

Between Regulation and Practice: Professional Certification, Oversight and Institutional Legitimacy in Sport

A Reflection on Regulatory Coherence, Professional Recognition and Institutional Trust in Martial Arts and Combat Sports

Fernando Loio, PhD

Integrated Researcher at CIEQV – Life Quality Research Centre

Affiliation: WUFC – World Ultimate Full Contact

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6760-1896>

Website: <https://fernandoloio.com>

Email: fl.fernandoloio@gmail.com

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Abstract

Professional certification systems have become one of the fundamental pillars underpinning the organisation and regulation of modern sport. Their primary purpose is to ensure minimum standards of competence, safety, pedagogical quality and participant protection, while simultaneously contributing to the professional recognition of coaches and the sustainable development of sporting disciplines.

However, the legitimacy of such systems does not depend solely upon the existence of regulations, formal requirements or administrative certification procedures. It also relies upon their internal coherence, the proportionality of the requirements imposed, equality of treatment among the various stakeholders involved, and the degree of trust they are able to inspire in those who are subject to them.

Drawing upon the context of martial arts and combat sports, this paper offers a critical reflection on the relationships between professional certification, competence recognition, continuing professional development, regulatory oversight and institutional legitimacy. Particular attention is devoted to the tensions that may arise where rigorous formal requirements coexist with complex administrative procedures, accreditation mechanisms whose effectiveness is sometimes questioned, and professional practices that develop within regulatory grey areas.

Rather than challenging the necessity of professional certification itself, this reflection seeks to examine the conditions under which a regulatory system can remain simultaneously rigorous, fair, coherent and socially legitimate. It is argued that the credibility of certification systems depends upon their capacity to recognise different forms of professional competence, promote meaningful professional learning, ensure regulatory proportionality, and strengthen institutional trust among both professionals and participants.

The article concludes by presenting a conceptual synthesis and an integrative conceptual model linking competence, quality, institutional trust, institutional legitimacy and human development, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the challenges associated with professional certification in the sporting context.

Keywords: professional certification; competence recognition; coaches; martial arts; combat sports; institutional legitimacy; regulatory coherence; continuing professional development; institutional trust; human development.

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, Portuguese sport has followed an international trend towards increasing professionalisation, institutionalisation and regulatory development. The establishment of professional certification systems, coach qualification frameworks and continuing professional development programmes has sought to address legitimate concerns regarding the quality of coaching practice, participant protection, activity safety and the professional recognition of sports practitioners.

In principle, few would dispute the importance of these objectives. The existence of minimum qualification standards represents an essential prerequisite for ensuring quality and accountability in coaching practice. Likewise, the promotion of lifelong learning constitutes a natural requirement within a context characterised by continuous scientific, technical and pedagogical development.

Nevertheless, the mere existence of a certification system does not, in itself, guarantee its legitimacy. A system may be formally valid, legally consistent and administratively well structured, yet still give rise to legitimate concerns when confronted with the practical realities it seeks to regulate.

This observation gives rise to a central question: **to what extent are current professional certification systems able to maintain their legitimacy when rigorous formal requirements coexist with limited enforcement mechanisms, accreditation procedures of variable effectiveness, and functionally similar activities operating under different regulatory frameworks?**

The present reflection builds upon previous research devoted to the study of coaching competence in combat sports (Loio, 2016), the recognition of professional competence in sport (Loio, 2026a), and the relationships between competence, bureaucratisation and professional legitimacy (Loio, 2026b). Whereas these earlier studies sought to examine the nature of competence and the challenges associated with its recognition, the present paper shifts attention towards a complementary dimension: the coherence of the systems responsible for recognising that competence.

More specifically, this article reflects upon the relationships between certification, regulatory oversight, proportionality, equality of treatment and institutional trust. It does not seek to question the necessity of professional certification; rather, it aims to explore the conditions under which regulatory systems can effectively fulfil the objectives that justify their existence.

Ultimately, the strength of any regulatory system lies not merely in its capacity to produce rules, but also in its ability to generate trust among those who are expected to comply with them.

1.1 Research Context

The present article forms part of a broader programme of research examining the relationships between competence, professional recognition, certification, bureaucratisation and institutional legitimacy within the field of martial arts and combat sports.

This line of inquiry originated in the author's master's research on perceptions of coaching competence in combat sports (Loio, 2016) and subsequently developed through analyses of

competence recognition processes, professional certification and institutional legitimacy in sport (Loio, 2026a; Loio, 2026b).

The present essay seeks to advance this research trajectory by focusing specifically on issues of regulatory coherence, administrative proportionality, equality of treatment, institutional trust and human development. In this sense, it constitutes both a continuation and a synthesis of previous reflections, proposing an integrative conceptual model that brings together the concepts of competence, quality, institutional trust, institutional legitimacy and human development within the sporting context.

2. Certification, Regulation and Institutional Legitimacy

Professional certification systems currently play a central role in the organisation of contemporary sport. Through these systems, minimum qualification standards are established with the aim of safeguarding participants, ensuring coaching competence, and promoting the quality of technical and pedagogical practice.

From this perspective, certification represents far more than a simple administrative procedure. It constitutes a regulatory instrument designed to determine who possesses the legitimacy to perform particular professional functions and under what conditions such practice should take place.

However, the legitimacy of a regulatory system does not derive exclusively from its formal existence. As Weber (1978) observed, institutional authority depends upon individuals' belief in the validity of the rules and in the legitimacy of the structures that produce them. Compliance is therefore generated not merely through the imposition of rules, but also through the perception that those rules are reasonable, fair and coherent.

Similarly, Habermas (1975) argued that institutional legitimacy cannot be reduced to formal legality alone. A system may fully satisfy legal requirements and yet still encounter difficulties in achieving legitimacy if its procedures are perceived as disproportionate, inconsistent, or disconnected from the realities they seek to regulate.

This distinction is particularly relevant within the sporting context. Professional certification exists not simply to satisfy administrative requirements but primarily to ensure competence, quality, safety and public confidence. When professionals recognise certification procedures as useful, coherent and fair, they are generally more willing to accept the obligations imposed upon them. Conversely, when discrepancies emerge between proclaimed principles and observed practices, doubts concerning the legitimacy of the system may arise.

It is therefore important to recognise that the strength of any regulatory framework depends not only upon its ability to establish rules, but equally upon its capacity to ensure that those rules achieve the purposes for which they were created.

Accordingly, the fundamental question is not whether professional certification should exist. The answer appears self-evident. Rather, the crucial issue is whether existing mechanisms are capable of reconciling regulatory rigour, recognition of professional competence, administrative proportionality and institutional trust.

This reflection becomes increasingly pertinent in light of the growing complexity of certification systems, the renewal of professional qualifications and the expansion of continuing accreditation requirements. Although such mechanisms are frequently justified by the need to promote quality and

professional development, it remains important to ask whether the procedures implemented maintain an appropriate balance with the objectives they are intended to achieve.

Ultimately, the legitimacy of a regulatory system depends not only upon what it requires, but also upon how those requirements are applied, justified and understood by those who are expected to comply with them.

3. Between Competence and Certification

One of the most significant issues in the debate surrounding professional certification concerns the distinction between actual professional competence and formal certification.

Although these concepts are frequently treated as synonymous, they are not necessarily equivalent. Certification constitutes a mechanism of institutional recognition, whereas competence refers to a complex combination of knowledge, skills, experience, attitudes and values that become manifest through professional practice.

This distinction is particularly evident within sports coaching. A coach's effectiveness depends not solely upon the qualifications he or she possesses, but also upon the ability to lead, communicate, teach, make informed decisions, solve problems and establish meaningful pedagogical relationships with participants.

This perspective is supported by the author's previous research conducted as part of his master's dissertation on perceptions of coaching competence in combat sports. The findings demonstrated that coaches, athletes and other sporting stakeholders consistently value a broad range of competencies extending well beyond the formal dimension of certification.

Among the competencies considered most important were practical experience, pedagogical ability, leadership, communication, ethical conduct, emotional management and the quality of the coach–athlete relationship. These findings suggest that professional competence is perceived as a multidimensional construct developed over time through the interaction between formal education, practical experience and reflective practice.

This interpretation is also consistent with Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning, which conceptualises learning as a continuous process based upon the transformation of experience. From this perspective, professional knowledge emerges not exclusively through formal instruction but also through individuals' capacity to reflect upon experience and derive meaningful learning from it.

Similarly, Schön (1983) introduced the concept of the *reflective practitioner*, arguing that highly competent professionals are those capable of integrating theoretical knowledge, practical experience and critical reflection upon their own practice.

These perspectives suggest that professional competence cannot be adequately understood through exclusively administrative indicators. Possession of a certificate may constitute an important form of institutional recognition, yet it can never fully encompass the complexity of human competence.

This observation should not be interpreted as diminishing the value of certification processes. On the contrary, it highlights the importance of recognising certification as an instrument designed to serve competence, rather than as a substitute for competence itself.

When systems of professional recognition successfully integrate formal education, practical experience and continuing professional development, they reinforce their own legitimacy. Conversely, when excessive emphasis is placed upon administrative compliance, there is a risk that the recognition of competence will become confused with the mere documentary verification of its existence.

This distinction is particularly significant within martial arts and combat sports, where accumulated experience, intergenerational transmission of knowledge, experiential learning and prolonged practice have historically played a fundamental role in developing the technical, pedagogical and human competencies of coaches.

For this reason, any discussion of professional certification should seek to balance two equally legitimate objectives: the need to ensure minimum qualification standards and the need to recognise that human competence is a broader, more dynamic and more complex reality than any formal certification system can fully capture.

4. Regulatory Asymmetries and System Coherence

One of the most important criteria for assessing the legitimacy of any regulatory system is its capacity to ensure consistency between the principles it proclaims and the practices it effectively governs.

Within the field of sport, professional certification systems are generally presented as instruments intended to guarantee technical quality, participant safety, pedagogical competence and the professional recognition of coaches. These objectives are both legitimate and difficult to contest. Their achievement, however, depends not only upon the existence of formal requirements but also upon the extent to which those requirements correspond to the practical realities of sporting activity.

It is precisely at this point that a particularly significant question emerges: **to what extent is there coherence between the regulatory requirements imposed upon formally certified professionals and the realities of the activities that are actually carried out in practice?**

Over recent decades, there has been a marked proliferation of physical activity and fitness programmes that make direct or indirect use of techniques, exercises and methodologies inspired by disciplines traditionally governed by specific education and certification frameworks. In many settings, activities are marketed under titles such as *Fit Boxing*, *Cardio Boxing*, *Boxing Fitness*, *Cardio Kickboxing*, or similar designations.

The purpose of the present discussion is not to question the educational or recreational value of these activities. Many undoubtedly make valuable contributions to the promotion of physical activity, health and well-being. The issue lies elsewhere.

Where functionally similar activities are conducted under substantially different regulatory frameworks, it becomes legitimate to ask whether the system continues to demonstrate appropriate levels of coherence and proportionality.

The discussion should not focus exclusively upon the terminology used to describe a particular activity. From the participants' perspective, what matters most is the actual nature of the intervention, the content being delivered, the competencies required and the potential consequences arising from the activity itself.

When the same regulatory system demands high levels of qualification, certification and continuing professional development for certain professional roles, whilst simultaneously accommodating activities of a comparable nature that are subject to considerably less demanding requirements, an unavoidable question of regulatory coherence arises.

This issue becomes even more significant when the costs of regulatory compliance fall primarily upon those who choose to operate fully within the formal system. Initial qualification, continuing education, renewal of professional credentials and compliance with administrative requirements all require substantial investments of time, financial resources and professional commitment.

Naturally, every regulated profession entails responsibilities and obligations. The issue does not lie in the existence of these requirements themselves. Rather, it emerges when the benefits of compliance cease to be clearly recognised by those who are expected to meet them.

In this context, reflection upon regulatory coherence should not be interpreted as a criticism of professional certification. On the contrary, it represents an attempt to identify the conditions necessary to preserve the credibility and legitimacy of certification systems.

Indeed, the greater the divergence between regulatory norms and professional practice, the more difficult it becomes to justify the very existence of those regulatory requirements.

Rather than continually increasing the number of formal obligations, greater attention should be devoted to ensuring that existing requirements remain coherent with the realities they are intended to regulate.

The strength of any regulatory system depends not only upon its capacity to establish rules, but equally upon its ability to ensure that those rules are perceived as relevant, proportionate and consistently applied.

Regulatory coherence therefore constitutes a fundamental condition for institutional legitimacy. Without it, even systems designed with the best of intentions risk undermining the trust of those upon whom they ultimately depend.

5. Continuing Professional Development, Accreditation and Professional Learning

Continuing professional development (CPD) has become one of the fundamental pillars of contemporary professional qualification systems. Within sport, this approach is founded upon a principle that is difficult to dispute: professional competence is not a static condition but rather a dynamic process of learning, updating and continuous improvement.

The ongoing development of sport sciences, coaching methodologies, pedagogical approaches and knowledge relating to health, safety and human development fully justifies the need for lifelong learning. From this perspective, systems of continuing accreditation represent an important opportunity to foster the professional development of coaches.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such systems depends less upon their formal existence than upon the quality of the learning experiences they actually provide.

Participation in educational activities does not, in itself, guarantee professional development. Just as possession of a certificate does not automatically demonstrate competence, attendance at accredited learning events does not necessarily result in meaningful learning.

Research on professional learning consistently demonstrates that competence develops through high-quality educational experiences, critical reflection upon practice and the ability to integrate new knowledge into authentic professional contexts (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983).

Within this context, it becomes appropriate to ask to what extent current accreditation systems are capable of distinguishing between formal participation and genuine learning.

When the accumulation of accreditation credits assumes greater importance than the knowledge and understanding acquired, or when administrative procedures become more prominent than the educational processes themselves, there is a danger that the focus shifts from meaningful learning towards bureaucratic compliance.

The issue is therefore not whether continuing professional development should exist. On the contrary, its importance should be reinforced.

An accreditation system acquires legitimacy when professionals recognise genuine value in the educational experiences it offers—when they perceive that such experiences genuinely improve their practice, broaden their knowledge and enhance their professional competence.

Conversely, when continuing education is perceived primarily as an administrative requirement necessary to maintain professional status, its educational function inevitably becomes weakened.

Reflection upon the quality of continuing professional development is especially important at a time when professional updating is frequently presented as one of the principal justifications for systems of certification renewal and ongoing accreditation.

If education is understood as an instrument of both professional and human development, then accreditation mechanisms must be designed to recognise meaningful learning rather than merely formal participation.

Ultimately, the credibility of any continuing professional development system depends upon its capacity to produce better professionals rather than simply professionals who satisfy administrative requirements.

6. Proportionality, Equality of Treatment and Institutional Trust

Among the various factors that influence the legitimacy of regulatory systems, few are as significant as the perception of fairness and equality of treatment.

Professionals generally accept demanding regulatory requirements when they recognise that such requirements serve legitimate objectives, are applied consistently, and produce tangible benefits for the quality of professional practice. Institutional trust is built precisely upon this relationship between regulatory rigour and legitimacy.

No regulatory system can be sustained solely through the imposition of rules. Its stability depends upon the confidence of those who are subject to it. It depends upon the conviction that the rules are reasonable, proportionate and applied in a balanced and consistent manner.

Within this context, the principle of proportionality assumes particular importance. The obligations imposed upon professionals should maintain an appropriate relationship with the objectives they are intended to achieve. The greater the burdens associated with regulatory compliance, the greater the need to demonstrate both their practical value and their consistent application.

This issue becomes especially sensitive where different realities coexist within the same sporting environment.

On the one hand, there are professionals who invest considerable time, financial resources and personal commitment in obtaining formal qualifications, participating in continuing professional development and complying with the regulatory requirements associated with their profession.

On the other hand, there are activities delivered under technically ambiguous frameworks, alternative designations or intervention models whose relationship with formal certification mechanisms is not always clearly defined.

Irrespective of the legal status of such situations, their very existence may give rise to perceptions of regulatory inequality.

The central question is not whether every participant should be subject to precisely the same regulatory requirements. Different contexts may legitimately justify different levels of regulation. What matters is that such differences remain understandable, proportionate and coherent.

When professionals who make every effort to comply fully with regulatory requirements perceive that they bear substantially greater obligations than others engaged in functionally similar activities, feelings of unfairness, demotivation and diminished institutional trust may emerge.

Institutional trust depends not only upon the legal validity of regulations but also upon the perception that they are implemented fairly and directed towards genuinely worthwhile objectives.

Accordingly, equality of treatment should not be understood as absolute uniformity. Rather, it should be interpreted as the existence of clear, transparent and proportionate criteria capable of justifying differential treatment whenever such distinctions are appropriate.

The credibility of certification systems depends to a considerable extent upon their capacity to reconcile regulatory rigour with recognition of contextual diversity while remaining faithful to the principles of administrative justice.

Ultimately, regulatory systems do not exist merely to secure compliance. They exist to promote trust, quality, competence and institutional legitimacy.

Without trust, compliance is liable to become little more than a formal obligation. With trust, regulatory requirements are recognised as legitimate instruments serving professional development and the overall quality of sport.

7. Sport as a Space for Human Development

Although this reflection has focused upon certification, professional recognition, accreditation, regulatory oversight and institutional legitimacy, it is important not to lose sight of a more fundamental question: **what is the ultimate purpose of sport itself?**

Regulatory frameworks, certification procedures and professional qualification systems are not ends in themselves. Their legitimacy depends upon their capacity to serve broader objectives related to the quality of sporting practice, the protection of participants and the promotion of human development.

Sport occupies a unique position within contemporary society. Beyond its competitive dimension, it constitutes a privileged environment for learning, socialisation, education, identity formation and personal development.

Millions of children, young people and adults experience some of the most significant moments of their lives through participation in sport. They learn discipline, responsibility, cooperation, respect, perseverance and resilience. At the same time, they develop physical, emotional and social competencies that frequently extend well beyond the sporting environment.

Within this process, the role of the coach is of central importance.

A coach is not merely a transmitter of technical knowledge or a manager of performance. Coaches are also educators, facilitators of learning and, very often, significant personal role models for the individuals with whom they work.

This reality helps to explain why professional competence cannot be reduced solely to qualifications, certificates or administrative procedures.

A coach's competence is demonstrated daily through the quality of decision-making, the manner in which communication is established, the ability to create positive learning environments and the contribution made to the holistic development of those under their guidance.

Freire (1996) reminds us that authentic education is not simply the transmission of knowledge but the creation of conditions that enable individuals to realise their full human potential. Although developed within a different educational context, this principle possesses profound relevance for the world of sport.

Within sport, education should likewise be understood as a process of human development rather than merely a mechanism of administrative validation.

This perspective does not diminish the importance of professional certification. On the contrary, it endows certification with a higher purpose.

Professional qualification systems find their true justification when they contribute to the development of better coaches, richer sporting experiences and conditions that enable sport to fulfil its educational and social mission.

When administrative procedures become more important than the human objectives they are intended to serve, there is a risk that the natural order of priorities becomes reversed.

Certification exists to promote competence.

Competence exists to promote quality.

Quality exists to serve people.

This simple sequence may well constitute the most important criterion for evaluating any system of professional regulation in sport.

Whenever the means become excessively detached from the ends they are intended to serve, it becomes necessary to return to the essential question: **for whom does the system exist, and which values is it genuinely intended to promote?**

The answer to this question will, to a large extent, determine the future legitimacy of policies concerning certification, professional education and competence recognition in sport.

8. Conclusion

The increasing professionalisation of sport has led to the development of increasingly sophisticated systems of professional certification, qualification and accreditation. These systems play an important role in promoting quality, safety and the professional recognition of coaches, thereby constituting essential instruments for the organisation of contemporary sporting activities.

However, the legitimacy of these mechanisms depends not merely upon their formal existence, but equally upon their capacity to produce outcomes that are consistent with the objectives that justify their implementation.

Throughout this reflection, several of the tensions that may emerge between certification and competence, regulatory rigour and proportionality, administrative compliance and professional development, and formal legality and institutional legitimacy have been examined.

It has been argued that the strength of certification systems does not reside exclusively in their capacity to establish rules or impose regulatory requirements. Rather, it depends fundamentally upon their ability to inspire trust among those who are subject to them.

Institutional trust constitutes a fundamental resource for every regulatory system. It is built through coherence, transparency, proportionality and the perception of equality of treatment.

When professionals recognise certification mechanisms as useful, fair and rational, they are more likely to embrace their objectives. Conversely, when significant inconsistencies are perceived between proclaimed principles and observed practices, doubts concerning the legitimacy of the system are likely to emerge.

The present reflection does not seek to question the necessity of professional certification in sport. On the contrary, it reaffirms its importance.

Nevertheless, it also reminds us that certification is a means rather than an end.

The ultimate objective of any professional qualification system should be to promote competence, pedagogical quality, participant safety, institutional trust and human development.

From this perspective, the fundamental question is not whether certification should exist, but rather **what kind of certification system is capable of genuinely recognising competence, promoting meaningful learning, ensuring regulatory coherence and strengthening institutional legitimacy.**

Ultimately, the credibility of regulatory systems depends not only upon the rules they produce.

It depends, above all, upon the trust they are able to inspire.

And it is upon that trust that their capacity to serve both sport and the people who give it meaning ultimately depends.

Table 1. Conceptual Synthesis of the Main Themes Addressed in the Article

Theme	Central Question	Key Idea
Professional Certification	What is the purpose of certification?	To ensure competence, quality and safety.
Institutional Legitimacy	What makes a system legitimate?	Coherence between principles, rules and practice.
Competence vs Certification	Does a certificate equate to competence?	Certification recognises competence but cannot replace it.
Coaching Competence	What characterises an effective coach?	Experience, leadership, pedagogy, ethics and knowledge.
Experiential Learning	How is competence developed?	Through education combined with reflective experience.
Regulatory Asymmetries	Are similar activities subject to different regulatory requirements?	Regulatory coherence is essential for legitimacy.
Parallel Activities	What challenges do they present?	They raise questions concerning proportionality and equality of treatment.
Continuing Professional Development	What is the purpose of CPD?	To promote learning and professional development.
Professional Accreditation	What should accreditation value?	The quality of learning rather than the mere accumulation of credits.
Bureaucratisation	What is the principal risk of administrative procedures?	Transforming means into ends.
Proportionality	Are regulatory requirements appropriate to their objectives?	Regulation should be balanced and justified.
Equality of Treatment	How can regulatory fairness be ensured?	Through coherent and transparent criteria.
Regulatory Oversight	What is the role of oversight?	To strengthen credibility and confidence in the system.
Institutional Trust	Why is it important?	No regulatory system is sustainable without the trust of those it governs.
Human Development	What is the ultimate purpose of sport?	To promote education, citizenship and personal development.
The Role of the Coach	What does the coach represent?	An educator, mentor and facilitator of learning.
Certification and Human Development	How are they connected?	Certification should ultimately serve people.
Central Question of the Article	What is the principal challenge?	Reconciling regulatory rigour, competence, fairness and legitimacy.
Final Message	What ultimately sustains a regulatory system?	The trust it is capable of inspiring.

Note. Author's own elaboration (Loio, 2026).

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Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Competence, Trust and Institutional Legitimacy in Sport

The conceptual model proposed in this article may be represented as follows:

Competence → Quality → Trust → Institutional Legitimacy → Human Development

The model is based upon five sequential propositions:

- Certification is legitimate when it recognises genuine competence.
- Competence becomes meaningful when it promotes quality.
- Quality generates trust.
- Trust strengthens institutional legitimacy.
- Institutional legitimacy enables the regulatory system to contribute to human development through sport.

Note. Conceptual model developed by the author (Loio, 2026).

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Biographical Note

Fernando Loio holds a PhD in Sport Sciences and is an Integrated Researcher at the **CIEQV – Life Quality Research Centre**. His research focuses on sports coaching, martial arts and combat sports, with particular emphasis on professional competence, coach education, competence recognition, institutional legitimacy and human development through sport.

He has accumulated more than fifty years of experience in martial arts and combat sports as an athlete, coach, event promoter and sports administrator. Throughout his career, he has collaborated with numerous national and international organisations associated with Boxing, Taekwondo, Ultimate Full Contact, Pankration, Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), Free Fight, Kickboxing, Muay Thai and Grappling.

His principal research interests include professional competence, coach education, competence recognition, institutional legitimacy and the contribution of sport to human development.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6760-1896>

Website: <https://fernandoloio.com>

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