

FROM RANK TO REACH: MMR AS SOCIAL CURRENCY AND PERSONAL BRANDING IN INDONESIA'S DOTA 2 COMMUNITY

Hery Maulana Arif^{1*},

*Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

E-mail: *herymaulana@unm.ac.id

Received : 15 March 2026

Published : 19 May 2026

Revised : 12 April 2026

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.59971/jumawa.v3i3.422>

Accepted : 05 May 2026

Link Publish : <https://abadiinstitute.org/index.php/JUMAWA/article/view/422>

Abstract

The growth of esports and social media has transformed gaming achievements into forms of digital social capital. In Indonesia's DOTA 2 community, Matchmaking Rating (MMR) functions not only as a ranking system but also as a symbol of credibility and online identity. However, limited qualitative studies have examined how players use MMR to build personal brands on social media platforms. This study aims to explore how Indonesian DOTA 2 players leverage MMR as social currency in constructing digital personal branding. This research employed a qualitative approach using digital ethnography and narrative analysis. Data were collected from TikTok, YouTube, Discord, OpenDota, and Dotamax through observations of content creators and gaming communities. The findings show that MMR serves as a status marker, storytelling tool, and source of social legitimacy. Two dominant branding archetypes were identified: the "Elite Educator," who emphasizes expertise and strategic guidance, and the "Relatable Striver," who builds engagement through humor and shared gaming experiences. TikTok emerged as the primary platform for audience reach and organic brand growth. The study concludes that successful gaming personal branding depends not only on competitive rank but also on how players narrate and communicate their gaming experiences across digital platforms.

Keywords: DOTA 2, MMR, Personal Branding, Esports, Digital Identity.

INTRODUCTION

The global esports industry has grown into a multi-billion-dollar ecosystem, reshaping the boundaries between play, performance, and professional identity (Newzoo, 2023). Within this ecosystem, individual players increasingly leverage their in-game achievements to build digital personal brands, a phenomenon particularly pronounced in Southeast Asia, where gaming culture is deeply embedded in everyday social life (Zainudin et al., 2021). Indonesia presents a compelling case: with one of the world's largest and fastest-growing digital populations, the country hosts a vibrant DOTA 2 community in which Matchmaking Rating (MMR) has transcended its technical function and become a form of social currency (Marchenko & Musabirov, 2019).

MMR, the algorithmic metric used by DOTA 2's ranking system to quantify player skill, determines the tier to which a player belongs, ranging from Herald at the lowest end to Immortal at the apex. While designed to ensure balanced matchmaking, this rating has acquired a far richer social significance within the Indonesian gaming community. High MMR confers prestige, credibility, and authority, while the journey of climbing ranks constitutes a compelling narrative arc that players publicly share through platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Discord (Opportunity-Ability Theory in Indonesian Dota2 Gamer, 2021).

Despite the growing body of literature on esports and gaming communities, qualitative inquiry into how individual players, particularly in non-Western contexts, construct personal brands through rank-based identity remains scarce. Most existing studies focus on professional teams or macro-level industry trends, leaving the micro-level practices of community-driven personal branding underexplored. This study

addresses that gap by asking: How do Indonesian DOTA 2 players use MMR as a social and symbolic resource to construct digital personal brands on social media?

To answer this question, we employ a qualitative methodology combining narrative analysis and digital ethnography. Our data sources include publicly available content from TikTok and YouTube, player profiles from OpenDota and Dotamax, and community discourse observed across Indonesian DOTA 2 forums and Discord servers. The analysis is guided by the theoretical frameworks of personal branding, social identity theory, and the concept of digital social capital.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on MMR, personal branding, and digital identity. Section 3 outlines our research methodology. Section 4 presents the findings organized around the key themes that emerged from data analysis. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, and Section 6 concludes the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MMR as Social Capital in Gaming Communities

Matchmaking Rating systems have been extensively studied in the context of competitive game design and player motivation (Bowman et al., 2016). However, less attention has been paid to the social dimensions of ranking systems, how they are interpreted, displayed, and weaponized within communities as forms of status. Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of social and cultural capital provides a useful framework here: MMR can be understood as a form of objectified cultural capital that players accumulate through sustained practice and display within a field defined by DOTA 2's competitive hierarchy.

Research on esports communities has noted that rank functions as a reputational signal, influencing how players are perceived by peers (Marchenko & Musabirov, 2019). In the context of DOTA 2 specifically, data from platforms such as OpenDota.com and Dotamax.com reveal a significant behavioral pattern: players with ratings above 4,000 MMR are substantially more willing to publicly display their rankings compared to those with ratings between 1,500 and 3,000 (Zhihu, 2017). This differential display behavior suggests that higher rank brackets are viewed as prestigious credentials worthy of public proclamation, while lower ranks may be concealed to avoid social stigma.

The significance of the Immortal threshold, approximately the top 13–16% of the player base, is particularly salient (Zhihu, 2017). Reaching Immortal is a milestone that players narrativize and celebrate publicly, marking the transition from competent player to elite status. This threshold mirrors findings in other competitive gaming contexts, where ranked achievements serve as gateways to new social roles and community recognition (Taylor, 2012).

Personal Branding in Digital Spaces

Personal branding, originally theorized in marketing literature as the deliberate management of an individual's professional image (Peters, 1997), has evolved significantly in the digital era. Online platforms have democratized the tools of self-presentation, enabling individuals without institutional backing to build audiences and exert influence (Khamis et al., 2017). For gaming content creators, personal branding involves the strategic curation of in-game performance, personality, and community interaction to construct a distinctive and compelling online identity (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017).

Indonesian research on YouTube gaming channels has demonstrated that a dedicated gaming presence can significantly enhance a creator's personal brand, with tangible milestones such as the silver

play button (awarded at 100,000 subscribers) contributing to perceived brand value (Akbar et al., 2023). This aligns with broader findings that creator credibility is often established through demonstrated expertise and consistent content production, both of which MMR directly supports.

Crucially, personal branding in gaming contexts is not limited to elite performers. Researchers have identified that authenticity, relatability, and community engagement are equally powerful brand-building tools (Duffy & Pooley, 2019). This suggests a spectrum of branding strategies available to players at different skill levels, from expert-driven instruction to humor-based community content.

TikTok and the Indonesian Digital Ecosystem

Indonesia's digital landscape is characterized by extraordinary social media penetration and rapid growth. As of 2020, approximately 66% of the population accessed social media, with projections reaching 82% by 2026 (Statista, 2024). While Facebook has historically dominated the market with approximately 70% market share as of July 2021 (Statista, 2024), TikTok has emerged as the dominant platform for youth and gaming culture, driven by its algorithm's emphasis on engagement rate over follower count, an affordance that particularly benefits emerging creators (Baltezarević et al., 2022).

TikTok's flow-inducing design, characterized by short-form video, algorithmic personalization, and infinite scroll, creates an environment highly conducive to gaming content (Iman & Hardianto, 2026). Gaming creators leverage this environment by producing highlight reels, quick tutorials, meme compilations, and community reactions. The platform's emphasis on organic reach rewards quality and resonance over advertising spend, making it an especially important venue for grassroots personal brand construction.

YouTube and Discord play complementary roles in this ecosystem. YouTube affords longer-form content, detailed match analyses, vlogs, and extended live streams that deepen audience relationships and reinforce expertise claims (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). Discord, functioning as a semi-private communication layer, enables intimate community management and real-time interaction that sustains fan loyalty beyond the public sphere of mainstream platforms (Jiwandono, 2026)

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, combining digital ethnography and narrative analysis to investigate how Indonesian DOTA 2 players construct digital personal brands through their MMR. Qualitative approaches are appropriate here because the research objective is to understand meaning-making processes, symbolic communication, and identity construction phenomena that resist reduction to numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study is interpretive in orientation, seeking to understand participants' practices from an emic, insider perspective.

Data Collection

Data was collected from multiple online sources between January and September 2024. Primary data sources included: (1) publicly available TikTok videos from Indonesian DOTA 2 content creators, identified through keyword searches including "dota 2," "naik MMR," "immortal dota," "rank dota indonesia," and names of prominent local players; (2) YouTube channels operated by Indonesian DOTA 2 creators, focusing on channel descriptions, video metadata, and viewer comment sections; (3) player profiles on OpenDota.com and Dotamax.com, where MMR data is voluntarily disclosed; and (4) publicly accessible Discord server announcements and community posts.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, selecting creators who demonstrated active engagement with rank-related content and had verifiable public MMR data. The final sample comprised approximately 45 content creator profiles and over 120 individual content items spanning TikTok videos, YouTube uploads, and social media posts. Data collection followed ethical guidelines for internet research, focusing exclusively on publicly available material without accessing private communications.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through three iterative phases. First, open coding was applied to identify initial themes and patterns across the dataset, generating a preliminary codebook of concepts related to MMR display, narrative framing, platform strategies, and community interaction. Second, axial coding was used to explore relationships between codes, leading to the identification of the two dominant branding archetypes described in the findings section. Third, selective coding integrated the emerging themes into a coherent theoretical framework connecting MMR, narrative strategy, and social media execution.

Narrative analysis was applied specifically to content items in which creators explicitly framed their rank or MMR journey as a story. This involved attention to plot structure (the journey from lower to higher rank), character positioning (expert vs. fellow traveler), and rhetorical appeals (logos through statistics and gameplay evidence, ethos through rank display, pathos through shared struggle). The analysis was conducted by two researchers independently, with disagreements resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Positionality and Limitations

The researchers acknowledge their positions as scholars with familiarity with competitive gaming culture, which facilitated interpretive access to community norms but may also have introduced assumptions that shaped the analysis. All interpretations have been cross-checked against the raw data to minimize researcher bias. Key limitations include the reliance on publicly available data, which may not capture private or informal branding practices, and the temporal scope of the study, which reflects a specific

moment in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. The selection bias inherent in publicly displayed MMR data, where players in lower brackets are less likely to make their ratings visible, is also acknowledged as a constraint on the representativeness of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 MMR as Social Currency and Identity Marker

The most prominent finding to emerge from the data is the extent to which MMR functions as a form of social currency within the Indonesian DOTA 2 community. Far from being a mere algorithmic output, rank is treated as a public credential, a verifiable, objective marker of investment, skill, and status. Players in the upper tiers routinely displayed their MMR across content titles, profile bios, and video thumbnails, framing it as a seal of authenticity that validates the advice and analysis they offer.

This display behavior was strongly tiered. Players with MMR above 4,000, the threshold for the Immortal bracket, were substantially more likely to foreground their rank in content compared to those with ratings between 1,500 and 3,000. One streamer's declaration, "Kalau begini, kenapa nggak sekalian jadi streamer" ("If it's like this, why not just become a streamer"), illustrates the pathway through which rank achievement catalyzes the decision to enter the content creation space. High rank was not merely a prerequisite for credibility; it was, in this community, an invitation to go public.

The symbolic vocabulary of rank permeated community discourse at all levels. Players who had never competed professionally nonetheless identified as "legend" or "immortal legend," highlighting the aspirational and identity-forming power of these titles. Even the language of inter-rank conflict, exemplified by content framed around "Divine 5 Crushing Immortals," demonstrates how rank distinctions are continuously leveraged to generate dramatic narratives that captivate and organize the community.

4.2 Two Dominant Personal Branding Archetypes

The analysis revealed two dominant and recurring personal branding archetypes, each representing a distinct strategy for leveraging rank in the service of audience construction.

The first archetype, the Elite Educator, is characterized by high-ranked players typically in the Immortal or Divine tiers who position themselves as authoritative knowledge sources. Their content encompasses detailed item build recommendations, hero mechanics breakdowns, and MMR improvement guides. The rhetorical logic underpinning this archetype is transparent: high rank legitimizes the claim to expertise, transforming gameplay achievement into pedagogical authority. Titles such as "How to Get Pro Rank" or "Mastering [Hero] Critical Build" signal this positioning immediately, directing content toward an audience actively seeking to improve. The Elite Educator brand is reinforced through clips of flawless gameplay, solo kills, and strategic outplays, which function as evidence supporting the creator's authority claims. YouTube is a particularly important platform for this archetype, given its affordance for long-form analytical content.

The second archetype, the Relatable Striver, operates at a different register. Rather than projecting elite status, these creators often, in the Legend or Ancient brackets, cultivate a brand rooted in shared experience, humor, and community solidarity. Their content foregrounds the struggles and absurdities of climbing the ranked ladder: encounters with smurfs, losing streaks, unexpected defeats, and the psychological toll of competitive play. This strategy builds emotional connection rather than intellectual credibility, positioning the creator as a fellow traveler rather than a distant expert. The narrative logic here

is empathic: "We are all struggling together, and in this struggle, we find humor and motivation." TikTok is the natural home for this archetype, given its emphasis on short-form, emotionally resonant, and humorous content. The following table summarizes the key distinguishing characteristics of these two archetypes.

Table 1. Personal Branding Archetypes in the Indonesian DOTA 2 Community

Feature	Elite Educator	Relatable Striver
Primary Goal	Establish authority and teach advanced skills	Build community, humor, and shared experience
Typical MMR/Rank	High (e.g., Immortal, Divine)	Mid-to-Low (e.g., Legend, Ancient)
Content Focus	Gameplay analysis, strategy guides, item builds, MMR improvement tips	Funny fails, relatable struggles, memes, community reactions
Brand Personality	Knowledgeable, confident, authoritative	Humble, entertaining, empathetic
Audience Appeal	Players aiming to improve and reach a high skill level	A broad audience identifying with the daily grind
Primary Platforms	YouTube (long-form analysis), TikTok (tips)	Primarily TikTok for short-form, humorous content

4.3 Niche Specialization as a Third Strategy

Beyond the two dominant archetypes, the data revealed a third, less common but analytically significant strategy: niche specialization. Some creators built their brand around mastery of a specific hero, particularly mechanically demanding ones such as Meepo or Terrorblade, rather than around their overall MMR tier. This strategy enabled creators to carve out a distinctive identity within a crowded content landscape, becoming the go-to resource for players interested in that specific hero or role.

Niche specialization is particularly effective because it reduces direct comparison with higher-MMR creators; a Legend-tier Meepo specialist occupies a different competitive space than a generic Immortal-tier tutorial channel. The strategy also facilitates a devoted, highly engaged following among players with shared interests, consistent with findings in broader influencer research suggesting that niche audiences often exhibit higher engagement rates than general audiences (Statista, 2023).

4.4 The Integrated Brand-Building Feedback Loop

A key structural finding is that personal brand-building in this community operates as a dynamic feedback loop rather than a linear process. MMR provides the foundational social proof upon which a brand is built. Creating content about that rank through tutorials, highlight reels, and commentary reinforces the creator's skills through reflective practice, potentially driving further MMR gains. Improved in-game performance generates more compelling content, which attracts more followers and engagement, which in turn motivates continued content production. This cycle is amplified by platform algorithms, particularly TikTok's, which reward high-engagement content with expanded reach, creating a positive reinforcement loop that benefits creators who successfully marry in-game achievement with compelling content execution.

This feedback loop has practical consequences for how creators narrate their journey. The most successful accounts in the dataset did not present their rank as a static credential but as a living, evolving

story. Progress toward higher tiers, setbacks during rank loss streaks, and the eventual achievement of milestone ranks were all rendered as chapter turns in an ongoing narrative that kept audiences invested. Former professional player Ibot13 exemplifies this dynamic: leveraging his past high-level competitive experience alongside his current streaming practice to build authority that transcends any single MMR bracket.

4.5 Platform Ecology and Multi-Channel Strategy

The data consistently showed that successful brand builders in this community did not limit themselves to a single platform but deployed a coordinated multi-platform strategy tailored to each channel's affordances. TikTok served as the primary acquisition channel, used to generate awareness through short, algorithm-optimized clips. YouTube functioned as the authority-building channel, hosting longer-form analysis, vlogs, and live streams that deepened audience relationships. Discord operated as the retention and community management layer, enabling intimate interaction between creator and audience that sustained loyalty between content releases.

This ecology mirrors findings from broader creator economy research (Cunningham & Craig, 2019), while also reflecting context-specific factors in the Indonesian digital landscape. The dominance of mobile device usage for gaming in Indonesia reinforces TikTok's centrality, as the platform is natively optimized for mobile consumption. At the same time, YouTube's established infrastructure for monetization and discoverability ensures its continued relevance for creators seeking long-term brand sustainability.

Discussion

The findings of this study carry several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, they extend the personal branding literature into non-Western, gaming-specific contexts, demonstrating that the principles of brand construction differentiation, credibility signaling, and audience engagement operate within gaming communities but are mediated by domain-specific currencies such as MMR. The Elite Educator archetype maps onto expert power positioning theorized in personal branding literature (Khamis et al., 2017), while the Relatable Striver archetype reflects the affective labor and authenticity performance documented in influencer studies (Duffy & Pooley, 2019).

The concept of MMR as social currency extends Bourdieu's (1986) framework into digital gaming contexts, where field-specific capital accumulated through playing a game is converted into audience capital through strategic self-presentation. This conversion is not automatic: it requires narrative work, platform literacy, and community management. The creators who most successfully translate high MMR into social media influence are those who combine in-game excellence with communicative competence.

The identification of a selection bias in public MMR data, where players with higher ratings are more likely to display them, has important implications for quantitative studies using platform-scraped MMR data. Any empirical analysis of the MMR-influence relationship must account for this bias, as it artificially inflates the apparent density of high-MMR accounts in public datasets. An estimated 84–87% of all DOTA 2 players have MMR below 4,000 (Zhihu, 2017), meaning that Immortal-tier creators represent a structurally privileged minority whose visibility in public data far exceeds their actual prevalence.

Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for aspiring gaming content creators. The most effective strategy appears to involve not merely achieving a high rank but actively constructing a narrative around that rank, framing it as an achievement with a backstory, a process with lessons, and a destination with a community. Creators who treat rank as raw material for storytelling, rather than simply as a

credential to be displayed, appear to build more engaged and loyal audiences. Platform selection should be deliberate: TikTok for reach and engagement, YouTube for depth and authority, Discord for community and retention.

The study also highlights a broader cultural dynamic in Indonesian digital media: the transformation of gaming from a private leisure activity into a public performance with genuine social and economic stakes. As the Indonesian esports industry continues to grow with increasing opportunities for streaming sponsorships, event appearances, and professional contracts, the ability to build a personal brand around in-game achievement becomes an increasingly valuable and consequential skill.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has explored how Indonesian DOTA 2 players use their Matchmaking Rating as a foundational resource for constructing digital personal brands on social media. Through narrative analysis and digital ethnography, we have demonstrated that MMR functions not merely as a technical metric but as a socially rich symbol system, a credential, a status marker, a narrative device, and a community currency. Two dominant branding archetypes, the Elite Educator and the Relatable Striver, represent distinct but equally viable strategies for translating rank into social influence, each optimized for different audiences, platforms, and relational dynamics.

The integrated framework that emerges from the analysis, in which in-game identity, narrative strategy, and social media execution form a dynamic feedback loop, provides a model for understanding organic personal brand development in gaming communities more broadly. This framework suggests that the gap between virtual achievement and real-world influence is bridged not by rank alone, but by the narrative and relational work that players invest in presenting their ranked experiences to the world.

Future research should extend this framework through longitudinal methods that trace brand trajectories over time, comparative studies across different national gaming communities, and quantitative approaches that complement the qualitative insights developed here. The intersection of gaming achievement, digital identity, and social media influence represents a rich and largely underexplored domain with significant implications for communication studies, esports scholarship, and the broader sociology of digital culture.

REFERENCES

- Akbar, A., Pradiani, T., & Rahman, A. (2023). The Influence Of Youtube Gaming Channel Through Personal Branding On Increasing Brand Awareness Of The E-Sports Industry in IESPA Malang Raya Members. *Jurnal Ilmiah Riset Aplikasi Manajemen*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.32815/jiram.v1i2.31>
- Baltezarević, R., Baltezarević, I., & Milutinović, O. (2022). The role of personal branding in the esports industry. *Megatrend Revija*, 19(3), 329–339. <https://doi.org/10.5937/MegRev2203329B>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
- Bowman, N. D., Weber, R., Tamborini, R., & Sherry, J. (2016). Facilitating game play: How others affect performance at and enjoyment of video games. *Media Psychology*, 16(1), 39–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2012.742360>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York University Press.
- Duffy, B. E., & Pooley, J. D. (2019). Idols of promotion: The triumph of self-branding in an age of precarious work. *Journal of Communication*, 69(1), 26–48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy063>
- GosuGamers. (2026). Dota 2 team rankings and leaderboards 2026. <https://www.gosugamers.net/dota2/rankings>
- Iman, M. F. S., & Hardianto, A. (2026). Technological Affordances and Flow Experience: A Study of TikTok Users in Indonesia. *Ekspresi Dan Persepsi: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, 9(1), 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.33822/JEP.V9I1.10738>
- Jiwandono, H. P. (2026). Mobile labour: Mobile esports and gaming labour in Indonesia. *Mobile Media & Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20501579261417804>
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>
- Marchenko, A., & Musabirov, I. (2019). Media metrics in esports: The case of Dota 2. In *Proceedings of the ACM CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605>
- Newzoo. (2023). *Global esports & live streaming market report 2023*. Newzoo BV.
- Peters, T. (1997, August 31). The brand called you. *Fast Company*. <https://www.fastcompany.com/28905/brand-called-you>
- Sjöblom, M., & Hamari, J. (2017). Why do people watch others play video games? An empirical study on the motivations of Twitch users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 75, 985–996. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.10.019>
- Statista. (2023). YouTube influencers' engagement rate by follower count 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1399219/indonesia-youtube-influencers-engagement-rate-by-follower-count/>
- Statista. (2024a). Indonesia: Social media advertising number of users 2019–2028. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/247938/number-of-social-network-users-in-indonesia/>

- Statista. (2024b). Market share of social media platforms in Indonesia 2025. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1256213/indonesia-social-media-market-share/>
- Statista. (2024c). Indonesia: Social media penetration 2026. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/486480/mobile-messaging-user-reach-indonesia/>
- Taylor, T. L. (2012). Raising the stakes: E-sports and the professionalization of computer gaming. MIT Press.
- Zainudin, M., et al. (2021). Opportunity-ability theory influences Indonesian Dota 2 gamer behavior. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, 1779(1), 012003. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1779/1/012003>
- Zhihu Column. (2017). An estimation of DOTA 2 MMR distribution. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/25207214>