

## Commodification of Padel Sports as A Culture of Capitalism and Personal Branding on Instagram

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**Abstract.** The rapid expansion of digital platforms has transformed sport from a physical and recreational practice into a symbolic and economic resource within digital capitalism. In Indonesia, padel has emerged as a lifestyle sport closely associated with urban elites and Instagram-based self-presentation. This study examines how padel is commodified as a cultural practice and mobilized as a personal branding strategy through visual representations on Instagram. This research adopts a qualitative approach using digital visual content analysis. Data consist of Instagram posts related to padel activities uploaded by Indonesian influencers and public figures between April and July 2025. The analysis integrates Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to examine denotative, connotative, and mythic meanings, alongside Mosco's political economy of communication to contextualize these representations within the structural logic of digital capitalism. The findings reveal that padel is represented less as a competitive sport and more as a cultural commodity embedded in luxury consumption, aesthetic coherence, and emotional display. Visual elements such as premium venues, branded equipment, fashionable attire, and expressions of joy and confidence construct padel as a marker of prestige, modernity, and social distinction. Influencers strategically integrate padel into lifestyle narratives, transforming leisure activities into symbolic and economic capital within Instagram's attention economy. These findings indicate that padel functions as a performative space where identity, emotion, and consumption intersect under platform capitalism. The commodification of padel reflects broader dynamics of cultural and emotional capitalism, in which emotions and authenticity are instrumentalized for visibility and engagement.

**Keywords:** Commodification; Digital Capitalism; Padel; Personal Branding; Social Media

### 1. Introduction

Sport has traditionally been understood as a social practice oriented toward physical well-being, recreation, and collective interaction (Alhammad et al., 2025; Ferreira et al., 2025; Kasiga & Bro, 2024; Toro-Román et al., 2023). Classical sociological perspectives position sport as a cultural arena that cultivates discipline, fairness, and social integration, relatively autonomous from economic rationality (Castón Boyer, 2024; Mustikasari et al.,

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2023). In its ideal form, sport functions as a site of embodied experience rather than market exchange, where participation is motivated by health, enjoyment, and social bonding. However, this ideal configuration has increasingly eroded as contemporary capitalism expands into leisure, culture, and everyday life.

In late modern societies, sport has become deeply entangled with consumer culture and symbolic economies. Scholars of media and cultural studies argue that leisure activities are no longer insulated from capitalist logics but are increasingly transformed into lifestyle commodities embedded in systems of consumption and representation (Bauman, 2013; Lash & Lury, 2007). Social media platforms, particularly visually oriented ones such as Instagram, play a central role in this transformation. Instagram operates as what Kellner (2009) terms a “media spectacle,” where everyday practices are aestheticized, circulated, and evaluated through metrics of visibility, engagement, and symbolic prestige. Within this environment, sport becomes not only a physical practice but also a performative and mediatized activity.

One contemporary manifestation of this process is the rise of padel as a lifestyle sport. Originally developed as a recreational racket sport, padel has rapidly expanded into a global phenomenon associated with exclusivity, urban leisure, and cosmopolitan identity. In Indonesia, padel has emerged predominantly among urban middle- and upper-class communities, concentrated in metropolitan areas such as Jakarta and Bali. The sport’s association with premium venues, fashionable sportswear, and curated social interaction positions it as a marker of distinction rather than mere athletic participation. Its strong visual appeal, enclosed courts, stylized movement, and social play renders padel highly compatible with Instagram’s visual culture, enabling it to function as a symbolic resource within digital self-presentation.

The commodification of sport within digital environments can be understood through the political economy of communication. Hall (2023) defines commodification as the process by which social practices and meanings are transformed into exchange value within capitalist systems. In the context of social media, this process extends beyond material goods to include images, emotions, and identities (Fuchs, 2021). Consumption, as Baudrillard (1998) and Featherstone (2007) argue, increasingly revolves around signs and symbols rather than functional utility. Consequently, sporting activities such as padel are consumed and circulated as signs of health, success, and modernity, particularly when mediated through Instagram’s algorithmic and aesthetic infrastructures.

At the same time, the rise of personal branding has reshaped how individuals engage with sport and social media. Shepherd (2005) conceptualizes personal branding as a form of self-marketing in which individuals manage their identities as strategic assets in a post-industrial economy. Hearn (2008) further critiques this process as self-commodification, where individuals are compelled to continuously perform marketable versions of themselves. Empirical studies on influencers and athletes demonstrate that social media enables personal branding through curated visuals, emotional narratives, and brand affiliations (Abidin, 2021; Khamis et al., 2016). On Instagram, bodily practices such as exercise and sport become resources for constructing credibility, authenticity, and commercial value.

Despite extensive scholarship on sport commodification and influencer culture, a clear research gap remains. Existing studies largely focus on mainstream sports, professional athletes, or explicit endorsement practices, often within Western contexts (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Limited attention has been given to emerging lifestyle sports such as padel, particularly in Southeast Asia. Moreover, few



studies integrate semiotic analysis with political economy perspectives to examine how visual representations of sport simultaneously construct ideology, identity, and economic value. The role of Instagram as a site where sport, emotional capitalism, and personal branding intersect remains under-theorized.

This study addresses these gaps by examining padel as a cultural commodity and a medium of personal branding within Indonesia's Instagram landscape. Theoretically, it contributes to media and cultural studies by synthesizing Barthes' (2019) semiotic analysis with Mosco's (2009) political economy of communication. Empirically, it offers insight into how a global lifestyle sport is localized and re-signified through digital media. The study aims to analyze how padel is visually and emotionally constructed as a symbol of prestige, how these representations operate within the logic of digital capitalism, and how influencers engage in self-commodification through aesthetic and affective performance on Instagram.

## 2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach through digital visual content analysis to examine the symbolic construction of padel as a cultural commodity within social media environments. In the tradition of media and communication studies, digital visual analysis allows researchers to interpret how visual and narrative texts in online spaces function as part of popular cultural practices mediated by technology (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). The study adopts a descriptive-qualitative orientation, emphasizing depth of interpretation and contextual understanding of meaning embedded in social media representations.

The primary data consist of Instagram posts (images, videos, captions, hashtags, and user interactions) related to padel activities uploaded by Indonesian celebrities and influencers. Sampling was conducted purposively, based on four criteria: (1) consistent posting of padel-related content between April and July 2025, (2) a follower count exceeding 5,000 to ensure social visibility, (3) measurable engagement through likes, comments, and shares, and (4) diversity in gender, profession, and geographic location. These criteria ensure representativeness of padel as a mediated lifestyle across different social segments within Indonesia's urban context.

### 2.1. Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis followed two methodological layers. First, Barthes (2009) semiotic analysis was applied to deconstruct the meaning systems embedded in padel-related visual content. The analysis involved three coding stages: (1) Denotative coding, identifying the literal visual elements (e.g., padel court, rackets, sportswear, gestures). (2) Connotative coding, classifying the cultural or ideological associations (e.g., exclusivity, luxury, social belonging). (3) Mythological interpretation, synthesizing recurring symbolic patterns into broader ideological narratives (e.g., padel as a representation of cosmopolitan lifestyle or digital prestige).

The coding process was iterative and reflexive: data were read and reread to identify recurring visual motifs and textual signifiers that reveal the ideological construction of padel. Codes were grouped into thematic categories (e.g., aesthetic display, social validation, health as capital), forming a semiotic map that connects micro-level imagery to macro-level social meanings.

Second, Mosco's (2009) political economy of communication was used to interpret the structural dimension of these representations. This stage examined how Instagram functions as a digital marketplace governed by attention metrics and algorithmic visibility.



The analysis connected the visual codes to broader economic structures of digital capitalism, focusing on how influencers' branding strategies translate visibility into symbolic and economic capital.

### 2.2. Validity and Reliability

To enhance analytical validity, data triangulation was implemented by cross-examining three elements: (1) visual content, (2) textual narratives (captions and hashtags), and (3) audience engagement patterns (comments, likes, and shares). A light digital ethnographic approach (Hine, 2015) was also incorporated to contextualize how padel-related content is produced and circulated in daily social media practices. Peer debriefing with two communication scholars was conducted to ensure interpretive consistency and minimize researcher bias during coding and theme construction.

### 2.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were carefully observed throughout the study. Only publicly accessible Instagram accounts were included, and identifiable personal information was anonymized or omitted to protect privacy. The research adhered to ethical standards for online data collection (Heazlewood et al., 2012; White & Hanley, 2024), ensuring that analysis focused on content as cultural text rather than on individuals as research subjects. The researcher maintained reflexive awareness regarding positionality and the potential influence of interpretive bias in analyzing influencer culture.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Padel as a Cultural Commodity

The findings of this study indicate that padel has undergone a shift in meaning. As reflected in its representation on social media, this racket sport originating from Mexico is no longer interpreted merely as a physical activity but has become a cultural commodity.

Padel is still relatively new in Indonesia and carries a novelty effect. People tend to be curious about trying something different from mainstream sports. Its status as a trendy sport has made padel quickly go viral, particularly on social media. Indonesia currently ranks sixth among Southeast Asian countries with the fastest padel development and holds the 29th position globally. According to the Indonesian National Sports Committee (KONI), this data, released by the International Padel Federation (FIP), records the rapid growth of interest and infrastructure for padel in the country. Indonesia now has an official organization, the Indonesian Padel Association (PBPI), which is a member of FIP, and the sport has even been included as an exhibition category in the National Sports Week (Rachmawati, 2025).

Technically, padel is easier to learn than tennis. The court is smaller than a tennis court, and the rackets used are lighter. These factors make padel more accessible even to beginners, making it suitable as a social sport. In its early emergence in major cities such as Jakarta, padel courts were generally built-in premium areas. Rental fees for courts and equipment were relatively high, making padel associated with the urban elite lifestyle and granting it social prestige.

Several influencers observed in this study integrated luxury products into their padel-related posts. One influencer featured a high-end skincare brand alongside a padel match, linking physical activity with self-care and a luxurious beauty routine. Another post featured a limited-edition Prada racket, while several others documented tournament scenes emphasizing "best dressed" contests and designer luggage unboxing sessions with



prizes. The captions accompanying these visuals generally conveyed emotional tones of joy, confidence, and empowerment, reinforcing the aspirational narrative that padel embodies a balanced and successful lifestyle.

This collective observation suggests that padel's social media presence has become a confluence of consumer culture, fashion aesthetics, and fitness values. Representations of the sport no longer focus on skill or competition, but on visual coherence, lifestyle branding, and symbolic consumption.

From a theoretical perspective, these empirical findings suggest that padel has entered the realm of cultural capitalism. Referring to Roland Barthes's semiotic framework, the denotative layers of padel imagery, such as outfits, rackets, and courts, function as surface signs, while their connotative meanings signify exclusivity, modernity, and social distinction. At a mythic level, this sign system naturalizes the belief that successful and modern individuals naturally engage in padel, obscuring the ideological processes that link recreational activities to class identity.

This transformation aligns with Lash & Lury (2007) notion of the global culture industry, where ordinary objects are remediated into symbolic commodities carrying prestige and emotional value. A Prada racket, for example, functions not only as sports equipment but also as a status object, serving as a visual marker of belonging to an aspirational global consumer class.

The link between padel and luxury brands also aligns with Zwick & Denegri-Knott (2009) who argue that in digital capitalism, consumption is increasingly fused with the performance of identity. Through platforms like Instagram, individuals generate value not through hard work in the traditional sense, but rather by curating and showcasing lifestyles that attract attention and commercial engagement. In this context, padel content illustrates how digital subjects become "entrepreneurs of the self," transforming leisure time into social and economic capital.

Furthermore, the repeated emphasis on aesthetic presentation, emotional tone, and consumable imagery reflects the logic of emotional capitalism. As Illouz in Pugh (2008) notes, emotions are no longer personal experiences but rather productive forces mobilized by the capitalist system. The joy, intimacy, and empowerment expressed in padel-related posts are commoditized affects, or feelings designed to generate engagement, strengthen the influencer's personal brand, and stimulate consumption. This emotional framing is not spontaneous; it follows the logic of digital platform algorithms that prioritize visibility, positivity, and aspirational imagery.

The conflation of luxury consumption and sport also illustrates Bauman (2013) argument that in late-modern consumer society, identity is shaped by what one consumes, rather than what one produces. Here, athletic identity is formed not through competition or performance, but through symbolic consumption such as branded rackets, curated clothing, and the ability to participate in exclusive events. Such practices reflect what Harvey (2005) calls accumulation through dispossession: the concentration of symbolic and material capital within a limited social strata. Access to padel and the social prestige it symbolizes is thus limited to individuals with sufficient economic and cultural capital.

This aligns with (Noviadhista et al., 2019) who observed that commodification extends even to identity and self-expression. In this context, participation in padel tournaments, along with the prizes and attributes that accompany them, becomes an experience resold in the form of glamorous images on Instagram. Furthermore, this reflects Harvey's (2005) notion of accumulation by dispossession, where access to padel,



along with its accompanying prestige symbols, is limited to certain groups with sufficient social and economic capital.

From a media studies perspective, this dynamic can be interpreted through the lens of the political economy of communication. As Mosco (2009) argues, media systems operate under the control of market forces that shape the production and distribution of meaning. Social media platforms, in particular, are not neutral spaces for self-expression, but rather structured environments that prioritize content with commercial potential. This structure encourages influencers to project visibility, emotion, and exclusivity, values that align with the monetization logic of the attention economy.

Recent studies reinforce this view. Fuchs (2021) highlights that social media platforms commodify not only user data but also user participation itself, transforming every act of uploading, liking, or sharing into a productive activity within capitalist accumulation. In the case of padel, this means that visual narratives of joy, elegance, and luxury simultaneously function as expressions of identity and as productive labor, generating symbolic and financial value for both influencers and brands.

The mythologization of padel as an aspirational lifestyle further reflects the self-referential nature of digital capitalism. Each post reproduces a circular economy of symbols: influencer-curated images reinforce the brand's luxury identity, while brand associations enhance the influencer's credibility and appeal. This feedback loop illustrates what Couldry & Mejias (2019) describe as data colonialism, a system in which human experience itself becomes a resource to be extracted, packaged, and monetized through digital infrastructure.

In this context, padel is no longer a sport, but rather a performative medium where identity, emotion, and consumption intersect. Padel functions as both a place of leisure and a stage for capitalism, where every visual cue like smiles, noise, clothing, and gifts, serves as a marker of value. The sport's visibility on social media builds an imagined community of aspirational consumers who identify with the ideals of health, beauty, and success promoted through influencer culture.

**Table 1** Padel as a Cultural Commodity on Instagram

Analytical Dimension	Empirical Indicators (Instagram Representation)	Semiotic Meaning (Barthes)
Novelty and Trendiness	Rapid growth of padel courts; viral padel content; increasing participation in urban areas; inclusion in National Sports Week	Padel as a "new" and fashionable activity
Accessibility and Social Appeal	Smaller courts, lighter rackets, beginner-friendly gameplay; group play emphasized	Padel as inclusive and sociable
Premium Space and Cost	Courts located in elite urban areas; high rental and equipment fees	Exclusivity and distinction
Luxury Brand Integration	Prada rackets, high-end skincare, designer fashion, luxury luggage in padel posts	Consumption as status sign
Visual Aesthetics and Fashion	"Best dressed" contests, coordinated outfits, aesthetic court visuals	Style over performance
Emotional Display	Joy, confidence, empowerment emphasized in captions and images	Emotional affect as meaning
Lifestyle Branding	Padel linked to beauty, wellness, leisure, and social success	Sport as lifestyle narrative



Myth Construction	Repetitive imagery of successful, stylish padel players	Myth of success and modernity
Identity Commodification	Tournament participation displayed as glamorous experience	Identity as exchange value
Platform Capitalism Logic	High engagement through likes, comments, shares; influencer visibility	Visibility equals value
Symbolic Feedback Loop	Mutual reinforcement between influencers and luxury brands	Circular production of meaning

Table 1 summarizes how padel is constructed and circulated as a cultural commodity on Instagram through the interplay of visual representation, symbolic meaning, and capitalist logic. The table demonstrates that padel's popularity in Indonesia is not driven primarily by athletic performance, but by its positioning as a trendy, accessible, yet exclusive lifestyle practice rooted in urban elite spaces. Empirical indicators such as luxury brand integration, aesthetic presentation, and emotionally charged content reveal a shift from sport as physical competition to sport as symbolic consumption. Through a Barthesian semiotic lens, visual elements like branded rackets, fashionable attire, and curated emotions function as signifiers that connote prestige, modernity, and social distinction, while at the mythic level they naturalize the idea that success and cosmopolitan identity are embodied through participation in padel. The table also highlights how Instagram's platform logic transforms padel-related content into productive labor, where visibility, affect, and identity are monetized within digital capitalism. Overall, the table illustrates that padel operates simultaneously as leisure, lifestyle branding, and ideological performance, reinforcing broader dynamics of cultural capitalism, emotional commodification, and class-based distinction in contemporary social media culture.

### 3.2. Personal Branding Strategy through Instagram

The analysis of personal branding practices on Instagram shows that padel is not only positioned as a recreational or fitness activity, but also as a medium of self-representation within the arena of identity commodification in consumer culture. This can be seen in the three Instagram accounts that became the units of analysis in this study. All three display different self-constructions, yet operate within a similar framework, namely building a personal image through the integration of sports, fashion, and premium brands.

Based on the 3W framework explained by Haroen (2014), the personal branding practices carried out by the three units of analysis through their Instagram pages can be read as structured identity management strategies. In the dimension of who are you, each of them presents themselves according to the personal image they seek to construct. The first unit positions herself as a public figure emphasizing an elegant and glamorous image. Through consistent posts that combine lifestyle, family, and brand collaborations, she presents "who she is" as a woman closely tied to family values but also professional in the business realm. The second unit embodies an urban figure who combines sports with premium beauty. Her personal identity is displayed through symbols of padel, premium fashion, and international brands. The "who" in her identity is presented as a modern figure who follows global trends. Meanwhile, the third unit shows personal branding with a different pattern. He constructs a self-image that merges the status of an established celebrity with a positioning as a business figure and representative of modern lifestyle.



This identity of “who they are” is not built naturally, but through carefully chosen visual language, aesthetics, and symbols that support their self-narratives.

In the dimension of what have you done, their personal branding is reinforced by track records presented through padel activities. The first unit emphasizes her contribution as both a host and a member of the exclusive community “mother of padel.” Her previous achievements are reflected in her track record as a beauty influencer who successfully manages a business and collaborates with many major brands. The second unit integrates sports with global brand collaborations such as SK-II, while the third unit expands his image as a celebrity who is not only present in entertainment but also in the sphere of elite lifestyle. What they showcase is not merely experience, but a symbolic portfolio that serves as proof of success and credibility in the eyes of the public.

The dimension of what will you do is embodied in future visibility. Each post not only celebrates the present moment but also signals consistency in their long-term vision. The first unit builds a projection for the future through ongoing collaborations with brands and personal projects that strengthen her position in lifestyle and beauty. The second unit reinforces her position as a role model for a healthy, exclusive, and fashionable lifestyle. In the context of Shepherd (2005), she presents herself as a “product” marketed through visual aesthetics, inspirational narratives, and social networks, all strategically packaged to increase both symbolic and economic value. Meanwhile, the third unit’s vision points to the development of a new role as an entrepreneur and inspiring public figure. From Hearn’s (2008) perspective, this branding strategy also reflects the trap of social performance, namely the consistency of appearing glamorous and exclusive, which underscores that his public identity must continually be managed for social validation and commercial capitalization.

Overall, the three units of analysis illustrate how personal branding in the post-industrial era has become a form of professional identity management that is no longer determined by institutions, but by individuals who position themselves as products. However, branding also brings the potential for self-commodification as criticized by Hearn (2008), where the displayed identity is often a social performance for the market rather than a reflection of an authentic self. Thus, this study affirms that personal branding through Instagram is a strategic practice full of negotiations between the authenticity of identity, social performance, and the logic of digital capitalism.

From the perspective of media sociology, these practices align with the influencer culture that increasingly blurs the boundaries between personal expression and commercial performance. Abidin (2021) describes influencers as “commercially motivated micro-celebrities” who commodify intimacy and relatability. In the context of this study, padel influencers extend this phenomenon into the sports domain, where physical activity becomes entangled with lifestyle branding. Comparable patterns have been found in studies of wellness and fitness influencers (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Jin et al., 2019) where everyday practices like exercise or self-care are strategically aestheticized to attract followers and sponsorships. The influencers analyzed in this study echo these global trends by using padel as both visual content and a symbolic resource for positioning themselves within elite cultural networks.

The intersection of sport, aesthetics, and digital entrepreneurship can also be read through the lens of cultural capitalism. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of distinction (1984), participation in padel conveys not only physical prowess but also social capital. This aligns with findings from Hutchins & Rowe (2012) who examine digital sports influencers and note how athletic participation increasingly functions as cultural display,



linking bodily performance with the consumption of technology, fashion, and space. The same logic applies here by showcasing padel in premium venues and combining it with luxury brands, influencers translate athletic engagement into symbolic consumption, an act of distinction and digital self-promotion.

Furthermore, the practice of merging sports with lifestyle imagery exemplifies what Khamis et al (2016) refer to as "visibility labor." The influencers' work is not confined to playing padel but extends to constant self-documentation, aesthetic consistency, and algorithmic engagement. Their digital presence must adhere to the visual standards of Instagram culture, such as bright lighting, curated outfits, and emotionally engaging captions to sustain follower interest. Thus, self-branding becomes continuous affective labor embedded in the attention economy (Fuchs, 2021).

The integration of global luxury brands like Prada or SK-II reinforces the capitalist infrastructure underpinning this visibility. Through co-branding strategies, influencers and corporations mutually benefit: brands gain symbolic association with lifestyle authenticity, while influencers gain legitimacy through brand affiliation. This reciprocity mirrors the platformization of cultural labor Nieborg & Poell (2025) where creators are both entrepreneurs and subcontracted marketers embedded in digital capitalism's feedback loop.

### *3.3. Emotional Capitalism and Self-Performativeness*

The analysis reveals that personal branding practices on social media are closely linked to the logic of emotional capitalism, where feelings and affective expressions are commercialized and transformed into marketable assets. Emotional capitalism emerges when emotions become a productive force in the economic system, circulating as commodities that sustain attention, trust, and desire. In visual representations of padel activities on Instagram, emotions such as joy, excitement, and togetherness are not neutral reflections of reality, but rather carefully orchestrated affective displays. Group photos featuring celebrities smiling and celebrating on a padel court, for example, construct a semiotic layer that blends sport, pleasure, and social prestige. These visual cues, which initially appear to document leisure time, operate as symbols, akin to affective capital, generating relational intimacy and aspirational identification among followers.

This finding connects directly with previous semiotic observations where padel imagery, such as fashionable clothing, luxury brand rackets, and premium venues, function as markers of status and distinction. At the connotative level, these same images now possess emotional content, generating affective meanings such as happiness, confidence, and belonging. The emotions embedded in these images reinforce their symbolic power: audiences don't just view padel as an elite sport; they experience its prestige through mediated emotions. Thus, the cultural commodity of padel extends beyond material objects to encompass affective experiences circulating in the digital marketplace.

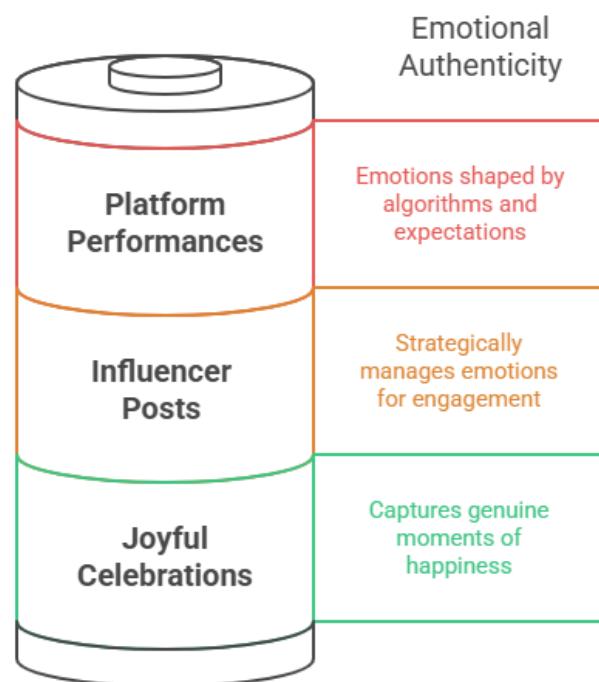
In this framework, social media influencers act as affective entrepreneurs, or figures who transform emotions into economic and symbolic capital Gill & Kanai (2018). When public figures post about their "best dressed" at a padel tournament or share behind-the-scenes moments of a luxury collaboration, they not only promote fashion or sport but also curate emotional narratives around confidence, empowerment, and sophistication. These emotions become the currency of visibility, attracting engagement, and strengthening parasocial relationships with followers. As Abidin (2021) notes in his study of influencer



culture, affective labor, or the strategic management of emotions, has become central to sustaining the online attention economy.

The affective economy surrounding padel content thus reflects the dual commodification of the physical and emotional body. A fit and stylish body is aestheticized as a sign of success, while emotional expressions such as joy, passion, and confidence are employed to reinforce authenticity and connectedness. However, as Barthes's notion of myth suggests, these images naturalize an ideological system: the myth of happiness and exclusivity attainable through consumption. The performative repetition of these affective signs creates a cultural narrative in which participation in padel and the lifestyle it represents signifies upward mobility, discipline, and taste.

In this regard, emotional capitalism intersects with performativity, a concept that captures how identity is continually reified through repetitive behaviors and mediated gestures. According to Hearn (2008) performativity in self-image refers to the strategic presentation of oneself as a marketable persona. The influencers in this study are not simply "being themselves"; they are presenting curated versions of their identities that align with market expectations. For example, aesthetic depictions of athletic performance, luxury brands, and emotional expressions serve as scripts of success, beauty, and health that followers are encouraged to emulate. The body, the smile, and the photo caption all become performative acts embedded in a cycle of visibility and validation.



**Figure 1** Emotional expression on social media ranges from authentic to staged

Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual continuum of emotional expression on social media, ranging from authentic affect to staged and strategically managed performances. At the base of the model, joyful celebrations represent moments of genuine happiness and spontaneous emotion, capturing lived experiences that appear minimally mediated. Moving upward, influencer posts indicate a transitional layer in which emotions are consciously curated and managed to maximize engagement, visibility, and audience connection, reflecting affective labor within digital platforms. At the top level, platform



performances signify the most mediated form of emotional expression, where feelings are increasingly shaped by algorithmic logics, audience expectations, and market incentives rather than personal spontaneity. Together, the stacked structure visualizes how emotional authenticity becomes progressively instrumentalized as content moves from personal experience to public performance, highlighting the workings of emotional capitalism in which emotions are transformed into strategic, commodified resources within platform-driven visibility economies.

However, this performative identity is ambivalent. While it empowers individuals to manage their identities and careers, it simultaneously demands unfettered emotional expression. The joy and camaraderie of influencers, as seen in padel-related posts, are not simply spontaneous emotions, but socially mandated performances shaped by platform algorithms and audience expectations. Such effective performances fuel engagement metrics and brand partnerships, but also blur the line between authenticity and spectacle. This aligns with Banet-Weiser (2018) observation that "authenticity itself has become a brand strategy," where sincerity and emotion are staged to signal trust in a competitive attention economy.

The intersection of emotional capitalism and performativity thus reveals a deeper transformation in how individuals experience and communicate emotions in digital culture. Social media, once celebrated as a space for personal expression, now operates as a marketplace of feelings, a system in which joy, intimacy, and aspiration are monetized through likes, shares, and sponsorships. In this economy, influencers become both producers and products of affective labor, embodying what Couldry & Mejias (2019) describe as the datafication of the self, where every emotional expression contributes to the expansion of digital capitalism.

The commodification of emotions and the performative nature of self-presentation in padel-related content illustrate how digital media transforms sport and identity into intertwined symbolic economies. Emotions are no longer personal experiences, but rather resources mobilized for visibility, marketability, and social differentiation. The padel court becomes not only a physical playing field, but also an affective stage where happiness, grace, and success are displayed, circulated, and consumed.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that padel in Indonesia has undergone a significant semiotic and economic transformation within the context of digital capitalism. The findings reveal that padel is no longer represented merely as a recreational sport, but as a cultural commodity embedded in visual aesthetics, luxury consumption, and emotional narratives on Instagram. Through curated images, branded equipment, premium venues, and affective expressions such as joy and confidence, padel is constructed as a symbol of cosmopolitan lifestyle and social distinction. Influencers strategically mobilize these visual and emotional elements to enhance visibility, engagement, and credibility, thereby transforming leisure activities into sources of symbolic and economic value. The analysis confirms that Instagram functions as a mediating infrastructure where sport, identity, and market logic converge, enabling the commodification of both physical practice and emotional experience.

At the level of discussion, these findings extend theoretical debates on cultural capitalism, personal branding, and emotional labor. Drawing on Barthes' semiotics, the study shows how padel-related visuals operate across denotative, connotative, and mythic levels, naturalizing the ideology that elite lifestyle, happiness, and success are attainable



through participation in specific forms of consumption. From the perspective of the political economy of communication, the study illustrates how Instagram's attention-based and algorithm-driven system incentivizes influencers to perform continuous self-branding, aligning with Mosco's notion of commodification and Hearn's critique of self-commodification. Furthermore, the prominence of emotional display in padel content highlights the workings of emotional capitalism, where feelings are not private experiences but productive resources mobilized for engagement and market value. In this sense, padel emerges as a performative space where identity is strategically produced, managed, and circulated under the imperatives of platform capitalism.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, the analysis is limited to a qualitative visual reading of selected Instagram accounts and does not incorporate audience reception, which could provide deeper insight into how followers interpret and negotiate padel's symbolic meanings. Second, the study focuses on influencers within an urban Indonesian context, limiting the generalizability of the findings across different cultural or socioeconomic settings. Future research could adopt comparative approaches across countries or platforms, such as TikTok or YouTube, to examine how commodification and personal branding dynamics vary across digital ecosystems. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how the meanings of padel evolve over time as the sport becomes more mainstream. By addressing these directions, future scholarship can further illuminate how sport, emotion, and identity are continuously reshaped within the expanding terrain of digital capitalism.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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