instagram profiles but differ in visual identity, communication style, audience size, and market positioning, which enables a comparative analysis of different digital communication strategies within the same national context. The analysis encompassed all publicly available posts published during the period from January 1 to March 31, 2025. The selected three-month period ensured comparability across all analyzed profiles and enabled the observation of communication continuity and posting dynamics within the same time frame. In total, 183 posts were analyzed: 64 posts from IZAKOVA, 73 posts from KLISAB, and 46 posts from eNVy room. The unit of analysis consisted of individual posts (photographs, videos, carousel posts, and Reels formats). For each post, the following variables were recorded: type (promotional, collection presentation, campaign, storytelling content), tone of communication in the caption, visual elements and composition used, as well as audience engagement measured through the number of likes, comments, and views. Posts were additionally categorized according to the presence of celebrities or public figures, collaborations with other brands or media, and the narrative structure of the post (informational, promotional, or storytelling content). Comments were analyzed according to their type (emoji comments, short emotional reactions, and comments with intrinsic value) in order to assess the level of audience interaction and engagement quality. The analysis was based on the typology developed by Russmann and Svensson (2016), which classifies Instagram communication into four clusters (as adapted by Loureiro, Serra, and Guerreiro, 2018): perception (perspective, broadcasting, and mobilization), image management (personalization, privatization, and the presence of celebrities), integration (hybridity, content sharing, and references to campaigns), and interactivity (content and tone of comments and reciprocity of communication). Additionally, following Kusumasondjaja

(2019), the visual elements of the posts were analyzed and classified into four categories: expressive (dynamic and complex compositions), multimedia (a combination of images and videos), classical (balanced and neutral), and single (solely an image or a video). The collected data were processed using descriptive statistics (frequency of posts, average number of likes, comments, and views) and were complemented by qualitative interpretation of communication strategies, with the aim of identifying which types of posts generate the highest audience engagement and how visual and narrative elements contribute to the construction of brand identity. This approach represents a mixed content analysis, combining quantitative engagement metrics with qualitative interpretation of visual and narrative communication strategies in order to measure engagement patterns and better understand brand identity construction on Instagram.

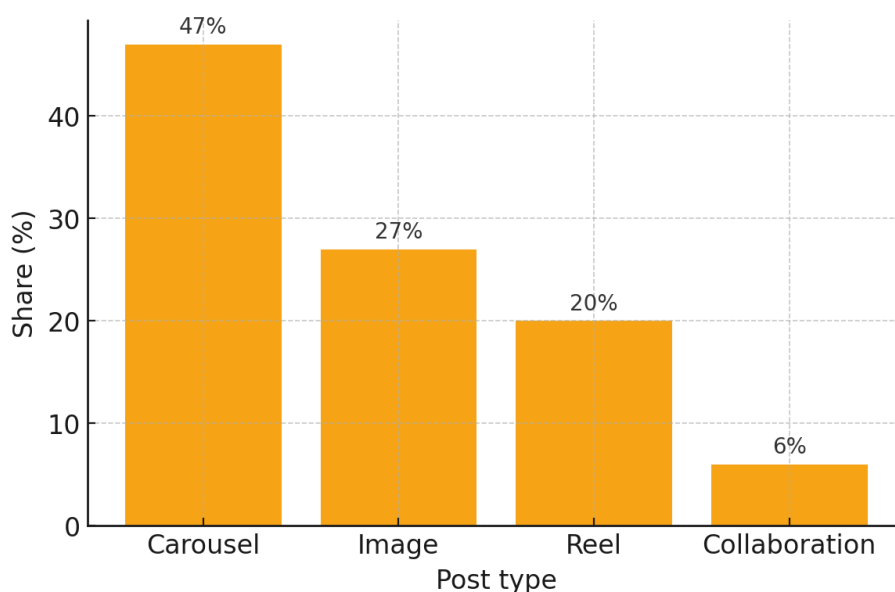
4 Results

This section presents the results of the Instagram content analysis for the three Croatian fashion brands IZAKOVA, KLISAB, and eNVy room. The results include posting frequency, post formats, engagement indicators, top-performing posts, and comparative engagement metrics across brands. The results are presented separately for each brand, followed by a comparative analysis.

4.1 IZAKOVA

At the beginning of the research period (January 1, 2025), the IZAKOVA brand profile had approximately 437,000 followers, while by the end of the period (March 31, 2025) the number had decreased to 425,000, indicating a decline of about 12,000 followers. Over the course of three months, a total of 64 posts were published (an average of 0.77 posts per day). The most frequent format was carousel posts (47%), followed by images (27%), Reels (20%), and collaboration posts (6%) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Post types on IZAKOVA Instagram profile (Jan–Mar 2025)



The posts with the highest engagement were consistently linked to the personal narrative of the founder, Izabel Kovačić, often combined with the presentation of the brand's clothing items. In January 2025, the highest engagement was achieved by a carousel post (18,185 likes and 56 comments)

that combined personal motifs from her private life with the display of the collection. In February 2025, the most successful post was an eight-photo carousel combining brand items with scenes from the founder's personal life (9,997 likes and 36 comments). In March 2025, the highest engagement was generated by a carousel post featuring 19 photographs of the new ski collection "IZK ski fits'25" (9,794 likes and 36 comments) (see Table 1). Most of the top-performing posts were carousel posts that combined product presentation with personal or lifestyle content, and these posts recorded higher engagement than standard product posts.

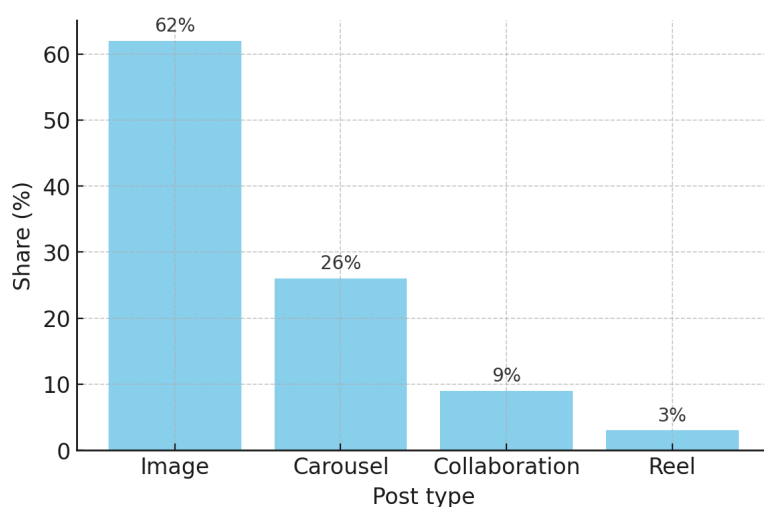
Table 1. Top-performing posts on IZAKOVA Instagram profile (Jan–Mar 2025)

Month	Post type & content description	Likes	Comments
January 2025	Carousel; personal narrative + brand collection	18,185	56
February 2025	Carousel (8 photos); brand items + private life scenes	9,997	36
March 2025	Carousel (19 photos); ski collection "IZK ski fits'25"	9,794	36

4.2 KLISAB

At the beginning of the research period (January 1, 2025), the KLISAB brand profile had approximately 18,100 followers, while by the end of the period (March 31, 2025) the number had increased to around 18,300, representing a growth of about 200 followers. During the three months, a total of 73 posts were published (an average of 1.23 posts per day). The most frequent format was images (62%), followed by carousel posts (26%), collaboration posts (9%), and Reels (3%) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Post types on KLISAB Instagram profile (Jan–Mar 2025)



The posts with the highest engagement for the KLISAB brand varied in terms of content type and collaborations. In January 2025, the most notable response was generated by a carousel post with

two photographs created in collaboration with the lifestyle magazine Journal.hr, featuring musician and model Vlaho Arbulić (250 likes and one comment). The following month, in February, the most successful post was a Reel published on the occasion of the store's second anniversary, showcasing fashion combinations along with promotional information (180 likes, no comments). In March, the highest engagement was achieved by a carousel post produced in collaboration with Journal.hr and kukus.tv, featuring members of the trap group KUKU\$ and promoting Adidas Superstar sneakers (2,529 likes and 12 comments) (see Table 2). The top-performing posts were frequently associated with collaborations and campaign-related content, and these posts recorded higher engagement than standard posts.

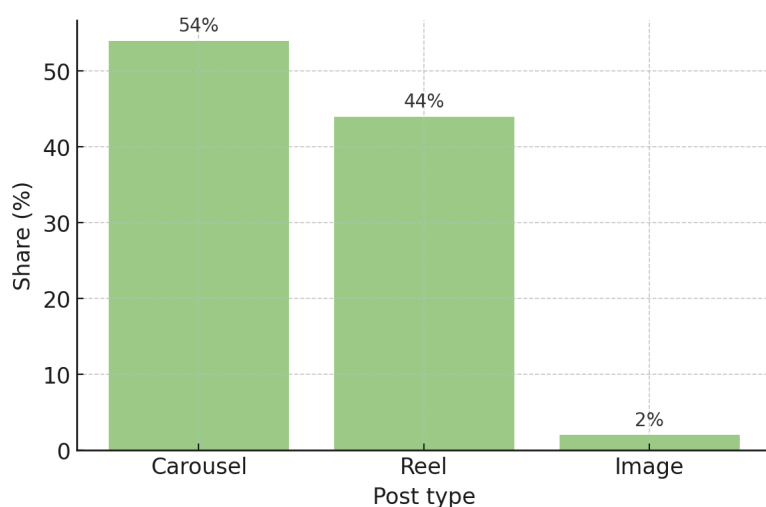
Table 2. Top 3 KLISAB posts (Jan–Mar 2025)

Month	Post type & description	Likes	Comments
January 2025	Carousel (2 photos); collaboration with Journal.hr, featuring Vlaho Arbulić	250	1
February 2025	Reel; 2nd anniversary of store opening, includes outfits and promotional information	180	0
March 2025	Carousel (9 photos); collaboration with Journal.hr and kukus.tv, Adidas promotion	2,529	12

4.3 eNVy room

At the beginning of the research period (January 1, 2025), the eNVy room brand profile had approximately 54,000 followers, while by the end of the period (March 31, 2025) this number had increased to around 56,000, representing a growth of about 2,000 followers. During the three months, a total of 46 posts were published (an average of 0.51 posts per day). The most frequent format was carousel posts (54%), followed by Reels (44%), while images were very rare (2%) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Post types on eNVy room Instagram profile (Jan–Mar 2025)



The posts with the highest engagement were linked to key events and narratives that combined aesthetic value with emotional appeal. In January 2025, the most engaging post was a Reel showcasing the

Bridal Collection 2025, presented through a sequence of rapidly changing images of wedding dresses (210 likes and 11 comments). In February, the most successful post was a carousel featuring a new wedding dress with detachable sleeves, professionally photographed in a bright and elegant aesthetic (192 likes, no comments). In March 2025, the highest engagement was achieved by a carousel post in which young actress Lara Nekić wore an eNVy room gown at the Academy Awards. The post was accompanied by a narrative that traced the process from sketch to final design, resulting in 1,271 likes and 13 comments (see Table 3). Higher engagement levels were recorded for posts related to major events, collaborations, and posts featuring public figures.

Table 3. Top 3 eNVy room posts (Jan–Mar 2025)

Month	Post type & description	Likes	Comments
January 2025	Reel; Bridal collection 2025, fast-changing sequence of wedding dresses	210	11
February 2025	Carousel; new wedding dress with detachable sleeves, professional photoshoot	192	0
March 2025	Carousel; actress Lara Nekić wearing eNVy room dress at the Oscars, including sketches and final design	1,271	13

4.4 Comparative analysis of brands

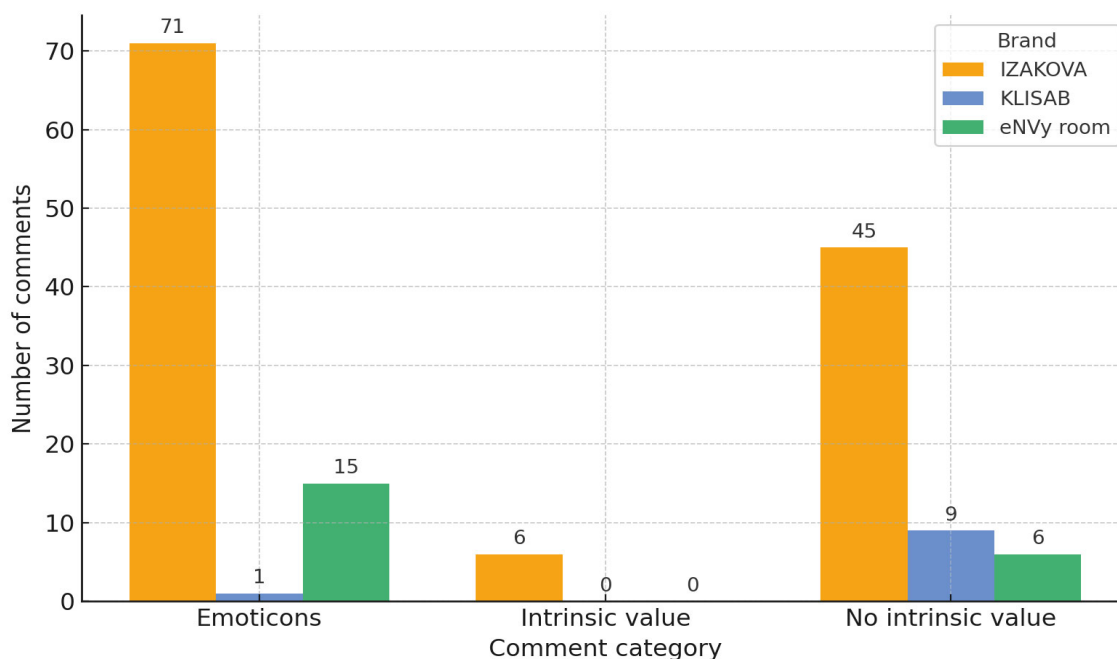
The comparative analysis revealed differences among the three brands in posting activity, engagement levels, and the impact of collaborations and post types on audience engagement. According to quantitative indicators (see Table 4), the IZAKOVA profile achieved substantially the highest average number of likes (2,215) and Reel views (54,068), while eNVy room led in the average number of comments (9). KLISAB, although the most active in terms of posting frequency, recorded considerably lower levels of audience engagement.

Table 4. Average engagement metrics (likes, comments, and Reel views) across brands

Brand	Likes	Comments	Reel views
IZAKOVA	2,215	8	54,068
KLISAB	196	4	24,542
eNVy room	562	9	25,118

The structure of comments further confirms the differences among the brands (see Figure 4). IZAKOVA receives the highest number of comments consisting of emojis and remarks without intrinsic value, indicating predominantly affective forms of audience interaction. eNVy room shows a somewhat greater presence of comments expressing emotional support, while substantive comments are less frequent. KLISAB, on the other hand, has the lowest number of comments overall, with only a negligible share containing intrinsic value.

Figure 4. User comments on Instagram posts



The data show that posts featuring celebrities achieve significantly more likes on average than those without them (see Table 5). On the IZAKOVA profile, such posts almost regularly include the founder, Izabel Kovačić, along with other well-known public figures, while KLISAB collaborates with musicians and public personalities from the Croatian scene. For eNVy room, the posts that resonate most strongly feature famous actresses wearing their gowns at prestigious events, such as the Academy Awards.

Table 5. Posts with and without celebrity involvement

Brand	Posts with celebrities	Avg. likes (with)	Posts without celebrities	Avg. likes (without)
IZAKOVA	19	3,804	45	1,209
KLISAB	7	627	66	131
eNVy room	5	598	41	192

At the aesthetic level, all three brands use a combination of expressive and classical posts, but with different effects on engagement (see Table 6). IZAKOVA and eNVy room achieve higher numbers of likes on expressive posts, which link fashion with personal stories or significant social events. KLISAB, by contrast, records higher engagement with classical posts, which is partly the result of its focus on specific collections with a clearly defined visual identity. Overall, higher engagement across all three brands was most frequently recorded for carousel posts, collaborations, and posts connected to public figures or significant events. In addition, the results show that the three brands differ in posting frequency, visual strategies, and engagement levels. IZAKOVA achieved the highest engagement levels, KLISAB showed the highest posting frequency but lower engagement, while eNVy room achieved

higher engagement in posts related to events and public figures. The comparative analysis indicates that engagement is influenced by post format, collaborations, and the presence of public figures across all analyzed brands.

Table 6. Expressive vs. classical posts

Brand	Post type	Number of posts	Avg. likes
IZAKOVA	Expressive	14	2,708
IZAKOVA	Classical	50	1,546
KLISAB	Expressive	42	192
KLISAB	Classical	31	212
eNVy room	Expressive	34	747
eNVy room	Classical	12	447

5 Discussion

The content analysis revealed that Croatian fashion brands IZAKOVA, KLISAB, and eNVy room employ different communication strategies on Instagram, distinguishing themselves by style and aesthetic expression while sharing a pronounced emphasis on visual identity and profile consistency. These findings confirm that Instagram functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a platform for brand storytelling, identity construction, and audience engagement. Similar conclusions have been reached in studies of fashion brands and luxury brands on Instagram, where visual aesthetics, storytelling, and influencer collaborations play a crucial role in brand communication and audience engagement (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017). The findings are consistent with previous research showing that fashion brands primarily use Instagram for visual storytelling, brand identity construction, and audience engagement rather than direct product promotion (Lim & Childs, 2020; Loureiro et al., 2019; Naeem & Ozuem, 2021; Yoo, 2023).

Similar patterns of Instagram communication have been observed in studies of fashion and luxury brands in other countries. Research on Italian, French, and Korean fashion brands shows that Instagram communication is primarily based on visual storytelling, influencer collaborations, and the construction of brand lifestyle and identity rather than direct product promotion (Kim & Ko, 2012; Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Studies of luxury fashion brands show that social media communication primarily focuses on symbolic value, visual aesthetics, brand storytelling, and lifestyle representation rather than direct product promotion (Kim & Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016; Hudders et al., 2021; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). This is consistent with the findings of this research on Croatian fashion brands. Unlike global luxury brands with large marketing budgets, Croatian brands rely more heavily on personal branding, collaborations, and symbolic associations to achieve visibility, which reflects their position in a smaller and semi-peripheral market (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2015; Perez-del-Castillo et al., 2020).

The results also confirm the importance of influencer and celebrity collaborations in digital fashion communication. Previous research shows that influencer marketing plays an important role in shaping consumer behaviour, brand perception, and engagement on social media platforms. Influencers function as opinion leaders and mediators between brands and audiences, influencing brand credibility, purchase

intentions, and engagement levels (Hudders et al., 2021; Kanaveedu and Kalapurackal, 2024). The findings of this study are consistent with these results, as posts featuring public figures and collaborations consistently achieved higher engagement across all analyzed brands. The most significant finding of this research is that Instagram posts combining aesthetic appeal with personal narratives and celebrity collaborations achieve the highest levels of audience engagement. This finding is consistent with studies on fashion brands on Instagram, which show that posts that combine storytelling, visual aesthetics, and emotional content generate higher engagement than purely promotional content (Kusumasondjaja, 2019; Lim & Childs, 2020; Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2025). This result confirms Escalas's (2004) concept of narrative processing, according to which personal and emotionally charged stories strengthen consumers' connection with a brand. Similarly, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) emphasize the credibility and persuasive power of online celebrities, which helps explain why posts featuring public figures (for instance, Izabel Kovačić for IZAKOVA or Lara Nekić wearing an eNVy room gown at the Academy Awards) attract the greatest user attention. Similar patterns have been observed in studies of fashion brands in global markets, where storytelling and influencer collaborations significantly affect engagement rates and brand perception (Phua, Jin & Kim, 2017; Kim & Ko, 2012).

The analysis also highlights the specific communication strategies of each brand. IZAKOVA relies on a minimalist visual style but secures engagement by linking brand promotion with the private life of its founder. This confirms Bourdieu's (1984) thesis that fashion choices are connected to cultural capital and social positioning. KLISAB emphasizes an artistic and campaign-oriented character in its posts, often distanced from everyday contexts. Such an approach can be associated with Barthes's (1983) semiotic perspective on fashion as a system of signs, where meaning is constructed through creative visual codes. eNVy room, on the other hand, builds recognition through elegance, luxury aesthetics, and international visibility, which corresponds to Lipovetsky's (2002) interpretation of fashion as a key instrument of hyper-consumption in late modernity. These differences among brands suggest that Instagram communication strategies are closely related to brand positioning, target audience, and symbolic capital, which is consistent with research on digital branding and brand identity construction on social media platforms. An important finding also concerns the relationship between expressive and classical aesthetics. IZAKOVA and eNVy room achieve higher engagement with expressive posts, while KLISAB records better results with classical ones. Kusumasondjaja (2019) demonstrates that expressive, complex visual compositions can elicit stronger emotional reactions; however, this study shows that effectiveness also depends on the brand's identity and positioning. In the case of KLISAB, classical balance resonates more effectively with the audience, suggesting that aesthetic strategies must align with the brand's narrative. This finding supports previous research indicating that visual communication strategies on Instagram must be consistent with brand identity in order to achieve higher engagement and brand recognition.

From the perspective of world-systems theory, brands from semi-peripheral markets face structural limitations in production, distribution, and global visibility; however, digital platforms can act as a compensatory mechanism by enabling symbolic positioning and global visibility (Wallerstein, 1974; Banet-Weiser, 2012). This explains why Croatian brands, despite limited resources, manage to achieve recognition on Instagram, yet still depend on collaborations, narratives, and symbolic associations. The critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) is also relevant here: emotional storytelling and celebrity culture simultaneously create an impression of authentic connectedness while stimulating consumer desires.

The results of this study confirm that digital communication strategies in fashion cannot be reduced to mere product promotion. It is also important to emphasize that differences in engagement among brands cannot be fully explained solely by visual and narrative strategies. In the case of IZAKOVA, the founder Izabel Kovačić's personal capital plays a crucial role, as her public prominence further

increases the visibility of posts. This can be explained through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, as visibility, prestige, and social recognition function as forms of capital in fashion communication and brand positioning (Bourdieu, 1984; Entwistle, 2015; Crane, 2012). For KLISAB, despite a high posting frequency, engagement remains low, suggesting that quantity alone is insufficient without a strong narrative or a recognizable figure to attract attention. eNVy room, on the other hand, employs a strategy of associating itself with global events and celebrities, thereby building international recognition. The findings of this study demonstrate that the success of communication strategies on Instagram depends not only on the aesthetics and content of posts but also on the social capital of the actors and their position within the cultural and global context. This indicates that digital fashion communication is shaped by both communication strategies and broader social and cultural structures. In other words, Instagram posts function as symbolic practices that simultaneously convey narratives, construct aesthetics, and secure social recognition for the brand. Instagram functions as a space of symbolic positioning in which fashion brands construct identity, status, and cultural meaning through visual communication, storytelling, and social associations (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Marwick, 2015; Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022; Naeem et al., 2025). From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study can be interpreted through the concepts of symbolic capital, digital branding, and social media engagement. Instagram communication allows fashion brands to construct symbolic value through visual aesthetics, storytelling, and associations with celebrities and prestigious events. This supports the idea that fashion communication in the digital environment is not primarily informational but symbolic and identity-oriented, which is consistent with sociological theories of fashion and consumer culture (Bourdieu, 1984; Simmel, 1957; Veblen, 1992) as well as with research on digital branding and social media communication, which emphasizes brand storytelling, visual identity, and symbolic value creation on social media platforms (Kapferer, 2015; Godey et al., 2016; Tafesse & Wood, 2021).

6 Conclusion

The results of this study show that Instagram plays a central role in the communication strategies of Croatian fashion brands, particularly in the presentation of collections, construction of brand identity, and interaction with audiences. The analysis demonstrated that audience engagement is highest in posts that combine visual aesthetics, personal narratives, collaborations with public figures, and content related to important events. Carousel posts and collaborations with celebrities or media partners consistently achieved higher engagement levels than standard product posts. The comparative analysis also showed significant differences among brands in posting frequency, engagement levels, and communication strategies, indicating that digital brand positioning depends not only on the number of followers but also on the type of content and storytelling strategies used on social media. Overall, the findings indicate that successful Instagram communication in fashion is based on visual storytelling, symbolic associations, and consistent brand identity rather than solely on product promotion. This study contributes to the literature by integrating communication and sociological approaches in the analysis of digital fashion communication. Theories of differentiation (Simmel, 1957), conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1992), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), and world-systems (Wallerstein, 1974) are connected with communication research on digital branding and social media engagement. The particular contribution of this research lies in its focus on Croatian fashion brands within a semi-peripheral context, thereby going beyond the usual focus on global fashion centers. The results suggest that digital communication through Instagram can serve as a compensatory mechanism for structural limitations in the creative industries of smaller markets. Furthermore, by combining quantitative engagement metrics with qualitative interpretation of visual and narrative strategies, the paper offers a more comprehensive understanding of how brand identity is constructed in the digital environment. Such a multidisciplinary framework enables

a deeper understanding of fashion as a cultural, communicational, and socio-economic phenomenon and encourages further research on creative industries in the semi-periphery within the context of globalization. For practitioners in the field of public relations and digital marketing, the results suggest that visual aesthetics, authentic narratives, and collaborations with celebrities represent key tools for increasing audience engagement. Croatian brands can enhance their global visibility through Instagram, but it is crucial that communication strategies align with their identity and positioning. Particularly important are personalized posts that connect the brand with personal stories and experiences, as these achieve the highest levels of engagement. For PR and digital marketing professionals, this means that communication should be strategically planned through consistent visual identity, continuous monitoring of engagement metrics, and the use of storytelling as a means of building trust and long-term relationships with the audience. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The main limitation is the relatively short period of three months during which the analysis was conducted, which prevents insight into seasonal and long-term trends. In addition, quantitative engagement metrics such as the number of likes, comments, and views do not necessarily reflect long-term loyalty or perceptions of brand quality, as they may be influenced by algorithmic recommendations or current trends. The analysis was based exclusively on publicly available posts, without incorporating the audience's perspective, which limits a deeper understanding of content reception. Furthermore, the research focused on only three brands, meaning that the results cannot be generalized to the entire Croatian fashion industry. Future research could extend the timeframe and include a larger number of brands of different sizes and positions within the fashion industry, in order to allow for broader generalization of results. Combining content analysis with qualitative methods, such as interviews or surveys with designers and consumers, would provide deeper insights into the meanings and reception of posts and enable a more comprehensive understanding of communication strategies. Furthermore, it would be valuable to investigate how sustainability, ethics, and community shape brand communication strategies in the digital environment, as these aspects are becoming increasingly important in consumer behavior and audience expectations. This study confirms that Instagram is not merely a promotional channel, but a key space in which fashion is shaped as a communicational, cultural, and social phenomenon, particularly in smaller and semi-peripheral markets where digital visibility plays an important role in brand positioning and recognition.

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