

The Sexual Objectification of National Team Athletes in Generative AI Photos Created by Fans: A Semiotic Analysis

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received April 27, 2026

Revised May 15, 2026

Accepted June 12, 2026

Keywords

Artificial intelligence;

AI generative photo;

Objectification;

Semiotics;

Digital media

ABSTRACT

The advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technology has facilitated the emergence of AI-generated photo content, giving rise to a social media trend in which users create images depicting themselves alongside their idols. This trend is originated within the fan community of the Indonesian National Football Team athletes in various intimate scenarios. This study aims to examine the forms of sexual objectification directed at these athletes. Employing a qualitative approach, this research utilizes Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis alongside Objectification Theory. The data consist of AI-generated photo content circulating on social media, representing the male bodies of Indonesian National Football Team athletes as constructed by fans. The findings reveal that such content frames athletes' bodies as sexual objects, detached from their achievements and professional identities. These representations contribute to the normalization of an ideology in which athletes, as public figures, are rendered consumable within private and sexualized contexts. Furthermore, this form of objectification has evolved into a recurring pattern within digital fan culture, continuously reproduced and normalized through AI technologies on social media.

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1. Introduction

The extensive use of Generative AI Photo technology has sparked a viral trend on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram featuring “Photos with Idols.” The “photos with idols” phenomenon, using Generative AI Photo technology, began to gain traction in early September 2025 as evidenced by national media coverage on September 12, 2025, reporting that multiple Indonesian National Team players including Rizky Ridho, Justin Hubner, and Sandy Walsh had publicly protested against the AI-edited photos circulating on social media (cnnindonesia, 2025; Kompas.com, 2025; Tvonenews, 2025). The rapid spread of this content prompted players to issue public statements objecting to the unauthorized use of their images in intimate and sexual scenarios. This trend is predominantly popular among the Indonesian national team's fan community on social media, it serves not only as entertainment, but also as a way for fans to visualize their personal fantasies with their idols in a very realistic manner. Initially, this trend emerged as a form of fan creativity, driven by a desire to feel closer to their idols through edited photos that appear realistic (Alfassi et al., 2025). These photos typically show fans posing intimately, such as standing side-by-side with the athlete.

Due to the ease of access to AI applications capable of generating images from text or source photos, this trend has rapidly spread and gone viral across various platforms. The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, particularly in the form of Generative AI Photo, has eliminated the boundaries that previously separated advanced technology from the general public (Bansal, Nawal, Chamola, & Herencsar, 2024).



Fig. 1. Fan photos featuring Indonesian National Soccer Team players created using Generative AI

Generative AI photo tools allow fans to create images that make it appear as though they are in a romantic or intimate situation with their favorite athlete. The viral trend of “Photos with Idols” has led to an increasing number of fans uploading similar content featuring various forms of editing, some of which even depict suggestive or sexual interactions without the athlete’s consent. This phenomenon raises ethical concerns because many “Photos with Idols” posts cross reasonable boundaries, depicting kissing scenes, highly intimate poses, or even content implying sexual activity. In a short time, the trend has shifted from mere creative entertainment to an ethical issue regarding the privacy and image rights of public figures. In response to the trend going viral, players on the Indonesian National Soccer Team have expressed their objections because these edited photos place them in positions or expressions they did not consent to and are considered to violate their privacy.

The main issue with this phenomenon is sexual objectification, according to (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) as cited in (Chau, Chan, Liang, & Poon, 2024) that is, when a person is no longer viewed as a whole individual, but merely as an object for others’ pleasure. Using Generative AI Photo technology, fans can alter or recreate images of male idols as they wish, including in the form of sexual fantasies. As access to this technology becomes easier, there is a risk that it could be used as a means of humiliation, bullying, and damaging a person’s image or reputation in the digital space (Okolie, 2023). This phenomenon demonstrates how social media has become a space that empowers fans, not merely as spectators but as meaning-makers who influence the public image of these idols.

Content created by fans using Generative AI Photo has sparked debate on social media. The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, particularly in the form of Generative AI Photo, has broken down the barriers that previously separated cutting-edge technology from the general public (Bansal et al., 2024). Fans who create and share this content view their actions not as negative, but as a form of expressing admiration and fantasy toward their idols (Kang, Kim, Kim, Fussell, & Kim, 2025). Fans view these edited photos depicting intimate and sexual scenes as a way to express enjoyment. However, these photo edits are opposed by many other social media users, who view such actions as unethical objectification and a violation of the idols’ privacy (Kang, Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2022). Social media platforms like Instagram likely have a stronger influence on the tendency

toward self-sexualization because these platforms focus on visual communication, particularly through photos. Therefore, the use of Instagram is often associated with increased objectification (Plieger et al., 2021).

Men are often perceived as strong, brave, and capable of protecting themselves, and are therefore considered resilient against harassment (Astari, 2022). This perception overlooks the fact that objectification, in any form, is a harmful act that demeans human dignity. Objectification strips a person of their humanity, regardless of who they are, what they do, or their gender. Ultimately, anyone can become a victim of objectification regardless of gender. Furthermore, objectification can occur anytime and anywhere, particularly in digital spaces that facilitate the creation of manipulative content without consent.

This phenomenon reflects a major shift in how women express their sexuality in the digital world. Now fans have the tools to create images that objectify male figures, a practice previously more commonly carried out by men against women. Furthermore, this phenomenon reveals how women, whether as fans or content creators, express their sexuality by leveraging technology to construct fantasies of masculinity. In digital culture, expressions of romantic and sexual interest in male public figures can serve as a form of affective pleasure for female fans through fantasies of intimacy, visual appreciation, and the consumption of male bodies on social media (Dewi & Rianto, 2022). Objectification mediated by Generative AI Photo technology not only violates an individual's right to their own image but also indicates the abuse of audience power driven by the ease of access to technology.

Previous research on objectification has primarily focused on female figures; a study by Pecini et al., (2023) demonstrated that masculinity norms play a significant role in reinforcing objectification practices. The emergence of this phenomenon on social media indicates a new trend, particularly as generative AI photo technology makes it easier for fans to reshape images of their idols according to their fantasies, including those of a sexual nature. Previous research has highlighted the objectification of male bodies in content on Instagram (Astari, 2022). A study by Willis, Bridges, & Sun (2022) examined gender bias in generative AI, finding that AI models directly participate in the production of content that has the potential to reinforce gender bias—unlike previous technologies, which only influenced content selection and curation. Azcárate (2024) also argues that digitalization and AI are not only transforming how humans interact with the world but also how humans think about the representation and distribution of agency between human and non-human agents in content production. Meanwhile, the study by Okolie (2023) examines the production of deepfake pornography and image-based sexual abuse, which threaten individual privacy and safety, particularly that of women. A review of recent literature on objectification, fandom culture, and generative AI indicates that studies examining AI-generated fan photography and the objectification of male athletes remain limited. Existing research has primarily focused on deepfakes, AI ethics, female objectification, and celebrity culture, while the objectification of male athletes through fan-produced generative AI imagery has received relatively little scholarly attention. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how AI-generated fan photographs construct and normalize the objectification of Indonesian national team athletes. The objectification created through Generative AI Photo technology, specifically regarding men's bodies. This study offers a novel perspective by examining sexual objectification through Generative AI Photo media, a topic not previously explored in prior research. The Roland Barthes semiotic model employed in this study will analyze the signs, symbols, and ideologies embedded in AI-generated content to elucidate how meanings regarding gender, sexuality, and power are constructed on social media.

The ease with which manipulated visual content can be made to appear realistic using generative AI photo tools poses a serious threat to information integrity and public trust in the digital sphere (Nurdin et al., 2025). This phenomenon also extends into sports fan culture, where fans actively produce and distribute AI-generated photos depicting male athletes in sexualized representations. The issue at hand is not merely a technological problem but touches on deeper dimensions regarding how male athletes' bodies are represented, their meanings constructed, and ultimately sexually objectified

by fans through AI-based media. The use of Generative AI Photo to create images where a person appears to be objectified without consent not only causes reputational harm but also has broader ethical implications (Furizal et al., 2025). The absence of clear ethical boundaries regarding AI-generated non-consensual content can expand the scope for exploitation and exacerbate social inequalities, one example being the sexual objectification of male athletes on the Indonesian National Team carried out through Generative AI Photos on social media.

Fan culture should ideally be based on positive appreciation, responsible creativity, and the use of technology for supportive or inspirational purposes, not for violations of privacy and moral rights. Given this gap, a fundamental question arises regarding how AI technology and fan culture shape the social construction of the male body in the digital media sphere. “How is the sexual objectification of male athletes on the Indonesian National Soccer Team constructed through visual representations in fan-created Generative AI Photo content?” The objective of this study is to understand and explain how the sexual objectification of male athletes on the Indonesian National Soccer Team is constructed through visual representations in fan-created Generative AI Photo content. The contribution of this research is to reveal how artificial intelligence (AI) technology serves as a new medium in shaping representations of the body and masculinity within digital culture, where fans are not merely consumers but also active producers of meaning. This research thus expands the theoretical scope of objectification theory within digital fan culture and AI-generated photos.

2. Method

This study employs a constructivist paradigm, which holds that social reality is not singular or objective but is shaped through the construction of meaning generated by individuals and social groups. The constructivist paradigm posits that knowledge is the result of human interpretation of experience, social context, and cultural symbols (W.Creswell & N.Poth, 2018). This study employs a qualitative approach using Roland Barthes’s semiotic analysis method. The qualitative approach is used to explain and interpret the meanings of hidden signs behind visual representations, particularly within complex digital cultural phenomena such as Generative AI Photo content featuring male athletes from the Indonesian National Soccer Team. This study focuses on efforts to uncover the process of sexual objectification and the construction of digital masculinity through the representation of athletes’ bodies within fandom culture.

The data in this study are divided into two types. Primary data consist of fan-created Generative AI photo content collected from TikTok and X through digital observation and documentation, while secondary data include academic journals, books, news articles, and previous studies related to objectification theory, fandom culture, masculinity, and visual semiotics. Data collection was conducted through digital observation on TikTok and X during September–October 2025. The researcher searched, downloaded, archived, and categorized AI-generated fan photo content using keywords and hashtags such as “foto Timnas AI,” “AI generative photo Timnas,” and “AI Polaroid Timnas.” The researcher searched, downloaded, archived, and categorized AI-generated fan photo content relevant to the focus of the study.

The initial corpus consisted of three AI-generated images uploaded by one fan aggregator account on X and approximately 97 user-submitted AI-generated images found within the comment section of one TikTok post related to the AI fan-photo trend. The researcher then conducted purposive sampling to select images relevant to the research focus. Images showing ordinary fan admiration, neutral poses, or non-intimate fan interactions were excluded from the analysis. The selected content was limited to visual representations containing operational indicators of sensuality, sexualization, and objectification. In this study, sensuality refers to visual or textual elements emphasizing bodily attraction, physical intimacy, or romantic atmosphere without necessarily depicting explicit sexual acts. Meanwhile, sexualization refers to representations positioning athletes primarily as objects of romantic or sexual fantasy beyond their professional identity as public sports figures. Operational indicators included: (1) intimate bodily proximity such as hugging, kissing, touching the face, chest, waist, or shoulders; (2) shirtless exposure or visual emphasis on muscular body parts; (3) bedroom or

private domestic settings implying intimacy; (4) suggestive captions or narratives implying romantic or sexual relationships; and (5) visual constructions that reduced athletes' identities from professional sports figures into romantic or sexual fantasy objects. Based on this screening process, seven images from seven different TikTok accounts and three images from a single fan aggregator account on X were selected as the final corpus for analysis. Therefore, the final dataset consists of ten AI-generated images featuring five Indonesian National Team athletes, although some athletes appear repeatedly in multiple images.

The data analysis technique employs Roland Barthes's semiotic approach by examining three levels of meaning: (1) denotative meaning, which describes the visual elements; (2) connotative meaning, which interprets the emotional and cultural significance of visual signs; (3) mythological or ideological meaning, which reveals the value systems and ideologies that naturalize the athlete's body as an object of fantasy and a symbol of ideal masculinity. The analysis is conducted through two main dimensions: the syntagmatic relationships between elements within a single image and the paradigmatic possibilities of meaning and symbol variation within the same sign system. Each piece of content is analyzed through a structured three-stage semiotic process. In the first stage (denotative analysis), each photograph is systematically described using a standardized coding sheet comprising five visual categories: (1) pose and gesture, including embrace direction, kissing, and physical contact; (2) body exposure and clothing, including shirtless depictions, tight clothing, and tattoos; (3) facial expression, including eyes closed, smiling, and emotional engagement; (4) spatial context and aesthetic format, including polaroid format, background, and filters; and (5) caption and text, including ownership claims, parasocial expressions, and character construction.

Following the visual description, each photograph is assessed against Nussbaum (1995) seven dimensions of objectification: (1) instrumentality: treating the athlete's body as a tool for satisfying others' desires; (2) denial of autonomy: denying the athlete's ability to govern their own body and image; (3) inertness: positioning the athlete as a passive object without agency; (4) fungibility: treating the athlete as interchangeable with other similar figures; (5) violability: treating the athlete's bodily and privacy boundaries as open to violation; (6) ownership: treating the athlete as possessable by the fan; and (7) denial of subjectivity: ignoring the athlete's feelings, thoughts, and inner experiences. Nussbaum (1995) notes that the presence of two or more dimensions is sufficient to constitute objectification. Both present and absent dimensions are recorded for each photograph to ensure analytical transparency. This framework is used to analyze how generative AI content represents Indonesian national team athletes, by identifying the presence of one or more of these dimensions that indicate the reduction of athletes from whole human beings into objects of sexual fantasy by fan-generated photo content circulated on social media platforms X and TikTok. Through this analysis, the study seeks to uncover how ideology, power relations, and the construction of meaning operate behind the practice of visualizing male bodies in Generative AI Photos produced by fans.




3. Results and Discussion

This study analyzes fan-generated photo content circulated on social media platforms X and TikTok, featuring Indonesian national team fans with their idols, retrieved from seven original TikTok creator accounts and three photos from the fan aggregator account @TimnasXtra on X, with a focus on the presence of sexual elements created by the fans. The analysis was conducted using Roland Barthes' semiotics and objectification theory. The AI-generated photos produced by fans reveal a shift in the meaning of National Team athletes' representations from professional sports figures to objects of romantic and sexual fantasy in the digital space. Visual representations of National Team athletes are no longer expressions of admiration but rather instances of digital objectification. Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of AI-generated photos featuring Indonesian national soccer team athletes with fans, recurring pattern of visual representation was identified across all ten photos analyzed physical intimacy. These trends in the photos depict physical closeness such as hugging in 7 photos, kissing scenes in 5 photos, touching intimate body parts in 3 photos, and intimate depiction of shirtless athletes in 2 photos

At the denotative level, the analyzed content consistently portrays the male body as the focal point of the visual composition. This visual content depicts physical interactions between athletes and fans, including touching the chest area, hugging, and kissing. Additionally, there is content featuring the athletes' upper bodies exposed, with muscles and tattoos on display. Meanwhile, the poses of physical intimacy depicted such as hugs, kisses, and intimate bodily contact construct a sexual scenario in which the athlete's body is reduced from a professional identity to a romantic-sexual object. Barthes (1977) explains that this reduction of professional identity into a site of sexual fantasy constitutes a second-order sign system, in which the initial visual signs athletic body, sports context are stripped of their original meaning and replaced by connotations of sexual desirability and romantic availability.

The consistent use of the polaroid photo format across all ten photographs constitutes a significant denotative pattern. At the denotative level, the polaroid format presents each photograph as a piece of personal, analog-style intimate photography, visually indistinguishable in format from authentic couple photographs. This uniformity across the entire corpus indicates that the choice of format is not incidental, but a deliberate aesthetic convention shared within this fan content practice, one that gives AI-generated objectifying content the visual grammar of real personal memory.

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of AI-Generated Fan Photos of Indonesian National Team Athletes Based on Roland Barthes' Levels of Meaning

Content	Semiotics		
	Conotative	Denotative	Myth
	Arhan Pratama embraces a woman from behind with his arms around her waist and his lips touching her cheek. The woman is smiling. Polaroid format with a plain background. Caption: 'That's my husband, right.'	A hug from behind with a kiss on the cheek symbolizes the intimacy of a romantic-sexual couple. The athlete's jersey a marker of professional identity loses its meaning. The caption "That's my husband, right" explicitly establishes a claim of ownership over the athlete.	The athlete's popularity as a public figure automatically grants fans social permission to claim and manipulate his image within a private and intimate context. The Polaroid format constructs the AI-generated content as an authentic, real memory, obscuring the fact that this photo is a digital fabrication created without consent. The caption 'That's my husband, right?' a claim of ownership.
	Arhan Pratama, shirtless, holds a woman's head while smiling. The background resembles a bedroom. No athletic clothing is visible. Caption: 'Sorry, I woke up next to Arhan.'	The combination of a shirtless body, a bed as the backdrop, and the act of cradling the head constructs a narrative of explicit sexual intimacy that implies sleeping together. The athletic body is highlighted as a sexual object, while the athlete's professional identity is completely erased.	The exposed, athletic male body is an object of sexual consumption that fans can claim and experience within a private digital context. The caption "Sorry, I woke up sleeping with Arhan" normalizes sexual fantasies as a form of parasocial intimacy that is considered funny and normal, rather than a violation of privacy.
	Rafael Struick, wearing a T-shirt, embraces a woman from behind with both arms wrapped around her waist and his head touching hers in a kissing gesture. Polaroid format on a plain background.	A hug from behind with hands on her stomach and a head-to-head kiss constructs a narrative of romantic possession that positions the athlete as a protective and dominant figure. Interestingly, the photo caption asks for permission from a fellow	Permission to use an athlete's image and likeness can be obtained simply from the fan community, not from the athlete themselves. This normalizes objectification as something decided collectively by the community, disregarding the athlete's individual rights to their own image.

Caption: 'It's okay, Fael, right, sis.'



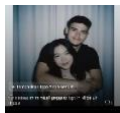
Rizky Ridho, a man wearing a long-sleeved shirt, is hugging a woman from behind; one hand is explicitly on the woman's chest, the other on her head. Both are smiling. A black-and-white filter is applied to the entire image. Polaroid format with no text.

fan—not from the athlete himself.

A hand explicitly placed on a breast is the most explicit sexual gesture. The black-and-white filter aestheticizes this exploitation, making it appear artistic. The absence of captions indicates that the image itself is sufficient as a sexual signifier.

'It's okay, right?' permission is sought from the fan community, not the athlete. Explicit sexual objectification can be repackaged within an artistic visual aesthetic to mask its exploitative nature. The absence of captions reflects a normalization so complete that verbal justification is unnecessary.

Mees Hilgers embraces a woman wearing revealing clothing from behind; both are facing forward and smiling. Polaroid format with a plain background. Caption: 'Sorry, I'm really nervous being hugged by Mees.'



Mees Hilgers, shirtless, embraces a woman from the side, with one hand touching her face and the other on her shoulder. Polaroid format on a plain background. The caption consists solely of emojis.

This caption reveals a strong parasocial dimension: fans do not merely imagine a fantasy but actively immerse themselves and physically experience the athlete's embrace as if it were real. The language, in the form of a present-tense sentence, simulates a physical experience in real time.

The athlete's body is interpreted as a symbol of masculinity and sexual appeal. Physical closeness is constructed as a romantic and intimate relationship between the athlete and the fan. This content depicts women as the party being embraced and protected by a male figure.

Generative AI enables parasocial relationships, allowing fans to create and internalize physical experiences with their idols as if they were real. AI is normalized as a legitimate tool for personal fantasy without considering the athletes' consent.

The athlete's body is naturalized as a visual object that is displayed and consumed sexually. The power dynamic between public figures and fans is legitimized through romantic visualizations. Generative AI photo technology normalizes the fantasy of symbolic ownership over the athlete's body.

Mees Hilgers, wearing a blue shirt, is hugging a woman in a black dress from the side; his hand is on her waist and her arm is draped around his shoulder. Both are facing sideways and smiling. Polaroid-style photo with a light effect. Caption: 'Sorry, I'm nervous.'



Hugging poses, close physical contact, and intimate gazes create a romantic and sensual atmosphere between the athlete and the woman in the photo. The caption "sorry, I'm nervous" reinforces fans' imagination of emotional closeness and romantic fantasies about the athlete, as if the uploader were in a real intimate situation with that figure. The athlete is portrayed not as a professional athlete, but as an object of affection and personal fantasy.

This photo represents the digital " " fandom culture, which normalizes romantic fantasies and the objectification of male athletes' bodies through generative AI technology. AI is used to create simulations of personal relationships that appear realistic, thereby reducing the athletes' bodies and identities to visual objects designed to satisfy fans' emotional needs and fantasies of intimacy.



Justin Hubner, wearing a black shirt, kisses the cheek of a woman wearing a gray T-shirt. The woman is using a visual filter with the caption 'Sorry, I'm nervous' and a heart emoji.

The cheek-kissing pose and physical closeness convey a sense of romantic and sensual intimacy between the athlete and the woman in the photo. The caption "sorry, I'm nervous" reinforces the narrative of an emotional fantasy, as if the uploader were experiencing an intimate moment with the athlete.

This photo represents a digital fandom culture that normalizes the simulation of romantic relationships with public figures through generative AI. Athletes' bodies and identities are reduced to objects of emotional and romantic fantasy that can be manipulated according to fans' imaginations.



A male athlete, Mees Hilgers, is kissing a woman on the cheek. The athlete has his arm around her shoulder, while she smiles at the camera and makes a peace sign. The photo is presented in Polaroid format with the caption "Don't be jealous, don't be envious".

The pose of a kiss on the cheek and an embrace conveys an intimate romantic relationship between the athlete and the woman in the photo. The caption "don't be jealous, don't be envious" reinforces the impression that the uploader is showing off or flaunting this closeness to other viewers. This caption gives the impression that the uploader is actually in a romantic relationship with the athlete,

This photo represents the culture of digital fandom, which allows fans to construct and display imaginary romantic relationships with public figures through generative AI technology. The caption "don't be jealous, don't be envious" suggests that these fantasies are not only enjoyed privately but also shared and validated on social media. Athletes are reduced to objects of affection and romantic fantasy that fans can symbolically "possess." Fans have the right not only to use athletes' images but also to create and spread fictional narratives about athletes' personalities and sexual behavior. Athletes' identities are not merely appropriated but actively fabricated to serve fantasies



An athlete named Arhan Pratama hugs a woman from behind, standing very close to her. The athlete kisses her or brings his face close to her cheek, while the woman smiles at the camera. The caption is "he really likes to kiss"

The woman's gesture of holding the athlete's hand creates a sense of mutual intimacy, as if both parties are equally active and enjoying the moment on equal terms. This is a manipulative visual because it obscures the athlete's lack of consent. The caption "he really likes to kiss" not only implies closeness but also actively constructs a narrative that the athlete has certain sexual habits or traits.

On a connotative level, these gestures are interpreted as representations of romantic and sexual relationships imagined by fans with athletes as their idols. The athlete's body is constructed as a symbol of masculinity, sexual appeal, and a protective figure. Meanwhile, fans are positioned as the party in the embrace or under protection, as the passive party, and as the recipient of affection (Nowicki, Marchwinski, O'Flynn, Griffiths, & Rodgers, 2022). These scenes of hugging, intimate touching, and kissing construct an intimate narrative that transcends the boundaries of the relationship between fans and public figures. Consequently, athletes are no longer represented as professional subjects but as objects of fantasy for fans. This finding aligns with Barthes (1977) semiotic analysis, which asserts that visual images cannot be viewed neutrally but carry ideological meanings shaped through a system of signs. The athlete's body in this AI-generated content is no longer interpreted as a symbol of achievement and professionalism in sports but has been reduced to an object satisfying

fans' imagination. The identity as a professional soccer player is nearly lost, replaced by the role of an ideal romantic-sexual partner. The visual focus on the athlete's body—such as intimate gestures and the athlete's appearance without clothes reinforces the sexualization of the athlete's public identity.

A cross-case analysis of the captions accompanying ten photos reveals four distinct connotative strategies that reinforce objectification at the verbal level: (1) claims of ownership, present in three photos that position athletes as personal property or social capital to be flaunted among peers; (2) parasocial immersion, present in three photos where fans describe the physical sensation of intimate contact as if it were real, simulating a realized parasocial experience; (3) narratives of sexual activity, present in one photo that explicitly constructs a scenario of sleeping together; and (4) narrative character construction, present in one photo that creates fictional sexual behavioral characteristics for the athlete. Two photos lack verbal captions, indicating that their visual content is considered self-sufficient as a sexual marker.

At the mythical level, such content normalizes athletes' bodies as visual objects that can be freely manipulated and consumed in the digital space. The romanticized visual relationships depicted through Generative AI Photos construct a narrative in which public figures can be turned into objects of fan fantasy. The athlete's popularity makes it seem acceptable to exploit their body and self-image as a public figure, as if granting fans social permission to use and manipulate the images. Generative AI photo technology supports this practice by enabling the creation of visuals that appear realistic. In fan-produced content, sexual content is presented within aesthetically pleasing visuals, thereby obscuring the objectification. Research by Sun et al. (2024) found that generative AI actively reproduces dominant aesthetic standards in the images it generates, making objectification appear both natural and aesthetically pleasing. Athletes are portrayed as strong, dominant, and ideal male figures, reinforcing the notion that athletes are worthy of being sexual fantasy objects, thereby blurring the line between professional public figures and the intimate representations fans construct in their imaginations. An athlete's popularity serves as cultural legitimacy for the blurring of boundaries between the public and private spheres. Barthes (1977) argues that myths are a form of discourse that makes social constructs appear normal and natural. This aligns with the analysis presented here, which suggests that AI-generated images of athletes are perceived as expressions of fan devotion, yet constitute ethically questionable actions. The systematic use of the polaroid format across all ten photographs constitutes a mythological normalization strategy. By mimicking the visual conventions of authentic personal couple photography, the polaroid format reproduces the ideology that AI-generated objectifying content is equivalent to real intimate personal memory effectively naturalizing the non-consensual and digitally fabricated nature of the images.

The emergence of generative AI-generated photos depicting members of the Indonesian national soccer team in intimate scenes is viewed as a trend in visual representation within digital culture. The production of these photos reveals recurring patterns that indicate the normalization and replication of meaning (Willis et al., 2022). Specifically, this normalization in the ten analyzed photos is manifested through three consistent visual strategies: (1) the systematic use of the Polaroid format in all photos to aestheticize and authenticate objectifying content; (2) the repetition of gestures of physical intimacy—particularly hugs from behind and kisses—as the primary visual vocabulary of objectification; and (3) the complete erasure of the athletes' professional identities, which replaces their role as soccer players with that of romantic-sexual objects. This trend is shaped by the uniformity with which athletes' athletic bodies, intimate poses, and contexts unrelated to sports are reproduced as variations of AI-generated images. This repetition reinforces the notion that athletes' bodies are treated as objects of romantic and sexual fantasy—a normal part of public consumption. This trend reproduces the ideology that the popularity of public figures erases the ethical boundaries of body representation and private life. Li & Pang (2025) add that in digital fandom, the line between creative expression and privacy violations becomes increasingly blurred when AI is used as a tool for producing fantasies based on real identities a condition that demands a new ethical framework for understanding fandom practices in the AI era.

The trend of Generative AI photos created by national team fans demonstrates that sexual objectification has become a normalized digital practice within certain fan communities. According to Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) in their theory of objectification, a person is viewed solely as a visual object, with their identity simplified and their body presented in isolation. When this perspective is produced and widely disseminated through AI technology and social media, objectification exhibits a recurring pattern within the context of digital fan culture. The trend of fan-created generative AI images indicates that sexual objectification has undergone a process of normalization within digital fandom culture. Repeated exposure to objectified body representations on social media can foster acceptance of objectification as a visual practice considered normal within digital culture (Papageorgiou, Fisher, & Crossa, 2023). Furthermore, social media platforms reinforce this normalization through algorithmic mechanisms and peer validation that amplify the visibility and repeated reproduction of sexualized content (Lee & Lee, 2026). In this context, objectification shifts from an ethical issue to a form of digital entertainment and fandom participation that is accepted within specific online communities.

The Generative AI Photo content exhibits the key characteristics of objectification as described by Fredrickson & Roberts (1997). Male athletes are reduced to their physical appearance and bodily attractiveness, with aspects of their personality and achievements being omitted, and their capacity as self-determining individuals being disregarded. The relationship constructed in this content is one-sided and exists only in the fans' imagination. Athletes are portrayed as passive objects within the sexual fantasies created by fans. Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) explain that sexual objectification occurs when the body is evaluated primarily based on appearance and sexual appeal, which can ultimately lead to various psychological risks. Although this theory was initially focused on women, the mechanism of reducing the body to an object remains applicable to men in the digital age. A study conducted by Harun & Nurhadiyanto (2024) supports this finding, showing that AI can be misused to generate images used to harass individuals in the real world, particularly in cases where male national team athletes are rendered as muscular, shirtless, and emphasizing appearance over athletic function. AI not only reproduces but also reinforces hyper-masculinity and patterns of objectification.

This analysis is reinforced by Martha Nussbaum's (1995) concept of objectification, which encompasses instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity, and fungibility. The analysis identified the presence of six of Nussbaum's (1995) seven dimensions of objectification across the analyzed corpus. Athletes' bodies are consistently used as tools for the satisfaction of others, demonstrating a form of instrumentality. Visual manipulation carried out without the athlete's control reflects a denial of autonomy, where the individual has no power over how their body is represented. Athletes are also portrayed as passive objects within relationships unilaterally constructed by fans. This indicates inertness when the subject is positioned as having no active role in the interaction. The disregard for the athlete's feelings and perspectives in such content also reflects a denial of subjectivity, where the individual's subjective experience is not considered in the representation process. Furthermore, this content demonstrates that an athlete's image can be penetrated and exploited without consent a dimension of violability and treated as communal property of fans, reflecting a form of ownership. Regarding the seventh dimension, fungibility, defined as the interchangeability of the objectified subject, this study did not identify its presence in the analyzed photographs. Rather than treating athletes as interchangeable objects, content creators consistently selected and referred to specific athletes based on their individual celebrity identities (e.g., Arhan, Fael, and Mees). This absence is analytically significant because the objectification observed in the corpus depends on the uniqueness and recognizability of particular athletes rather than their interchangeability. In other words, fans objectify not a generic attractive male body but a specific and publicly recognizable athlete, which further intensifies the parasocial and emotional dimensions of the objectification process. Nussbaum (1995) explains that the cumulative presence of these dimensions signifies a comprehensive practice of objectification, not merely a sexual representation. Research conducted by (Willis et al., 2022) also notes that objectification in the media is not limited to pornography but can also occur through representations that emphasize physical

intimacy. This aligns with the dimensions of objectification outlined by (Nussbaum, 1995), where the object is passive and the producer feels a sense of ownership over the object.

In previous studies, (Pecini et al., 2023) and (Hollett, Rogers, Florido, & Mosdell, 2022) have been widely used to analyze the representation of women. However, the findings of this study indicate that men particularly male public figures such as athletes can also experience objectification in digital culture. Research conducted by Astari (2022) states that the objectification of men is increasing in tandem with a social media culture that emphasizes the visual body, masculinity, and physical attractiveness. This form of objectification often appears in the form of comments, photo edits, or visual content that highlights masculine physical attributes as objects of desire. The content analyzed in this study expands upon the findings of Astari (2022) by demonstrating how Generative AI Photo technology further facilitates and refines this process, where athletes' bodies such as defined muscles, intimate poses, and skimpy clothing become the primary material for fantasy without considering the athletes' agency or consent.

The objectification of this national athlete as a public figure can be a serious issue because athletes are viewed not only as individuals but as symbols representing the nation. When an athlete's body or image is turned into a sexual object, this not only affects the athlete personally but also influences how society perceives and respects national public figures. Research by (Eaton, Scott, Flynn, & Powell, 2026) assert that synthetic content that uses real identities without permission constitutes a violation of privacy and autonomy, with psychological, social, and existential consequences for the subject. How fans treat athletes shapes the public's perception of the athletes' identity and dignity as symbols representing the nation.

The trend of taking photos with idols using Generative AI Photo technology is also linked to a participatory culture in which fans are not merely consumers but also producers (Jenkins, 2007). The use of Generative AI Photo technology in this content production highlights a power imbalance between fans and athletes. Fans are seen as active content producers, while athletes are treated as objects lacking control. Based on research conducted by Guerra & Westlake, (2021), AI-based visual manipulation technology can open new opportunities for the exploitation of an individual's image without consent. This can have implications for privacy, ethics, and individual dignity. In fan culture, editing photos with idols is often seen as a form of appreciation and admiration, but on the other hand, there is an element of unrecognized harassment (Kang et al., 2022).

AI technology plays a major role in the spread of trends that enable the mass production of content with easily replicable aesthetics, thereby accelerating the process of virality and normalizing it (Okolie, 2023). As explained Chateau & Herman (2025), digital culture tends to produce uniform aesthetics because creativity is shaped by easily replicable patterns. In the trend of photo content featuring national team athletes, athletes' bodies are treated as objects that can be altered according to fans' imagination and desires. This situation has made the practice of objectification in digital media increasingly prevalent and popular among many individuals.

The practice of producing sexual AI content featuring athletes has become normalized as part of fans' expressions of affection, something considered natural and inherent to the digital fandom ecosystem. Matleena S. (2023) in (Harun & Nurhadiyanto, 2024) asserts that every visual element in an AI image is the result of a deliberate decision by the content producer through prompts, so that the construction of sexual fantasies in this trending content is an expression of conscious intent. Research conducted by (Alfassi et al., 2025) also states that AI can support creativity, but on the other hand, there are concerns regarding issues of authenticity and ethics, particularly within the context of fan culture. These findings also indicate that fans use Generative AI Photo technology to construct romantic fantasies, but this has the potential to violate athletes' privacy and image. Research by (Hollett et al., 2022) supports the finding that "body gaze" can be directed by women toward men, although it differs in intensity and impact from the objectification of women.

The reactions of the Indonesian National Team athletes to this trend of objectification were specifically documented in a national media report dated September 12, 2025. Rizky Ridho publicly

stated on Instagram that he asked fans to be more respectful and not to edit photos with sexual undertones, as a direct response to AI-generated photos depicting him in sexually objectifying poses, including a photo showing him as if he were touching a woman's breast (Kompas.com, 2025). Justin Hubner also publicly protested the AI-edited photos circulating on social media (Tvonenews, 2025) indicate a public debate on the issue. The repeated appearance of "Photos with Idols" content suggests that some members of the public accept the objectification of athletes' bodies as digital entertainment. However, on the other hand, expressions of rejection have emerged, indicating awareness and resistance to content deemed unethical. This demonstrates that sexual objectification in "Photos with Idols" content using Generative AI is intertwined with moral values, power dynamics, and evolving cultural norms within society. The findings of this study indicate that the sexual objectification of national team athletes in "Photos with Idols" content using Generative AI has evolved into a digital cultural trend that reproduces and normalizes the exploitation of public figures' bodies through technology in the media. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of critical digital literacy in creating and consuming AI-based content. This aims to ensure the public understands that not all forms of digital creativity are free from ethical implications. Research by Furizal et al., (2025) highlights that the lack of ethical frameworks governing AI-generated content in fan culture contexts enables the exploitation of public identities through synthetic imagery a concern this study empirically documents in the Indonesian sports fan culture context.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that photo content featuring fans with idols, created using Generative AI and depicting Indonesian national team athletes in intimate scenes, conveys meanings that go beyond fans' creative expression. Analysis of the content reveals a consistent pattern of objectification, in which athletes' bodies are reduced to objects of romantic-sexual fantasy through intimate poses, close physical contact, and the emphasis on masculine physicality. Through Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis, this content produces connotative meanings that position athletes' bodies as sexual objects. Meanwhile, at the mythical level, this content normalizes the ideology that athletes' bodies, as public figures, can be consumed in digital spaces. This study reinforces that sexual objectification does not only occur to women but can also occur to men in the digital age. Through Nussbaum's (1995) framework, this study identifies features of objectification, including instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, denial of subjectivity, and ownership. These findings confirm that the practice of female fandom using AI as a medium for the production of sexual fantasies is not merely a neutral creative expression, but rather a comprehensive practice of objectification as defined within the theoretical frameworks of Nussbaum (1995) and Fredrickson and Roberts (1997). Athletes' bodies are consistently reduced to objects for the visual and sexual gratification of others, leaving no room for the athletes' subjectivity or agency as individuals.

The use of AI technology reinforces this process by enabling the manipulation and reproduction of athletes' bodies without ethical boundaries. The findings of this study also indicate that objectification has become a trend in fan-driven digital culture, produced and normalized through social media. Generative AI photo technology further facilitates objectification by producing realistic-looking images without the subject's consent. This highlights the increasingly blurred line between the expression of desire and violations of ethics and privacy.

Author Contribution: All authors contributed equally to the main contributor to this paper. All authors read and approved the final paper.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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