

The spectacle self: Indonesian youth's self-presentation through Instagram "flexing culture"

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ABSTRACT

"Flexing culture" on Instagram is one of consequences of social media's embeddedness in the lives of young people, particularly in Indonesia. To date, research on "flexing culture" tends to discuss it from a psychological or economic perspective, meanwhile there were limited studies that regarded "flexing culture" as cultural production/reproduction of meaning and how the culture might shape the self/identity of young users. This paper aims to analyze the practice of "flexing culture" on Instagram from the lens of Indonesian youth, by conducting virtual ethnography research as a method. In this study, it is found that youth tend to define "flexing" as a spectrum between the efforts of personal branding and the practice of oversharing. This meaning then constructs the youth's self-presentation that is manifested in the practice of "flexing" in forms of "spectacle self"; which refers to the mediated representation of self-image which is based on flexing contents.

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1. Introduction

In Indonesia, social media has become a part of everyday lives, particularly for the youth. The habit of young people in using social media every day has built a digital culture for young people. One of the digital cultures of young people that is widespread in Indonesia is "flexing culture". "Flexing" refers to the activity of 'showing off' something via social media accounts. This "flexing culture" is often found on social media platforms that are widely used by young people, namely Instagram (Rosida et al., 2023; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). The practice of "flexing" that is generally found is showing off things that are materialistic and tend to be expensive, of high value, or luxury, such as gadgets, vehicles, houses, make-up, fashion items, and so on; in other words, it refers to showing off wealth.

Although the meaning of "flexing" departs from a materialistic-based understanding of looking at "objects on display" (such as wealth), this form of "flexing" is now also widespread in the form of 'achievements', for example academic achievements, traveling, and so on (Yusainy et al., 2023). In other words, "flexing culture" refers to the act of displaying wealth, possessions, or achievements in public, often on social media, to gain admiration or status. This is a phenomenon that has become increasingly common in recent years, fuelled by the rise of social media platforms such as Instagram (N. K. Putri et al., 2022).

Based on previous research, there are several reasons why young people might engage in a “flexing culture”. Some people do it to seek approval from others, while others may do it to increase their self-esteem; others may do it just to compete with their peers (Yuniar et al., 2023). Previous research on “flexing culture” also noted that “flexing” can have several negative consequences. This can lead to feelings of envy, inadequacy, and social comparison. This can also encourage materialism and excessive consumption. In extreme cases, this can even lead to debt and financial problems (Pakpahan & Yoesgiantoro, 2023).

Although widely practiced by young Indonesians on social media, the practice of “flexing” was popularized by social media influencers when they showcased a luxurious lifestyle in their content. The practice of “flexing” involves: (1) posting photos of expensive items; this could be cars, clothes, jewellery, or houses, (2) bragging about their accomplishments; this could include their work, travel, or academic accomplishments, and (3) document their luxurious lifestyle; this can include photos of them eating at expensive restaurants, staying at luxury hotels, or attending exclusive events (Firstiyanti, 2023; Pakpahan & Yoesgiantoro, 2023).

Indonesian youth currently belongs to the “Generation Z”, namely the generation born from 1998 to 2010, or what is often referred to as digital natives, because they were born and grew up in the digital and social media era and are therefore considered to have much better digital skills than their predecessors (Dimock, 2019; Shatto & Erwin, 2016). At this level, although age is a marker of the shift from millennials to Generation Z, cultural markers regarding social media habits are the main determinant in seeing the “flexing” phenomenon. In compare to their previous generations, Generation Z tends to have their own social media habits (PrakashYadav & Rai, 2017). Therefore, Generation Z’s digital culture exists because of the embeddedness of social media in their lives and might have distinct features in compared to the previous generation, particularly in the context of this research, Generation Z students who actively use Instagram in urban areas.

As a generation whose life is attached to social media, especially Instagram in the Indonesian context, Generation Z’s self-identity is closely related to their presence and self-presentation in virtual spaces (Prajarto & Purwaningtyas, 2022). Previous research suggested that Instagram is not just a tool or platform for self-expression, but rather a manifestation of their self-extension; part of their complete identity (Prajarto & Purwaningtyas, 2022; N. K. Putri et al., 2022; Rosida et al., 2023). Thus, the practice of “flexing” carried out by Generation Z on Instagram cannot be seen simply as a form of self-expression but must be seen more deeply as their meaning of their self-identity. Therefore, this paper aims to see how generation Z interprets the practice of “flexing” itself, as well as what kind of self is formed through their self-presentation in “flexing culture” on Instagram.

Previous researches regarding “flexing culture” in Indonesia were mostly questioning the practice of “flexing” as a form of conspicuous consumption (Firstiyanti, 2023; N. K. Putri et al., 2022; Yusainy et al., 2023). These researches critically pointed out how the practice of consumption has become embedded in youth’s lifestyle, as well as a part of their self-identity (Firstiyanti, 2023; Rosida et al., 2023). In other words, the selfhood of young people is defined by what they consumed and how they put their consumption practice in public display through their social media accounts (N. K. Putri et al., 2022; Rosida et al., 2023). Besides, previous researches also focused on the psychological aspect and effect of “flexing” towards youth’s mental health (Pakpahan & Yoesgiantoro, 2023; Yuniar et al., 2023). These researches highlighted how the practice of “flexing” is detrimental for youth’s psychological wellbeing, in forms of anxiety, insecurity, or lack of self-confidence (Yuniar et al., 2023). This psychological aspect of “flexing” is still related to the conspicuous consumption, which apparently the conspicuous consumption is in intertwining with mental health (Yuniar et al., 2023; Yusainy et al., 2023).

While focusing on the consumption practice and psychological effect in “flexing culture”, previous research lack on discussion regarding how “flexing culture” has shaped the ‘self’ of Generation Z in Indonesia through the self-presentation they display. Moreover, now that the definition of “flexing” has extended not only to material wealth, but also to life achievements or other achievements (especially academic and career-wise, because Generation Z is currently in that phase

of life). Therefore, this study is significant in looking at more than just young people's selfhood, which is based on consumption practices, but rather young people's selfhood based on self-presentation which is based on "flexing" aspects, which become the backbone for their existence and presence in the social media space.

Specifically, this study utilizes Guy Debord's "the spectacle" concept, which describes the gaze of contemporary society (Debord & Adams, 2022) to examine Generation Z's self-presentation in Instagram. Moreover, in this digital era of surveillance capitalism, Debord's "the spectacle" is relevant for analyzing the way "flexing culture" exists by celebrity culture (as it was diffused by social media influencers –the "celebrity" of social media) and mass media that work to automate the commodification of personal identity backed by machine learning (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017; Debord & Adams, 2022). "The spectacle" was born as Debord's critique of contemporary society which bases reality through a collection of mediated representations; which he refers to as pseudo-reality. Social media, at this level, becomes an amplification of the mediated experience of pseudo-reality referred to by Debord.

Generation Z treats Instagram as their "personal showroom", a space to show their desired persona through forms of self-presentation in order to gain recognition and acknowledgment from their peers (Fandia, 2021b; Prajarto & Purwaningtyas, 2022). By this notion, Instagram's mediality as a social media platform also plays a role in shaping the digital culture of its users. Mediality is understood as one platform's specific characteristic that makes it distinct from other platforms (Bennke & Pinchevski, 2022), which in the context of Instagram means visual-based content and prioritizing certain aesthetic standards that are often referred to as "Instagramable" (Campbell et al., 2022; Christanti et al., 2021). At this level, young people's self-presentation in "flexing culture" on Instagram is inseparable from the standards established by the mediality of Instagram itself. From a spectacle perspective, Instagramable "flexing" content has become a reality lived by Generation Z.

2. Method

The meaning of "flexing" practices and self-presentation on Instagram is seen as an arena or background for contestation that will be unveiled in this study. In other words, individual's self-experience is used to dismantle the negotiations carried by Generation Z in facing the socio-cultural context that surrounds them. For this reason, this study was conducted by using virtual ethnography as research method, particularly one that had been developed by Christine Hine (2000, 2015, 2017).

Hine's virtual ethnography enables researcher to focus not only on the virtual interaction that takes place in digital realm, but also on the socio-cultural contexts of individual behind the screen (Hine, 2015). It means that the data collection process involved not only digital observation of Instagram, but also in-depth interview with Instagram users (informants), to capture the comprehensive dynamics of "flexing culture" from informants' point of view. Furthermore, in-depth and reflexive analysis were conducted as the data analysis process. Rather than being a distinct phase, the data analysis was an ongoing process throughout the data collection (Hine, 2015, 2017). Therefore, data analysis and data collection were not conducted linearly.

Informants in this study consisted of twelve Indonesian Generation Z Instagram users. They were selected from screening process through prior digital observation. These twelve youngsters are active Instagram users (for at least five years) and have been engaged with "flexing" contents, both as actors who upload and audiences who are exposed to "flexing" contents. With the aim of protecting informants' personal information, code numbers are used in this paper. Below is the list of informants.

Table 1. List of informants

No	Informants' code number	Age	Gender	Active Instagram user for
1	Informant #1	23	female	> 9 years
2	Informant #2	22	male	> 9 years
3	Informant #3	23	female	> 9 years

4	Informant #4	21	male	6 – 9 years
5	Informant #5	21	female	6 – 9 years
6	Informant #6	20	female	6 – 9 years
7	Informant #7	22	female	> 9 years
8	Informant #8	21	male	6 – 9 years
9	Informant #9	20	male	6 – 9 years
10	Informant #10	23	male	> 9 years
11	Informant #11	19	male	6 – 9 years
12	Informant #12	19	female	6 – 9 years

Apparently, all informants in this study are college students who reside in urban areas in Indonesia. In the principle of virtual ethnography, this education and sociography background are considered as significant (Hine, 2017) for informants in practicing “flexing” and the meaning-building of the practice. Moreover, in the context of “flexing culture”, informants’ economic, ethnicity, and religion backgrounds are also put into consideration in the analysis, as explained in the next section.

3. Results and Discussion

This study attempts to answer the main question regarding the self-presentation displayed by Indonesian youth (Generation Z) on Instagram in the dynamics of “flexing culture”. In order to get there, a basic understanding of how Indonesian youth themselves define “flexing” is needed. Therefore, this section consists of two discussion topics, namely regarding the informants’ understanding/meaning regarding “flexing” itself, as well as regarding self-presentation which is manifested in the practice of “flexing” on Instagram.

3.1. Defining “flexing”: Personal branding VS oversharing

Amid various definitions of “flexing”, this study summarizes how the twelve informants interpret “flexing culture” based on their experiences in social media, especially Instagram. There are three forms of meaning of “flexing” presented by the informants in this research, namely: (1) flexing as a form of showing off which has a negative connotation, (2) flexing as an act of showing certain economic status/achievement, and (3) flexing as an embodiment of media society itself and the social standards established by it.

The first form of meaning is “flexing as a form of showing off which has a negative connotation”. At this level, the informants view the practice of flexing as tending to be a superficial practice and not bringing any benefits other than for the uploader of the “flexing” content, who according to them gets validation from the activity of uploading the “flexing” content.

“The flexing content that I often see is like showing off getting a gift from her boyfriend, yeah I know that’s her life, but for me it’s disgusting to see. There are also those who show off unboxing expensive items that they just bought, new cars, things like that make me sick to look at them. For me, they just like want to be validated by those materialistic things.” –Informant #3

The first meaning is related to the second meaning of flexing, namely “flexing as an act of showing economic status or achievements”. At this level, flexing content is more identified with content that contains material things that show a person’s economic status and achievements. Interestingly, flexing is not only identified with “expensive goods”, but also “expensive activities”, which are often seen through overseas holidays, luxurious birthday celebrations, eating at expensive restaurants, or staying at expensive hotels.

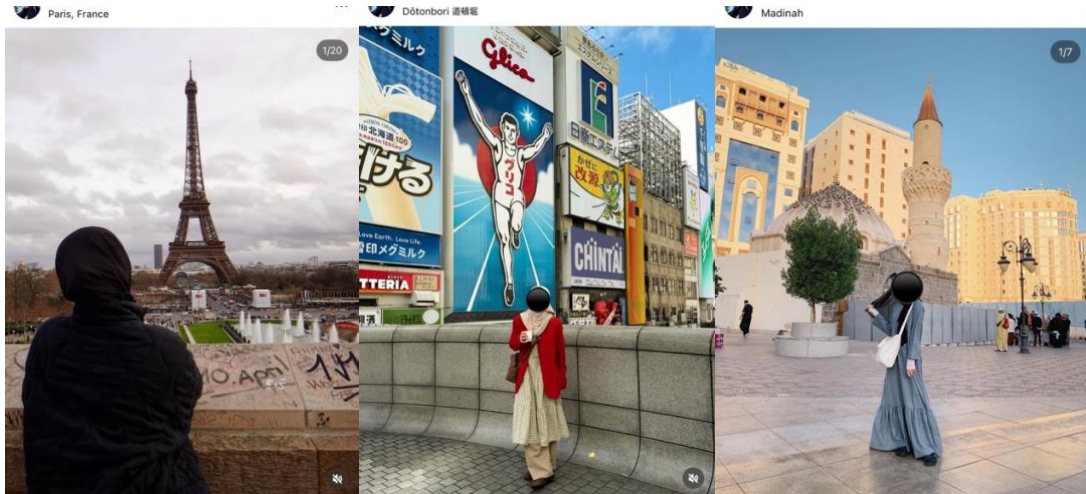


Fig. 1. Examples of contents of overseas holidays in informant's Instagram

As with the first meaning, “flexing” as an action that shows economic status or achievements is interpreted as a way for the “flexing” content uploader to seek validation from their social environment on Instagram.

“I tend to see flexing as identical to high-end or luxurious things, habits or hobbies that require a lot of money, showing off luxury goods, luxurious hobbies, such as someone who has managed to buy a luxury car or a luxurious trip abroad, not backpacking.” –Informant #5

The third meaning is “flexing as an embodiment of social media itself and the social standards established by it”. At this level, “flexing” is no longer seen simply as fulfilling the ego of the content uploader, but as an action that is born out of the push of social media culture. This third meaning is the opposite of the two previous meanings which tend to focus on the behaviour of “flexing” content creators who are considered to have full awareness in choosing and deciding to exhibit something or show their economic status and achievements. Instead, this third meaning focuses on the media apparatus, which in this context is Instagram, as the agent that encourages users to behave in this way.

“Social media itself might be a form of flexing, creating new standards, how people should be, how they should look, so in my opinion flexing is like that. Beauty influencers, for example, flexing the clothes they wear, showing off, going on vacation abroad. Flexing is actually a perception of ourselves, if we consider it as arrogance, it doesn't necessarily mean they want to brag. Showing something luxurious, maybe they don't mean flexing, or jogging and being photographed, it depends on the intention. Now social media is for flexing, then where to go on vacation, or watching the concert at the front, for me it's more of a substitute for an album.” – Informant #2

Instagram as a visual-based social media has based user perceptions on the aesthetics of the content (Caliandro & Graham, 2020; Seibel, 2019; Serafinelli, 2018). Whether the users realized or not, Instagram has formed a visual culture for its users, which in turn constructs new standards regarding what is presentable or not worthy of being presented to their audience on Instagram (Caliandro & Graham, 2020; Stokes & Price, 2017). This standardization of suitability, or what in Indonesia is often known as “Instagramable”, is amplified by the presence of social media influencers who act as references for users regarding lifestyles that are considered ‘worthy of being displayed on social media’ (Briandana et al., 2021; Christanti et al., 2021; Leban et al., 2021; N. F. Putri & Lobodally, 2024).

Therefore, in line with what the informants in this research stated, the term “flexing” was originally born from the actions of social media influencers in displaying a luxurious lifestyle which is the basis for Instagram's visual standards (Firstiyanti, 2023; N. K. Putri et al., 2022; Yusainy et al., 2023). Interestingly, informants in this study argued that “flexing” is not limited to material and consumption ‘luxuries’, but also to the ‘luxury’ of achievements and social relations. This shift is also

significantly influenced by social media influencers who often showcase their achievements, both academic and non-academic, as well as the social relationships they have.



Fig. 2. Examples of contents that show academic achievement and social relations

At this level, “flexing” is a spectrum. Forms of “flexing” can take the form of material things, achievements, activities or lifestyle, even social relations; all things can be considered as “flexing”. However, the way people deliver it matters; the significant thing is how people convey it. In fact, “flexing” can be something positive or negative, depending on how the uploader frames the story. At this level, the “flexing” spectrum is completely based on audience perception. In the position of audience, informants in this study stated that “flexing content” has many contexts and can cause various reactions. For them, “flexing content” can evoke at least two contradictory emotions: (1) feeling motivated or inspired, and (2) feeling disgusted or annoyed. Based on this, there are at least two categories of flexing content, namely “inspiring flexing” and “toxic flexing”.

“Inspiring flexing” makes informants feel motivated to achieve the same thing as the flexing content uploader. They consider that inspiring flexing includes things around life achievements, especially things related to academic and career. This is related to the status of the informants, most of whom are students. They are at a phase of life where pursuing academic and career-wise achievement is the main priority.

“I have ever had an ideal, had a target, sometimes when someone achieves it first and they shared the process in their Instagram content, I feel like I’m still below and can’t be the same as them, I feel like I’m still here, and how can I speed up to be able to do this and that, to be able to see the steps, to be able to reach that goal, because before they achieved and became what they were, they had to do this and that, so I have to do that too. It’s the same, for example, like people have achieved a lot, and you have an ideal condition in the future, and when someone achieves it first, I get inspired by them.” –Informant #8

Whether the informants realize it or not, in processing the inspiring-flexing content they are comparing the achievements of other people with themselves. At some point, to some extent, this process of comparing oneself with others has positive implications such as creating a feeling of motivation and inspiration. However, on the other hand, this process can cause discomfort when using social media. This is proven from the experience of informants who have carried out a social media detox.

Apart from creating a feeling of motivation and inspiration related to achievement, inspiring-flexing content also appears to create a feeling of motivation and inspiration in consumption practices.

“It’s like they show off what they have, and I don’t have it, and then I think about how I can have it. For example, I’m confused about buying my future car, then I see the specifications and I must save up to buy this.” –Informant #7

This is quite an interesting paradox, when “flexing content” is considered inspiring, but this inspiration is to encourage consumption practices. However, the informant did not consider the encouragement of consumption practices created by flexing content to be something banal. This condition sparked further discussion regarding the standards of success that exist among Generation Z.

At this level, “flexing content” becomes the backbone of how Generation Z views standards of success, both in terms of achievement and material objects. Through “flexing content” which they consider inspiring, it can be seen that Generation Z’s standards of success are measured through achievement, without abandoning the standards of materialism that may have been inherited from previous generations. This condition reflects a consumer society that bases its identity and self-actualization through consumption practices, with social media accommodating this through flexing practices (Rosida et al., 2023).

“Toxic flexing”, or flexing content that is considered ‘toxic’ by the informants, includes flexing content that basically makes them feel uncomfortable when they see it. The feeling of discomfort consists of feeling depressed to feeling disgusted. Interestingly, toxic-flexing is not limited to showing off wealth but also showing off achievements.

“I feel more pressured if he posts achievements, but if it’s luxury goods or luxury hobbies, I don’t feel pressured. I often feel disgusted, especially with my followers’ content, because I understand that their content is just about showing off. Especially if I know that their flexing is not really theirs, or they achieved it in a bad way, either stealing, or being too pretentious, having this and showing off so much, even though others do the same but not to that extent. Several times there were feelings of insecurity, for example with other guys, gosh why do I feel inferior when I see him, or having something that I want makes me want it too, or feeling pressured like, whenever I see a flexing, it’s mixed-feeling, there is never one emotion that is the same, sometimes I feel this, sometimes I feel that.” –Informant #10

According to the informants, there is no clear line in determining whether “flexing content” is toxic or not, because the indicator really depends on what they perceive and feel when they see the uploaded content. Furthermore, “flexing content” that is considered toxic is “flexing content” that makes informants compare themselves with other people.

The common thread from the informants’ explanations is that toxic-flexing content is content where people share excessively (especially for content about wealth) and share without context (especially for content about achievements and accomplishments). In this way, flexing culture becomes a spectrum of Generation Z’s ‘self-performance’ which cannot be seen in black and white. In the “flexing culture” that is widespread in Generation Z, the activity of ‘showing off’ becomes a practice of cultural production and reproduction that is intertwined with the mediality of Instagram as a media apparatus that has a role in the formation of this culture. This effort to ‘show themselves’ is inseparable from their desire to be ‘different’ individuals (those with distinction) in the midst of a postmodern consumer society that tends to be one-dimensional (Bourdieu, 2016; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). At this level, the practice of “flexing” is both a consequence and a means of ‘differentiating’ young people in the social media space.

Furthermore, in this study it was found that the “flexing” practice carried out by Generation Z on Instagram has a duality. On one hand, flexing is an effort of “personal branding”, where young people show their achievements and skills. On the other hand, “flexing” becomes a form of “oversharing” when it is done out of proportion. In relation to personal branding, the practice of flexing is tolerated as a personal branding effort when what is being exhibited is the academic and career-wise achievements.

Although most informants agreed that showing off achievements was an inspiring-flexing practice and a personal branding effort, there were also informants who disagreed and saw that Instagram was not the right platform for showing off achievements with the aim of personal branding. At this level, there is an opinion that Instagram’s mediality does not include how this platform is used

to build personal branding through accomplishments. This assumption is supported by the presence of other platforms which in medial terms are considered more suitable as personal branding platforms related to achievements and accomplishments, or more often referred to as “portfolios”.

Using Instagram as a social media platform to build personal branding is nothing new. Primarily, this practice is carried out professionally by influencers whose source of income or economic circulation is very dependent on how they build their self-image in the social media space. This practice is also common among celebrities who use social media platforms as an extension of themselves to communicate directly with fans. Even though the practice of using Instagram as a personal branding platform is quite foreign if it is carried out by users who are not influencers or celebrities, recently this practice has become widespread because job seekers apparently are not only armed with CVs in selecting prospective employees, but also armed with their presence on social media.

The informants' views were divided regarding this matter. Some informants did not mind Instagram's position as a platform for personal branding, because Instagram's mediality shapes its users to show who they are, thereby building a “this is me”-mentality in Instagram user culture. For them, it is fine (and even necessary) for Instagram users to build personal branding by showing off achievements and accomplishments. At some point to some extent, they even call it a way to appreciate themselves, in other words: appreciate one's own hard work by uploading and sharing it on Instagram. Interestingly, there is a paradox in this view. On one hand, they upload their achievements without the intention of making their audience jealous. On the other hand, content about achievements and self-achievement often makes users compare themselves with other people, which sometimes leads to the practice of social media detox because they consider other people's “flexing” posts to be toxic flexing.

However, there is an opinion by some other informants that Instagram is not an appropriate place to do personal branding. Informant #12, for example, argues that Instagram should be a platform for “not being serious and only upload fun things”. Besides, Informant #3 also considered that “career-wise, Instagram is not the proper place.” This assumption is related to the existence of the LinkedIn platform which is considered more appropriate for carrying out personal branding. For them, showing off achievements and accomplishments on Instagram is only aimed at seeking validation from peer groups or followers; because if their goal is to build a portfolio then they should do that on the LinkedIn platform, which its mediality is to contain users' achievements and accomplishments as a form of portfolio, which will then connect them with professionals and potential employers.

Apparently, in this study is also found that the practice of ‘flexing as personal branding’ is susceptible to shifting into the practice of oversharing. The informants stated that at some point to some extent, “flexing content” can become oversharing content. At this level, it can be seen how the informants argue that ultimately “flexing content” always has the potential to become an oversharing practice, although not completely.

Social media essentially blurs the lines of privacy and communication every day (Drozdova, 2020; Purwaningtyas, 2019; Wu, 2019). Some researchers argue that oversharing on social media is the result of a “drive to be authentic self” (Hernández-Serrano et al., 2022; Purwaningtyas, 2019; Stokes & Price, 2017). The message of being “authentic” and “yourself” likely influences the information users choose to upload, even if it includes intimate life details or experiences they choose not to share. The drive to successfully achieve a more casual, less curated Instagram aesthetic translates into written content, captions, and comments as well. In the potential for oversharing, new forms of self-care and coping mechanisms are born which are developed by users.

In social media space, the lines between private journals and public posts are blurred (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2019; Dandridge, 2023). For some people, social media is like their diary or “modern diary in the digital era” (Dandridge, 2023). This makes the practice of oversharing often carried out without users' awareness. For them, they only share content as the culture on Instagram has been formed through Instagram's mediality which encourages users to behave in this way. For them, this is normal. However, for the audience who sees it, it could be a practice of oversharing.

At this level, the problem is the boundary between ‘oversharing’ and ‘not oversharing’. How can a content be labelled as an oversharing practice? What’s the indicator of ‘oversharing’? While each informant has his or her own view regarding this matter, from this point forward, it is clear that the practice of oversharing is very dependent on the audience’s perception of the content. There are those who think that toxic flexing is a practice of oversharing. However, when explored further, inspiring flexing can also be considered oversharing when the audience feels uncomfortable seeing it, or using the Generation Z term, “*too much information*”. This condition of blurred boundaries between oversharing and not oversharing then leads to the next discussion regarding self-presentation which is formed through “flexing” practices in “flexing culture”.

3.2. Self-presentation in “flexing culture”: Creating the spectacle

Instagram’s mediality allows users to mirror other users; to watch over each other without feeling patronized (Fandia, 2021b; Prajarto & Purwaningtyas, 2022). Whether they realize it or not, this condition can influence people to overshare, even in very different circumstances. For example, when seeing influencers share their personal experiences, non-influencer users are inspired and following to do the same, then in returns, they will inspire their peer group to follow the same pattern.

Previous research shows that young people, especially Generation Z as a generation of digital natives, attach their self-worth to social media activities, such as how many followers they have, the number of likes they get, high engagement on social media, and others (Fandia, 2021a; PrakashYadav & Rai, 2017). This suggests that some acts of oversharing on social media may be an attempt to live up to an image that they believe will not only be approved by others but also considered ‘cool’ as well as reinforcing the sociological nuances of social media and oversharing. When applied to the practice of oversharing on social media, a person (who overshares on social media) also gives up power and agency over their identity, the way they present themselves to others, and their overall interactions through socialization.

The duality of “flexing” practices on Instagram has a paradoxical impact on users. As stated by several informants, on one hand the practice of “flexing” gives them a sense of satisfaction with the gratification they receive; internal self-satisfaction, as well as validation and recognition from their external peer group. However, on the other hand, the practice of “flexing” raises feelings of anxiety and worry about how peer groups and the Instagram public in general will receive their self-presentation through “flexing content”.

Whether they realize it or not, the paradox that is a consequence of the practice of “flexing” is accepted and understood by the informants as a price that must be paid when they want to show themselves that they consider authentic in the Instagram space (Fandia, 2021b). As Informant #1 argued, “Yes, there’s a risk of being labelled as flexing if you want to be different and authentic in social media.” At this level, in order to achieve the sensation of ‘that their authentic self is unique and different from other individuals on Instagram’, they surrender themselves and submit to the mediality of Instagram which (even though it gives them social patronage) provides security for a sense of self-authenticity; the sensation of ‘self-distinction’, or the difference that defines themselves among their closest circle (Bourdieu, 2016).

Thus, the duality of the practice of “flexing” as a form of personal branding and the practice of oversharing are in intertwined negotiations regarding young people’s efforts to show an authentic self that is different or distinctive. However, whether they realize it or not, this authentic self is a sensation built through the mediality of Instagram which forms its users to compete for their authenticity through the practice of “flexing” wrapped in the principle of “sharing”. The practice of “flexing”, both inspiring-flexing and toxic-flexing, ultimately becomes part of an individual’s efforts to show themselves as authentic to the public on social media.

The question then is, what kind of self is formed on Instagram through “flexing culture”? What is the authentic self, or just pseudo-authenticity? The young people in this study showed that regardless of whether the self-presentation they displayed through “flexing” practices was authentic or not, this self would always be in the shadow of supervision from their peers. Self-judgment, no matter how

freely they think and how much they try to be free from thinking about other people's responses, will always be based on how they want other people to see them.

What they choose to show or not show, what they show off or not show off, the young people in this study are aware that all of this will shape other people's perceptions of them. However, their awareness seems to be limited to personal branding efforts that can be built through "flexing" practices. Meanwhile, they tend not to realize the reverse side of the duality of "flexing" practices, namely oversharing; where young people are not entirely to blame, but rather victims who are not aware that they have been trapped in Instagram's mediality.

Instagram as a media apparatus in this context plays a significant role. Through its mediality, Instagram has formed a culture of users who tend to show off; all "flexing". Within the Instagram space, users can see and monitor each other (Purwaningtyas & Alicya, 2020; Sokowati & Manda, 2022; Stokes & Price, 2017). More than that, they can imitate each other, under the pretext of inspiring each other. Amid such a culture, users are often pitted against each other to compete to show themselves as the most different from the others.

Returning to the question at the beginning of this study: what kind of self is formed on Instagram through "flexing culture"? Borrowing a term from Guy Debord (Debord & Adams, 2022), the results of this study show that "flexing culture" has shaped the self-presentation of young people on Instagram as the "spectacle self". Spectacle society refers to the understanding of modern society as a collection of representations that have replaced authentic social life (Briziarelli & Armano, 2017; Debord & Adams, 2022). This is certainly reminiscent of the practice of "flexing" on Instagram, moreover, when the capitalistic society has become the driving force of online self-presentation. In this research, there are four aspects that form the "spectacle self" through the practice of flexing.

First aspect is the digital self that has become the representations of reality. In the logic of spectacle society, Debord argued that reality is replaced by capitalistic-based images (Debord & Adams, 2022). Hence, people interact more with representations of reality (through media, advertising, entertainment) than with the reality itself. In "flexing culture", reality is based on a set of self-presentation that become the representation of the self. When people interact, they interact with the representation of the polished digital self; and this digital self is being polished by "flexing" practices.

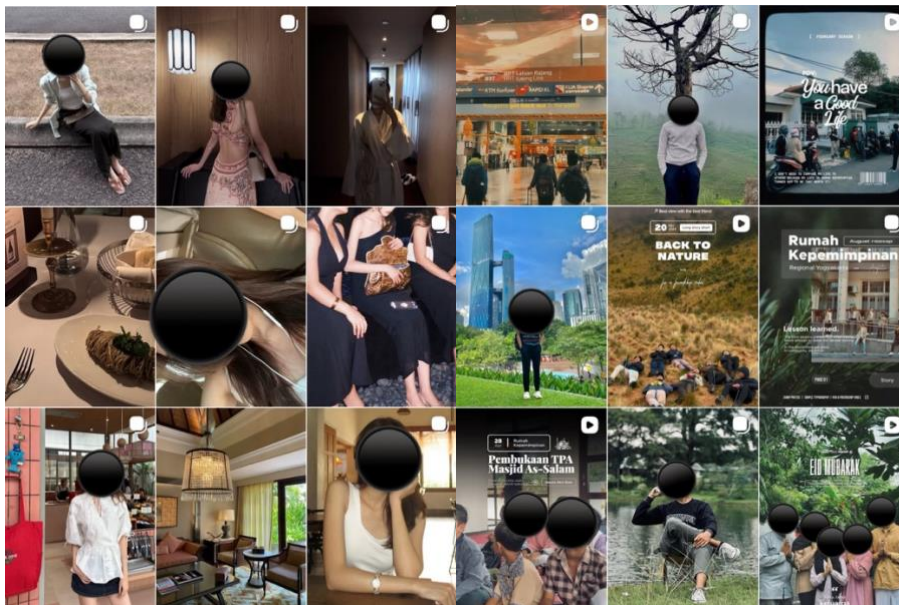


Fig. 3. Examples of informants curated/polished digital self in Instagram

Second aspect is the digital self that has turned into commodity. Debord argues that everything, including culture, relationships, and even rebellion, is turned into a commodity to be sold and

consumed (Debord & Adams, 2022). In this research, it was found that in the “flexing” practice, the self-presentation has become a commodity. This self-presentation is being sold to prospective employers (by “flexing” the achievements), as well as being consumed by their friends and peers (Instagram followers). The interesting thing is that apparently there is a shifting where capital is no longer being seen as only limited to materialistic capital, but rather also as achievement-based capital. Moreover, for Generation Z, the achievement-based capital seems more valuable than the materialistic capital.

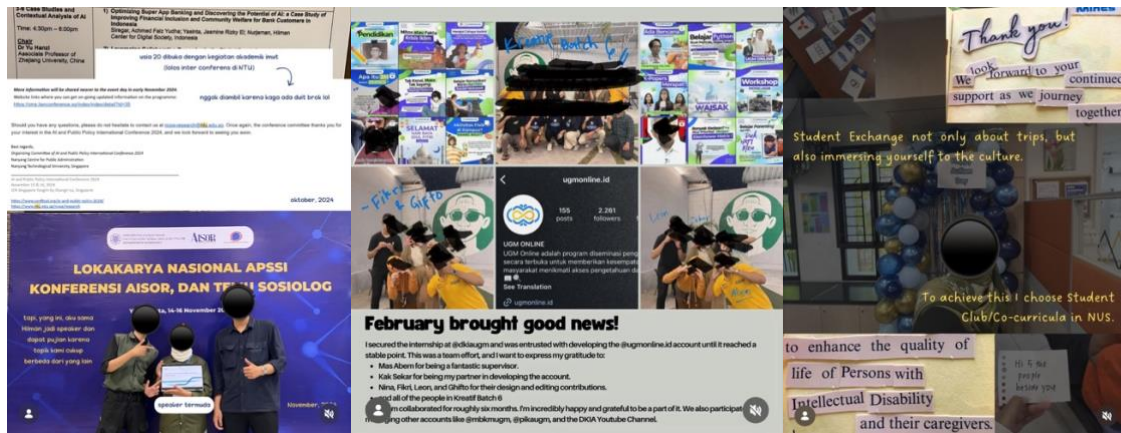


Fig. 4. Examples of “flexing” the achievements by informants

Third aspect is the digital self that is formed through active consumption. In the society of spectacle, Debord argued that instead of participating in real social life, people passively consume media and experiences that are curated for them (Debord & Adams, 2022). However, in the Instagram realm, users can actively consume, even showing off what they consume through “flexing” practice. At this level, although the main point has shifted slightly from Debord’s initial idea about passive consumption, findings in this study indicate that the idea has evolved into active consumption on one side, yet on the other side, users are still shaped by other users’ consumption and experiences that are curated for them.



Fig. 5. Examples of active consumption contents as “flexing” practice

Fourth aspect is the illusion of choice and freedom to create the digital self. Debord argues that the modern era appears to offer freedom and choice, and the spectacle ensures that these choices are predetermined by the logic of the market (Debord & Adams, 2022). This idea has also evolved in the practice of “flexing”. In “flexing” practice, it was found that Generation Z feels they have the choice and freedom to shape their digital self. However, what they don’t realize is that their choice was heavily influenced by their online peers. They select and filter their content based on expectation towards their peers’ acknowledgement and validation. They are not free to choose what they want to be, but they rather choose from what they have seen from others.

In the end, Debord argues that the spectacles create alienation and separation; it isolates individuals, replacing authentic human interaction with mediated experiences, and people become spectators of their own lives rather than active participants (Debord & Adams, 2022). This resonances with “flexing” practice where young people interact with each other via their spectacle self. Therefore, rather than building authentic connection with their peers, their connection is based on digital-self performativity. Meanwhile, this spectacle self is crafted for attention instead of intimacy. Hence, young people are conditioned to always “performing” and documenting life more than living it.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study showed that “flexing” content has become a representation of the social relationship among Indonesian youth. This social relationship is mediated through a set of self-images; while this set of self-images is mediated by “flexing” content. In this logical circulation of culture, a person’s self becomes the self that is displayed in the intertwined of production and reproduction of meaning towards “what is worth showing off and what is not”. In the end, this study upon 12 urban youngsters has shown that authentic selves have been replaced by a set of self-presentations that form the self-representation in the “spectacle self”.

This study has limitations in at least two aspects. The first limitation is in terms of methodology. This research uses a virtual ethnographic method which prioritizes the depth and tradition of phenomenology in uncovering phenomena that have become part of human daily life. However, this method limits the research so that it is less able to capture a macro picture of generations’ behavioural tendencies regarding flexing practices. So, in the future research with a quantitative approach may be needed to capture this general picture. The method also limits this research to focusing on Instagram users. In fact, “flexing culture” also includes issues surrounding the discourse that contained in the flexing contents. Apart from that, flexing content also brings problems regarding representation. Therefore, a future study that focuses on content rather than users is needed.

The second limitation is in terms of research focus which focuses on Generation Z among college students only. The informants’ education level has a significant influence on their perspective on “flexing culture”, making them quite rational in interpreting flexing practices. Meanwhile, higher education in Indonesia is still a privilege and many Indonesian Generation Z are underprivileged. Therefore, in the future, further study is needed that focuses on “flexing culture” in the context of underprivileged Indonesian youth.

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