

Social Media Flexing, Self-Presentation, and Conspicuous Consumption: A Phenomenological Study of Generation Z University Students

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of "flexing" on social media is increasingly prevalent among Generation Z university students; however, previous studies have generally examined self-presentation and consumerist behavior in isolation. This study offers a novel contribution by integrating these concepts and revealing the underlying attitude-behavior gap. It aims to analyze the influence of flexing on the self-presentation strategies, social identity construction, and consumerist behaviors of Generation Z students. A descriptive phenomenological qualitative approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 36 students from Universitas PGRI Wiranegara selected through purposive sampling. Data analysis was grounded in Self-Presentation Theory and Social Identity Theory. The results indicate that flexing serves as a self-presentation strategy driven by the need for social validation and the fear of missing out (FOMO). Although respondents acknowledged the negative impact of flexing, they continued to exhibit consumerist behaviors. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening digital literacy and self-regulation to mitigate the gap between attitudes and behaviors.

ABSTRAK

Flexing di Media Sosial, Presentasi Diri, dan Perilaku Konsumtif: Studi Fenomenologis pada Mahasiswa Generasi Z. Fenomena *flexing* di media sosial semakin marak di kalangan mahasiswa Generasi Z, tetapi penelitian sebelumnya umumnya mengkaji presentasi diri dan perilaku konsumtif secara terpisah. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada integrasi keduanya dengan mengungkap *attitude-behavior gap*. Penelitian bertujuan menganalisis pengaruh *flexing* terhadap strategi presentasi diri, konstruksi identitas sosial, dan perilaku konsumtif mahasiswa Generasi Z. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif fenomenologi deskriptif melalui wawancara semi terstruktur terhadap 36 mahasiswa Universitas PGRI Wiranegara yang dipilih secara purposive. Analisis data menggunakan *Self-Presentation Theory* dan *Social Identity Theory*. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa *flexing* menjadi strategi presentasi diri yang didorong kebutuhan validasi sosial dan FOMO. Meskipun responden menilai *flexing* berdampak negatif, mereka tetap menunjukkan perilaku konsumtif. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya penguatan literasi digital dan regulasi diri untuk mengurangi kesenjangan antara sikap dan perilaku.

Kata-kata kunci:

Flexing;

perilaku konsumtif;

presentasi diri;

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Introduction

The continuous evolution of information and communication technology has significantly reshaped social interaction patterns in modern society. Beyond its communicative function, social media has emerged as a prominent platform for self-presentation, enabling individuals to publicly exhibit their personal identities, lifestyles, and achievements (Goffman, 1959; Walther, 1996). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook allow users to share daily activities with a wide audience, facilitating unprecedented levels of self-disclosure and social comparison (Vogel et al., 2014).

One growing phenomenon in social media use is flexing, which involves flaunting wealth, a luxurious lifestyle, or specific achievements to gain attention and social recognition. This phenomenon is increasingly prevalent among the younger generation, particularly college students, who are active social media users. Previous studies have shown that flexing influences some students to engage in consumerist behavior and purchase luxury goods beyond their immediate needs, while also causing psychological distress (Bamazruk et al., 2025). Several studies indicate that flexing behavior displayed by influencers on Instagram can shape the consumption patterns of Generation Z students (Ramadhan et al., 2025). At the same time, flexing has been identified as a mechanism for constructing social identity and enhancing personal motivation, despite its potential to generate social pressure (Putri & Rosa, 2024; Uyun, 2025).

Furthermore, this phenomenon is often motivated by the pursuit of social acknowledgment, with social media exposure and peer influence serving as key contributing factors (Twenge & Campbell, 2019). Consequently, flexing may foster unrealistic perceptions of affluence and reinforce existing social disparities (Saragih et al., 2026). The Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), operationalized as the pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, is closely linked to compulsive social media use and has been shown to predict consumptive behavior (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Based on the current literature mapping, at least four research gaps remain inadequately addressed. First, previous studies have adopted fragmented approaches, examining self-presentation through Goffman's lens in isolation from analyses of creator culture, without exploring students' direct experiences as both actors and audiences (Gran, 2025). Second, despite the increase in social media usage among Indonesian university students from 82.46% in 2021 to 87.02% in 2024, empirical research examining the socio-cultural factors underlying Indonesian students' digital behavior remains limited (Hidayati & Yazid, 2025). Third, while recent research (2025) finds that FOMO drives impulsive purchasing influenced by social validation and emotional impulses (Rizky, 2025), the mechanism by which FOMO mediates flexing exposure and consumptive behavior, particularly in regional campuses, has not been studied phenomenologically. Fourth, the attitude-behavior gap, whereby students acknowledge the negative impacts of flexing yet remain behaviorally susceptible, has not been examined in depth from a phenomenological perspective in the Indonesian context.

This study presents two primary contributions: 1) the integration of three dimensions self-presentation, social identity, and consumptive behavior within a single empirical framework; and 2) empirical evidence of the attitude-behavior gap in the context of flexing among Generation Z students in a regional Indonesian university setting.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research type to understand and interpret students' experiences related to the flexing phenomenon, which includes: 1) self-presentation strategies, 2) social identity formation, 3) consumer behavior, and 4) coping strategies in facing the pressure of flexing culture on social media. The study was conducted at PGRI Wiranegara University with 36 Generation Z students representing various study programs as research subjects, selected using a purposive sampling technique with the

criteria of being active users of social media (Instagram and/or TikTok) and having displayed or regularly observed flexing-related content, for 2 months. The number of 36 informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes emerged from successive interviews. Although phenomenological studies may involve fewer participants, the larger sample in this study reflects the need to represent diversity across various study programs and differing social media usage patterns among Generation Z students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed for analysis. This method aligns with phenomenological traditions that seek to describe the essence of lived experience through detailed, first-person accounts (van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological analysis procedure followed the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994), consisting of four sequential steps: (1) epoché the researcher bracketed prior assumptions about the flexing phenomenon to approach each participant's lived experience with openness; (2) phenomenological reduction significant and relevant statements were identified from interview transcripts and horizontalized; (3) imaginative variation — underlying themes and structural conditions were explored across various contexts; and (4) synthesis a composite textural-structural description of the flexing phenomenon was constructed.

Data validity was ensured through four strategies: (a) member checking, whereby preliminary findings were returned to selected participants for verification; (b) source triangulation, comparing responses across participants from different study programs and social media usage intensities; (c) prolonged engagement over two months to capture temporal variation in experiences; and (d) peer debriefing with colleagues in sociology and communication studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Regarding research ethics: all participants provided voluntary informed consent before participation. They were informed of the study's objectives, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and that all data would be anonymized and used exclusively for academic research purposes, in accordance with Universitas PGRI Wiranegara's ethical guidelines.

Results and Discussion

The Role of Social Media in Student Life

Social media plays a central and multifunctional role in college students' lives, encompassing three main dimensions: the academic dimension as a means of seeking information, course materials, and scholarship opportunities; the social dimension as a communication and relationship-building tool; and the self-development dimension as a platform for personal branding and creative expression. Despite its many benefits, social media also significantly influences college students' shopping behavior, often driven by emotional responses or external factors such as advertising and promotions (Ramadhan et al., 2025). Social media also encourages people to actively construct and display various self-identities on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (Mokos, 2025).

Most respondents acknowledged the negative dimensions of social media use, including distraction, exposure to misinformation, social comparison, and consumptive impulses. These findings are consistent with Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959), which regards social media as a 'front stage' where individuals consciously manage impressions. As one informant stated: "Social media is an important part of student life; it facilitates access to information, but can also be a distraction and a source of stress (SF, Ilmu Komputer)."

Flexing as a Representation of Self-Identity to Build Social Identity

The findings reveal that respondents' attitudes toward flexing can be categorized into three groups: 1) tolerant-conditional; flexing is deemed acceptable as long as it reflects genuine, hard-earned achievements; 2) critical negative; practitioners of flexing are perceived as

"validation-hungry" and insensitive to others' circumstances; and 3) neutral-appreciative; flexing is viewed as a personal right and a legitimate form of self-appreciation. One informant articulated: "In my opinion, people who frequently flaunt a luxurious lifestyle need to be assessed based on their intentions and how they do it (DF, Pendidikan Matematika)."

The motivations driving flexing include: the need for social recognition and validation, enhancement of self-confidence, personal branding, keeping up with prevailing trends (FOMO), demonstrating achievement or social status, and professional purposes for influencers and content creators (Uyun, 2025). These findings are directly relevant to the concept of impression management in Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory (1959), whereby individuals strategically present themselves to shape particular impressions in the minds of their audience. Leary & Kowalski (1990) extended this framework by demonstrating that self-presentation is not merely situationally reactive but involves ongoing motivational systems oriented toward maintaining desired social identities.

From Tajfel & Turner's (1986) perspective, social identity construction through flexing involves three stages: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. These processes operate simultaneously and continuously within the social media ecosystem, forming a dynamic cycle of identity. Notably, flexing does not manifest solely as the display of material wealth; personal branding through academic achievement also constitutes a form of flexing considered more legitimate and socially acceptable.

Flexing, Social Evaluation, and the Construction of Reality in Digital Space

All respondents acknowledged that flexing significantly influences how others perceive an individual on social media. However, such evaluation is bidirectional and contradictory: practitioners of flexing may be perceived simultaneously as successful individuals and as arrogant or inauthentic. This condition is directly related to Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management: the same presentation may be interpreted differently by different audiences, depending on their respective frames of reference, values, and social positions.

Within the framework of Social Identity Theory, social evaluations generated through flexing serve as a mechanism for affirming group identity: receiving positive assessments from the in-group reinforces a sense of pride. In contrast, negative evaluations from the out-group often strengthen in-group cohesion through differentiation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) emerges as one of the most prominent psychological outcomes of this process, characterized by persistent concern that others are engaging in meaningful or rewarding experiences from which one is excluded (Przybylski et al., 2013). Research by Oberst et al. (2017) further demonstrated that FOMO mediates the relationship between social media use and negative emotional outcomes, particularly among young adults seeking social approval.

Nearly all respondents agreed that an individual can build a self-image or social identity through social media. This directly confirms the relevance of Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory in the digital context, where social media serves as a 'stage' on which individuals perform impression management through the curation of content, photographs, and displayed activities.

As one respondent stated: "Social media functions as a stage where a person performs impression management; one can choose photos, words, and certain activities to display so that others perceive them as successful, happy, or authoritative (RAW, PPKn)."

Students' Consumptive Behavior as a Result of Exposure to Flexing

Nearly all respondents acknowledged that students frequently follow trends emerging on social media, ranging from fashion and viral food trends to the latest gadgets and aesthetically appealing hangout spots. The primary motivation behind such conformity to trends is the desire to remain relevant and socially accepted within their peer environment. This conformist behavior constitutes empirical evidence of Social Identity Theory operating in a digital context:

viral trends function as cultural codes of ingroup membership that assert affiliation with relevant social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Empirical evidence suggests that social media exerts considerable influence on students' consumption behavior, with emotional engagement triggered by advertising, promotional activities, and flexing content serving as key contributing factors (Nathania & Hartanti, 2025; Ramadhan et al., 2025). Several respondents admitted to making impulsive purchases without considering actual needs; some alluded to using online credit services (paylater) to finance a consumptive lifestyle a concrete consequence of the uncritical acceptance of flexing-culture pressures. Dittmar et al. (2007) demonstrated that social comparison on media platforms activates materialistic values, which in turn predict impulsive and status-motivated purchasing, a pattern strongly echoed in the current findings.

Approximately of respondents admitted to having personally felt compelled to purchase something after viewing flexing content. The psychological mechanisms underlying this include: the FOMO effect, the desire to appear socially equal, the visual appeal of attractive content, and the influence of influencers who integrate flexing with product promotion. One informant explained: "Flexing content can influence purchasing decisions as a form of FOMO from what was initially a 'want'; it gradually feels like a 'need,' because one is tempted by the flexed item (WDA, Industrial Engineering)."

Critical Awareness and the Urgency of Digital Literacy

Although the majority of respondents acknowledged being influenced by the flexing phenomenon, this study found that most students possess a reasonably well-developed critical awareness of flexing's negative impacts. The most consistently emerging recommendations include: refraining from readily comparing oneself to others, recognizing that social media content only showcases highlights rather than full reality, prioritizing needs over wants, and using social media productively.

A noteworthy gap exists between awareness and actual behavior a phenomenon well-documented in social psychology (Ajzen, 1991). This confirms that cognitively-oriented digital literacy alone is insufficient. Students require reinforcement of self-regulation skills and greater psychological resilience the mental capacity to adapt, endure, and recover from pressure for critical awareness to be consistently translated into wiser behavior (Keles et al., 2020). Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory further underscores this point: self-efficacy in resisting social pressure must be developed through modeled behavior and structural reinforcement, not merely informational exposure.

The attitude-behavior gap is also linked to students' social environments. Sustained peer pressure from social circles that continuously consume flexing content creates digital social norms that are difficult to resist individually. Individuals with critical awareness remain susceptible to social conformity when standards of their reference group are dominated by a consumptive lifestyle (Nathania & Hartanti, 2025). This situation affirms that interventions addressing the negative impacts of flexing must extend beyond the individual level to encompass group dynamics and prevailing social norms within the broader student community. Zhao et al. (2008) demonstrated that identity construction on social media is inherently relational and contextual; therefore, changes in individual behavior will be effective only if accompanied by normative shifts within the broader digital social ecosystem.

Theoretically, this study makes a significant contribution to scholarship on digital behavior among Generation Z in Indonesia. First, it extends the application of Goffman's Self-Presentation Theory (1959) to digital space, an arena not fully anticipated by the original theory, which focused on face-to-face interaction. The finding that students strategically manage their 'front stage' on social media through flexing content confirms the continued relevance of Goffman's dramaturgical framework in the digital age, while revealing new complexities: an

unlimited audience, permanent records, and asynchronous interaction create impression management dynamics far more intricate than those in direct interaction (Mokos, 2025). The proliferation of digital platforms necessitates a renewed understanding of Goffman's 'front stage' and 'back stage' framework, as the traditional separation between public visibility and private experience is increasingly fluid (Hogan, 2010).

Second, this study enriches Tajfel & Turner's Social Identity Theory (1986) with empirical evidence of how social identity is constructed and negotiated through digital platforms. Whereas the original theory centered on identity formation within relatively stable social groups, the findings demonstrate that on social media, processes of categorization, identification, and social comparison operate simultaneously and involve a far broader audience than merely an individual's primary group. This flexibility of digital identity allows students to explore multiple versions of themselves, yet simultaneously generates more intense and sustained conformity pressure (Prasetyo et al., 2023; Rizka et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that flexing on social media is not merely an act of showing off but rather a complex mechanism linking self-presentation needs, social identity construction, and consumptive impulses through FOMO within the digital ecosystem of Generation Z. This dynamic has not previously been examined in an integrative manner in the context of regional Indonesian university students.

Theoretically, this study extends the application of Goffman's dramaturgical theory to the asynchronous, algorithm-driven digital realm, while enriching Tajfel & Turner's Social Identity Theory with empirical evidence of how categorization and social comparison operate simultaneously on social media platforms. Practically, the attitude-behavior gap finding urges universities to integrate digital literacy education, not merely technological literacy, into their curricula, encompassing the dimensions of digital social psychology, identity management, and students' financial intelligence.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to a single institution in one city (Pasuruan), thus not representing the full diversity of socioeconomic and cultural contexts among Indonesian university students. Second, the cross-sectional design was unable to capture changes in students' coping and consumptive behavior over time. Future research is recommended to: 1) employ in depth phenomenological interviews to explore students' coping strategies more systematically; 2) conduct comparative studies between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students to test whether flexing pressures vary by economic-cultural context; 3) examine the role of self-regulation and financial literacy as mediating variables between flexing exposure and consumptive behavior; and 4) design longitudinal studies to measure the effectiveness of digital literacy interventions in narrowing the attitude-behavior gap identified in this study.

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