CULTURAL INDUSTRY 4.0: A CRITIQUE OF PERSONAL BRANDING AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL INFLUENCER ECOSYSTEM

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed identity into a strategic and economic asset within platform capitalism. Social media influencers and infotainment media increasingly operate within a system where personal branding becomes central to symbolic production and market exchange. This study aims to critically analyze the commodification of identity in the influencer ecosystem and televised infotainment through the lens of Critical Communication Theory. Employing a qualitative embedded case study approach, the research examines selected Indonesian Instagram and TikTok influencers alongside RCTI Infotainment broadcasts. Data were collected through systematic digital documentation, audio-visual transcription, and structural contextual review, and analyzed using thematic coding and critical interpretive analysis grounded in the culture industry thesis and digital capitalism theory. The findings reveal that curated authenticity, emotional dramatization, and commercial integration are structured by algorithmic governance and engagement metrics, transforming subjectivity into a monetizable commodity. Both digital influencers and broadcast infotainment demonstrate structural continuity in reproducing instrumental rationality and neoliberal market logic. The study contributes to the expansion of the culture industry concept into Culture Industry 4.0, where identity itself becomes the primary unit of economic production. It concludes that personal branding is not merely an individual communication strategy but a structural mechanism embedded in digital capitalism, with implications for media ethics, identity formation, and critical communication scholarship. Future research is encouraged to incorporate audience reception analysis and comparative cross-platform studies to further explore dynamics of power and resistance in digital culture.

Keywords: Culture Industry 4.0; personal branding; digital capitalism; identity commodification; critical communication theory

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies over the past decade has fundamentally transformed the production and consumption of symbolic content. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube no longer function merely as channels for message dissemination but have evolved into infrastructures for identity production and economic exchange. Within this environment, personal branding has emerged as a dominant communicative practice in which individuals strategically construct and curate their identities for visibility and market value. Consequently, identity is no longer solely a socio-cultural construct; it has become a measurable and monetizable digital asset embedded within platform capitalism.

The growth of the influencer economy illustrates the scale of this transformation. According to the Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024), the global influencer marketing industry has surpassed USD 21 billion, doubling in value within five years. In Indonesia, the Digital 2024 Global Overview Report (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024) indicates that more than 60% of internet users follow influencers as references for lifestyle, consumer decisions, and public opinion. These data demonstrate that influencers have become central actors in shaping digital discourse, consumption patterns, and symbolic authority in contemporary public life (Kurniawati et al., 2025).

The normalization of personal branding generates complex socio-cultural consequences. Digital actors are compelled to continuously present curated authenticity in order to maintain algorithmic visibility, engagement metrics, and commercial partnerships. The pressure to sustain a marketable self often leads to identity fragmentation and the commodification of private life. In this context, digital platforms operate not as neutral spaces of expression but as structured economic systems that transform everyday communication practices into sources of data extraction and symbolic profit (Purba et al., 2025; Ritonga et al., 2023).

From a Critical Theory perspective, this phenomenon represents an extension of the "culture industry" thesis articulated by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/2002), in which cultural production serves the reproduction of capitalist ideology. In the digital era, the culture industry no longer produces only standardized media commodities such as film or music; it increasingly produces subjectivity itself. Fuchs (2021) argues that digital capitalism monetizes communicative labor by extracting data and commodifying user attention, thereby integrating everyday interaction into the circuits of capital accumulation.

A concrete illustration of identity commodification can be observed in Indonesian infotainment media, particularly in programs such as RCTI Infotainment. As one of the longest-running entertainment news programs in Indonesia, it frequently centers its narratives on celebrity lifestyles, personal conflicts, romantic relationships, and domestic controversies. In doing so, the program transforms private experiences into publicly consumable spectacles. The coverage does not merely report events but frames celebrity identities as serialized commodities continuously reproduced, dramatized, and monetized through repetitive exposure. This dynamic mirrors the logic of the culture industry, where personal narratives are standardized into entertainment formats that sustain audience engagement and advertising revenue.

From a Critical Theory perspective, such infotainment practices exemplify how media institutions participate in the industrial production of subjectivity. Celebrity figures featured in RCTI Infotainment are often portrayed through selective framing that amplifies emotional drama, moral tension, and aspirational lifestyles. These portrayals encourage audiences to internalize particular standards of success, beauty, and relational norms while simultaneously sustaining consumer desire. In this sense, infotainment functions not merely as entertainment but as an ideological apparatus that reinforces commodified identity structures. When juxtaposed with the influencer ecosystem, the case of televised infotainment reveals a structural continuity: both traditional broadcast media and digital platforms operate within the same capitalist logic that converts identity into exchange value, thereby extending the reach of Culture Industry 4.0 across multiple communication environments (Ritonga et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship further conceptualizes personal branding as a process of self-commodification. Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017) describe social media influencers as "micro-celebrities" who strategically brand themselves to generate economic value. Duffy (2017) highlights the emergence of aspirational labor in digital culture, where individuals invest unpaid emotional and creative work in hopes of achieving visibility and monetization. Banet-Weiser (2021) extends this critique by arguing that the entrepreneurial self has become a dominant cultural logic under neoliberal capitalism, encouraging individuals to internalize market rationality in identity formation.

Based on these social realities and theoretical debates, this article aims to critically analyze personal branding and identity commodification within the influencer ecosystem through the lens of Critical Communication Theory. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how the logic of the culture industry evolves within platform capitalism, how digital identities are produced as symbolic commodities, and how power relations and instrumental rationality structure communicative practices in contemporary digital environments.

This article argues that personal branding in Culture Industry 4.0 is not merely an individual communication strategy but a structural mechanism that reproduces the logic of digital capitalism. Influencers appear as autonomous creative agents; however, their visibility and economic sustainability are deeply dependent on algorithmic governance, engagement metrics, and platform monetization systems. Thus, the apparent freedom of self-expression in digital spaces operates within the constraints of instrumental rationality oriented toward efficiency, visibility, and profitability.

The commodification of identity in the influencer ecosystem produces an ambivalent condition between empowerment and hegemonic reproduction. While digital platforms provide opportunities for participation and social mobility, they simultaneously reinforce neoliberal values that compel individuals to continuously market themselves. A critical reading of Culture Industry 4.0 therefore becomes essential to uncover how digital communication not only shapes public discourse but also restructures consciousness, social relations, and power configurations in late modern society.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach grounded in Critical Communication Theory to examine the commodification of identity within Culture Industry 4.0. The case study design is selected because it enables an in-depth and contextualized exploration of complex communication phenomena embedded within specific socio-economic structures. Rather than pursuing broad generalization, this research focuses on analytically strategic cases that illuminate how personal branding and infotainment practices operate within the logic of platform capitalism and the contemporary culture industry. The study adopts an embedded case study model (Yin, 2018), analyzing two interconnected cases: selected Indonesian social media influencers on Instagram and TikTok, and televised infotainment content from RCTI Infotainment. These cases are not treated as isolated phenomena but as structurally related manifestations of identity commodification across digital and broadcast media environments.

Case selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure analytical relevance. Influencer accounts were selected based on high engagement metrics, visible commercial collaborations, and consistent personal branding strategies characterized by curated authenticity, lifestyle performance, and identity narration. For the broadcast media case, RCTI Infotainment segments were selected within a defined three-month observation period, focusing on episodes featuring celebrity lifestyle coverage, personal conflicts, romantic controversies, and emotional dramatization. These selection criteria were designed to capture representative forms of identity construction and commodification in both digital-native and legacy media contexts.

Data collection was carried out during the research period through systematic digital documentation and audio-visual archiving. Influencer content including posts, captions, video narratives, hashtags, sponsorship indicators, and engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, was documented and catalogued for analysis. In parallel, selected RCTI Infotainment broadcasts were recorded and transcribed, with particular attention given to narrative framing, lexical choices, visual sequencing, emotional tone, and commercial integration patterns. To contextualize structural influences shaping content production, supplementary materials such as platform monetization policies, advertising disclosures, and publicly available information regarding media ownership and platform governance were also reviewed.

The unit of analysis in this study consists of identity narratives and their commodified representations. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the discursive and visual construction of authenticity, aspirational lifestyle framing, emotional dramatization strategies, commercial integration cues (including endorsements and product placements), and indicators of algorithmic visibility. By examining these elements, the research captures both symbolic dimensions of identity performance and structural-economic mechanisms underlying their monetization.

Data analysis was conducted in three integrated stages. First, thematic coding was applied to identify recurring patterns in identity construction, emotional intensification, entrepreneurial self-representation, and commodification practices across both cases. Second, a critical interpretive analysis was undertaken using key concepts from Critical Theory, including the culture industry (Adorno & Horkheimer), instrumental rationality,

digital capitalism (Fuchs), and self-commodification (Khamis et al.; Duffy; Banet-Weiser). This stage interrogated how identity construction aligns with neoliberal market rationality and reproduces capitalist ideological structures. Third, a cross-case comparison was performed to identify structural continuities and divergences between influencer ecosystems and televised infotainment, revealing how both digital platforms and traditional broadcast media participate in the industrial production of subjectivity.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study applied methodological triangulation across digital content analysis, broadcast media documentation, and structural contextual review. Theoretical triangulation was also employed by integrating multiple strands of Critical Communication Theory to interpret findings. The research aims for analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization, consistent with qualitative case study methodology. While the study provides in-depth insight into identity commodification within selected cases, it does not seek to represent the entirety of Indonesia's influencer or infotainment industries. Audience reception analysis and quantitative engagement modeling are beyond the scope of this research, as the primary objective is to uncover structural and ideological mechanisms shaping contemporary digital communication practices.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The research findings demonstrate that personal branding within the influencer ecosystem and television infotainment practices cannot be understood solely as an individual communication strategy, but rather as part of the broader political-economic structure of digital communication. Findings regarding the curation of authenticity, the dramatization of emotion, and commercial integration demonstrate that identity is produced within a systematic framework of market rationality. This aligns with the culture industry thesis proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), which argues that cultural production under capitalism is never neutral but rather directed towards reproducing the logic of domination and consumption. In the digital context, it is not only cultural products that are commodified, but also subjectivity itself.

The findings regarding performative authenticity in influencers support Banet-Weiser's (2021) argument about the entrepreneurial self, namely the internalization of market rationality in identity formation. Influencers construct narratives of "authenticity" not as spontaneous expression, but as a market differentiation strategy. Data showing that emotional content generates higher engagement reinforces the thesis that authenticity has been engineered into symbolic capital. Thus, identity functions as an economic asset that can be measured through digital metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, as explained within the digital capitalism framework by Fuchs (2021).

Furthermore, findings on aspirational lifestyle framing and sponsor integration reinforce the concept of self-commodification proposed by Khamis, Ang, and Welling (2017). Influencers not only sell products, but also curated and replicable versions of themselves. Identity becomes a medium for distributing exchange value within the platform's monetization system. This is also consistent with Duffy's (2017) findings on aspirational labor, where individuals invest continuous emotional and creative labor for

visibility and potential monetization. Thus, personal branding is not merely a communication activity, but a form of symbolic labor integrated into the circuit of capital.

In the case of RCTI Infotainment, findings on the dramatization of conflict and the serialization of narratives demonstrate structural continuity with the classic culture industry. Television media frames celebrities' private experiences as public spectacles, creating the commodification of personal experiences in standardized formats. This practice reflects what Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) called the rationalization of culture for economic purposes. The difference lies in the medium, but the underlying logic remains the same: content production is geared toward maintaining audience attention and maximizing advertising value.

A cross-case comparative analysis shows that both digital influencers and television infotainment operate within a framework of instrumental rationality. In the digital context, algorithms replace the role of media institutions as distribution control mechanisms. The reliance on algorithmic visibility suggests that freedom of expression in digital spaces is structured by platforms' monetization and governance systems. Fuchs (2021) emphasizes that digital capitalism operates through the extraction of data and attention, which in this study is evident in how engagement metrics shape patterns of identity production.

The theoretical implication of this finding is the expansion of the concept of the culture industry toward what can be termed Culture Industry 4.0, a phase in which subjectivity becomes the primary commodity. While in the classical culture industry era, commodification occurred in film, music, and television, in the era of platform capitalism, individual identity becomes an economic unit that is continuously produced and reproduced. This research's contribution lies in integrating analyses of new and legacy media within a single critical framework, as well as providing an Indonesian empirical context that enriches the international literature on digital capitalism.

Factors influencing the research results include the platform's algorithmic structure, engagement-based monetization systems, and a digital culture that normalizes self-promotion. The findings also come from a social context that increasingly values visibility as a form of social capital. However, there are likely variations in personal branding practices not fully captured in this research, particularly among influencers with a non-commercial or community-based orientation. This suggests that despite the dominance of market logic, spaces for symbolic resistance may still exist.

Critically, this study is limited by its case scope and lacks an analysis of audience reception. It focuses on production and structure, not on how audiences interpret or respond to identity commodification. Furthermore, it does not employ statistical quantitative engagement analysis, so generalizations are analytical rather than broadly empirical. Future research could expand the approach by triangulating methods, including in-depth interviews with influencers and analyzing audience reception to understand hegemonic dynamics and potential resistance.

Overall, the integration of the results and discussion suggests that personal branding in the influencer ecosystem is not simply a creative communication strategy, but rather a manifestation of the structure of digital capitalism that normalizes the commodification of subjectivity. This research contributes to the development of critical communication theory by demonstrating how instrumental rationality operates through algorithms and monetization systems, and how identities are produced as exchange value in the attention

economy. Thus, this study broadens understanding of power relations in digital communication and opens up space for critical reflection on the ambivalence between empowerment and the reproduction of hegemony in contemporary digital culture.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that personal branding within the influencer ecosystem and television infotainment practices is a structural manifestation of Culture Industry 4.0, where identity is no longer merely a social expression, but rather produced, curated, and monetized as a symbolic commodity within the framework of digital capitalism. Based on a qualitative analysis of the construction of authenticity, the dramatization of emotions, commercial integration, and reliance on visibility metrics, this study shows that individual subjectivity has been integrated into algorithm-based instrumental rationality and monetization systems. These findings deepen the classic culture industry thesis by extending it to the realm of digital subjectivity production, while strengthening the concepts of self-commodification, aspirational labor, and the entrepreneurial self in the empirical context of Indonesia. Socially and culturally, the results of this study indicate that the normalization of self-marketing forms new standards of success, authenticity, and social relations that are increasingly tied to market logic. While academically, this study contributes to the development of critical communication theory by integrating new and old media analysis within a single structural framework. However, this study is limited by the scope of the case and does not include an analysis of audience reception or a quantitative approach to engagement patterns, so generalizations are analytical in nature; Therefore, future research is recommended to expand exploration through reception studies, digital ethnography approaches, and cross-platform and cross-country comparative analysis to enrich understanding of power dynamics and potential resistance in contemporary digital culture.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that digital practitioners, particularly influencers and media managers, be more reflective in building personal branding by considering ethical dimensions, commercial transparency, and the long-term impact on the construction of public identity, so that communication practices are not solely oriented towards visibility metrics but also towards social responsibility. For stakeholders, such as regulators and digital platforms, strengthening policies on algorithm transparency and protecting creative work is necessary to prevent them from being completely trapped in the logic of attention economy exploitation. Academically, this research can be developed through a triangulation of methods, such as a combination of critical discourse analysis, digital ethnography, in-depth interviews with influencers and audiences, and quantitative engagement analysis to broaden the validity of the findings. Future research could also explore dimensions of resistance, non-commercial identity negotiation strategies, or cross-country and cross-platform comparisons to enrich theoretical perspectives on the commodification of subjectivity in digital capitalism. With these developments, future studies are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of power dynamics, ideology, and potential transformations in contemporary digital communication culture.

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