

# **Research Paper**

# **'Flexing' and its Implications for Religious and Social Life Among Indonesian Muslim Millennials**

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ABSTRACT This study investigates the implications of the 'flexing' phenomenon, Keywords: Consumerism; characterized by the ostentatious display of wealth and material possessions Flexing; Islam; on social media, on the religious and social life of Indonesian Muslim Millennials; millennials. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study Social Media analyzes data collected through social media observation and interviews with millennial Muslims. Findings reveal that 'flexing' can have detrimental effects on religious life, including fostering excessive materialism, eroding integrity and honesty, and hindering the fulfillment of Islamic obligations such as Zakat and charitable giving. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that 'flexing' contributes to social issues such as excessive consumerism, social inequality, a decline in empathy and concern for others, and potential mental health issues arising from social comparison and insecurity. The study concludes that while 'flexing' may be perceived differently by individuals, its potential negative impacts on religious values and social cohesion warrant critical consideration. ABSTRAK Article Info:

Submitted: 27/10/2023 Revised: 28/09/2024 Published: 30/12/2024 Penelitian ini mengkaji implikasi fenomena "flexing," yang ditandai dengan pamer kekayaan dan harta benda secara berlebihan melalui media sosial, terhadap kehidupan keagamaan dan sosial generasi Muslim milenial di Indonesia. Menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis data yang diperoleh melalui observasi media sosial dan wawancara dengan generasi Muslim milenial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa "flexing" dapat memiliki dampak negatif terhadap kehidupan keagamaan, termasuk mendorong materialisme berlebihan, mengikis integritas dan kejujuran, serta menghambat pemenuhan kewajiban-kewajiban Islam seperti zakat, infak, sedekah, dan wakaf. Selanjutnya, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa "flexing" berkontribusi terhadap permasalahan sosial seperti konsumerisme berlebihan, ketidaksetaraan sosial, penurunan empati dan kepedulian terhadap sesama, serta potensi masalah kesehatan mental yang timbul dari perbandingan sosial dan rasa tidak aman. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa meskipun persepsi individu terhadap "flexing" dapat berbeda, dampak negatifnya yang potensial terhadap nilai-nilai agama dan kohesi sosial memerlukan perhatian kritis.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Flexing, the act of flaunting wealth and possessions on social media, has become a prevalent phenomenon in contemporary society. While some perceive it as a harmless form of self-expression or a marketing strategy, others view it with concern. The phenomenon of flexing is multifaceted. On one hand, it can be seen as a way to showcase achievements, build social status, and even promote businesses (Mustamin, 2022). As Corrigan argues, wealth often serves as a basis for social status and self-esteem (Fatimah & Putri, 2023). Moreover, flexing can be a powerful marketing tool, as exemplified by the success of companies like First Travel, which leveraged the extravagant lifestyle of its owners to attract a large customer base (Aida & Sartika, 2019; Ajidin & Wahidah, 2023).

However, flexing also carries potential risks. Cases like those of Indra Kenz and Doni Salmanan, who used social media to promote fraudulent investment schemes, highlight the darker side of flexing. These individuals exploited the desire for wealth and status to lure unsuspecting victims, demonstrating how flexing can be used to deceive and manipulate others (Murjana & Sinarwati, 2022; Yuwita et al., 2022). Flexing is done by showing off wealth through social media, both Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Tiktok, Twitter, and so on to attract victims to join binary option trading (Adinda, 2023). Furthermore, the ostentatious display of wealth can exacerbate social inequality and contribute to feelings of envy and resentment among those who cannot afford such luxuries.

The link between flexing and corruption is also evident. The cases of Rafael Alun Trisambodo and Andhi Pramono, where the extravagant lifestyles of their family members raised suspicions and led to corruption investigations, underscore the potential for flexing to mask illicit activities (Fauzan, 2023; Winarto, 2023). This highlights the importance of examining the motivations behind flexing behavior and its potential consequences. Pakpahan & Yoesgiantoro (2023) define flexing as the act of publicly displaying luxury goods, large amounts of money, expensive cars and motorcycles, designer bags, vacations to exotic destinations, and other symbols of affluence. This behavior is not limited to adults; the millennial generation is also heavily involved in the flexing trend.

From a religious perspective, flexing can raise concerns about its impact on individual spirituality and social harmony. Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of humility, gratitude, and social responsibility. Excessive consumption and the pursuit of material wealth for the sake of showing off can be seen as contrary to these principles. As Mutmainnah et al. (2023) argue, flexing can lead to arrogance, envy, and social inequality, all of which are detrimental to the well-being of the community.

Research by Nurhayat & Noorrizki (2022) has revealed a link between flexing behavior and self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem may exhibit narcissistic tendencies, leading them to engage in flexing behavior to project an image of wealth and success. Beyond personal motivations, flexing can also be strategically utilized as a marketing tool. Prof. Rhenald Kasali, Ph.D., has emphasized that flexing behavior is not merely a form of self-expression but can be leveraged to enhance brand image and attract customers (Fatimah & Putri, 2023). However, in the Indonesian context, the primary motivation for flexing among millennials appears to be the desire to demonstrate social status and wealth.

This study aims to be able to analyze the implications of flexing for religious and social life in the millennial Muslim generation in Indonesia. The flexing phenomenon in Indonesia reaps pros and cons because flexing can affect religious behavior, reduce gratitude, and hinder spirituality, especially for the millennial Muslim generation. Flexing can also cause dissatisfaction, social inequality, and loss of human values in social life. Therefore, this research is important to be conducted to be able to find out the implications caused by flexing behavior which has now become a lifestyle for the millennial Muslim generation.

# **METHOD**

The research method used is a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to the parties involved in the flexing phenomenon. Sources of data in this study using primary and secondary data sources. Primary data sources were obtained based on observations and interviews with several informants, such as the millennial Muslim generation who actively use social media to do flexing through Instagram, Tiktok, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Observations were made on several social media which contained elements of flexing. Secondary data sources in this study were obtained from documents, information, news, and so on related to the research being conducted.

# **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### The Existence of Flexing in an Islamic Perspective

Flexing is known as an effort to show off wealth. Flexing according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary can be interpreted as the behavior of showing something conspicuously (Mardiah, 2022). Even the Urban Dictionary states that flexing is showing off all of your shit to people or acting out for attention (Fauziah, 2023). The definition illustrates that flexing is more interpreted as the behavior of showing off wealth, luxury goods to show social status and get attention. Existence flexing always involves sharing photos or stories about luxury goods, travel, or unique experiences via social media to get attention, recognition, or admiration from others.

The term 'flexing' is used more and more in various situations and cultures, but in general, flexing refers to the behavior of showing and showing off superiority or luxury in a way that is ostentatious or exaggerated (Fauziah, 2023). Chairilsyah (2019) explained that the characteristics of people who like to show off are seen from the way they look inappropriate, for example too glamorous, showing the beautiful things they have, likes to show off and do something to attract the attention of others, like to tell stories about self-kindness, and so on.

No one clearly explains the term flexing in the al-Qur'an and Hadith. However, the behavior that leads to flexing is widely explained in the al-Qur'an and Hadith. Based on the definition of flexing above, namely the behavior of showing off wealth and a luxurious lifestyle is a form of "*Riya*" and "Arrogant." The al-Qur'an and Hadith explain a lot about arrogant behavior and showing off wealth. Arrogance and *riya* or showing off wealth is behavior that is prohibited in Islam. Even Ajidin & Wahidah (2023) state that flexing is an act that is prohibited in Islam because showing off wealth is considered bad in Islamic teachings and includes *israf* (excessive) behavior. Islam is a religion that considers that reputation, honor, and prestige should be obtained from non-material factors (Fatimah & Putri, 2023).

Flexing or showing off one's wealth and arrogance is one of the behaviors that has existed for a long time even in the Al-Quran which is explained clearly in Surat At-Takatsur (Ramadhan, 2022). Based on the *Tafsir Tahlili*, Ibn Buraidah narrated that Surat At-Takatsur was sent down because it was related to the incident of two tribes from the Anshor, namely Bani Harisah and Bani Al-Harith who were proud of each other's worldly luxuries. Contents of At-Takatsur's according to Prof. M. Quraish Shihab is related to the existence of criticism for anyone who flaunts luxury and wealth so that he neglects to worship Allah SWT (Labib, 2022). Showing off wealth and being arrogant by showing off wealth just to want to be adored and respected is behavior that is prohibited in Islam based on the Al-Quran and Hadith.

#### Factors Causing Flexing in the Millennial Generation

The act of "showing off wealth," often referred to as "flexing," has emerged as a prominent trend, particularly on social media platforms (Arsyad, 2022). This trend is fueled by the burgeoning number of social media users in Indonesia, which reached 167 million in 2021, representing 60.4% of the population (Kemp, 2021; Widi, 2023). Notably, millennials constitute a significant portion of this user base, comprising 57% of all social media users in Indonesia (Nisa et al., 2023). Consequently, the flexing phenomenon has become particularly prevalent among millennials, who are highly active on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and others (Rahayu, 2022).

In the past, the flexing phenomenon existed with silver spoons and corsets showing off. At that time, the possession of silver spoons and corsets was a status symbol for the rich. Nowadays, everyone can quickly and easily show off their wealth through social media. Many Crazy Rich from the millennial generation demonstrates their luxurious lifestyle, luxury goods, branded bags, luxury vehicles, and so on to the wider community so that many sympathize with them to serve as role models and some do not like them because they are considered excessive and arrogant (Rachman et al., 2023). Social media allows people to interact freely with others and offers flexors multiple ways to reach and engage with consumers. Social media is the right place to influence individuals and businesses (Appel et al., 2020). Therefore, flexing behavior in Indonesia is increasing with social media.

The flexing phenomenon through social media can be done by anyone, including the millennial generation. Social media makes it easy for the millennial generation to show off branded assets and goods, both their own and those of their parents. The flexing phenomenon has become a trend among the millennial generation because it has earned the nickname "Sultan" and "crazy rich." Flexing is one of the fastest ways to show social status for achievements at a young age with abundant wealth. A person's desire to flaunt wealth and luxury has different purposes. These goals are influenced by several factors that cause the millennial generation to flex through social media. Through flexing, many people imitate flexing behavior and become role models that need to be emulated (Raharja et al., 2023).



Figure 1. Factors Causing Flexing (Source: processed from various sources)

Several factors influence flexing behavior for the millennial generation (Figure 1), namely; The first factor is the existence of social status that makes a person show off his wealth. The second factor is the competitive culture between millennials. Some individuals may feel the need to show that their successes and accomplishments are more

than others. The third factor is the consumer culture of the millennial generation. Cultures that encourage excessive consumption and materialism can encourage individuals to display their wealth as a form of prestige or achievement. The fourth factor is the tendency to get recognition. Flexing can be a way for anyone to feel acknowledged or valued by others. The fifth factor is the influence of social media. The social media environment can play a large role in encouraging flexing behavior. The sixth factor is the lack of awareness of ethical values. This means that the millennial generation who flaunts their wealth has a lack of awareness of ethics or morals.

# Implications of Flexing in the Social Life of the Millennial Muslim Generation

Flexing or showing off wealth has long been practiced by some people, but showing off wealth that is not done through social media is different from the current flexing phenomenon which is very easy to show off wealth, luxury goods, and so on through social media due to an increase in internet users in Indonesia (Herman, 2023). Even research conducted by Yuliana Mustamin in the article The Phenomenon of Flexing Behavior After the Pandemic is A Contemporary Economic Problem from an Islamic Economic Perspective stated that flexing that is currently being carried out often has the negative motivation and is very massive because it is supported by digital means, namely the internet. Given the number of internet users in Indonesia continues to increase. Based on data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) that the number of internet users in Indonesia in 2023 will reach 215,626,156 people out of a total population of 275,773,901 people or 78.19 percent (Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia, 2023).

"Flexing," or the ostentatious display of wealth, has long been a human behavior. However, the advent of social media has significantly amplified this phenomenon. The ease of access to the internet has enabled individuals to readily showcase their wealth through online platforms, such as by flaunting luxury goods and extravagant lifestyles (Herman, 2023). This observation is supported by research conducted by Mustamin (2022), who argues that contemporary flexing behavior is often driven by negative motivations and has become more widespread due to the pervasive influence of digital media. This trend is further exacerbated by the rapid growth of internet penetration in Indonesia. According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2023), internet users in Indonesia reached 215,626,156 in 2023, constituting 78.19% of the total population. This high level of internet access provides a fertile ground for the proliferation of flexing behavior among Indonesian society.

Some of the millennial generations give the view that flexing is something normal because it is a place to compete for the successes that have been achieved in wealth and luxury goods. Others give the view that flexing is considered a "tacky" attitude and an unethical attitude for people who have abundant wealth and luxurious goods. The phenomenon of flexing appears and is present in a person's life due to a job and

environment that is so significant to appearance and achievement that it encourages him to show himself to his environment or work. Several other millennial generations share the view that flexing is an influencer marketing strategy through social media.

The implications of flexing can affect the subconscious of the human brain and usually, the person imitates the appearance of others who are believed to be better than themselves. Therefore, when you see other people being successful, make someone imitate and follow them. In addition, the implications of flexing for the social life of the millennial Muslim generation can affect a person's behavior in his daily life to become increasingly consumptive in his life because he wants to always display wealth, luxury goods, luxury vehicles, and so on. Flexing behavior among the millennial generation because they are increasingly tempted by the popularity in society with full praise for being seen as a "Sultan" or "Crazy Rich." The temptation of popularity for flexing actors will shape the character as someone who can do various ways to be able to fulfill the luxurious necessities of life, such as cheating, debt, corruption, and so on. The implications of flexing in a person's social life hurt both himself and society. Flexing that is done is a style of showing off wealth and a style of arrogance.

With frequent flexing, there is a possibility that there will be less empathy and concern due to not caring about people who need help and lack. The loss of human values in social life is the impact of flexing behavior because flexing actors only focus on how to improve social status so that they always get endless popularity and admiration. Flexing actors only focus on how to influence people to follow what they are doing and trying to do. Flexing actors also only focus on showing off their wealth. Flexing can also create social inequality for other generations who are below the poverty line. Flexing makes a person increasingly compare social status among people so that they are not sensitive to poverty and concern. Flexing can also have a significant impact on mental health. Constantly comparing yourself to others leads to some worrying conditions. Flexing can trigger feelings of insecurity towards victims, feeling not good enough with what they have, and then growing a sense of social anxiety that gets worse, so that it can interfere with concentration and productivity to cause unhappiness and risk of depression.

# Flexing Implications for Religious Life in Millennial Muslim Generation

"Flexing," the act of ostentatiously displaying wealth or achievements on social media, presents a complex challenge to the Islamic identity of millennial Muslims. While Islam emphasizes simplicity and modesty, flexing can inadvertently promote materialism, arrogance, and a disregard for Islamic values such as *tawadhu'* (humility) and *riya'* (showing off).

From an Islamic perspective, wealth is considered a trust from Allah, and its acquisition and utilization should be guided by principles of justice and compassion. Flexing, by its very nature, can contradict these principles by prioritizing outward displays of wealth over internal spiritual growth and social responsibility. Islam

encourages the use of wealth for charitable purposes, such as Zakat, *Infaq*, and *Sadaqah*, to uplift the less fortunate. However, excessive focus on material possessions and their ostentatious display can divert attention from these important obligations.

Furthermore, flexing can foster a culture of materialism and consumerism among millennial Muslims, leading them to equate happiness with wealth and status. This can create a sense of inadequacy and competition, potentially undermining the importance of spiritual values and fostering a materialistic worldview. While some might argue that flexing can be a form of inspiration or a platform for sharing knowledge and achievements, it is crucial to ensure that these actions are rooted in sincerity and avoid promoting harmful comparisons and fostering feelings of inferiority.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of flexing presents a unique set of challenges for millennial Muslims. By adhering to Islamic principles of humility, compassion, and social responsibility, and by using social media platforms for constructive purposes, such as sharing knowledge and promoting charitable causes, millennial Muslims can navigate the complexities of the digital age while remaining true to their faith.

#### CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of "flexing" in Indonesia presents a complex picture with both potential benefits and drawbacks. While some view it as a normal and acceptable way to showcase achievements, others perceive it as a form of *riya* (showing off) and arrogance, which are prohibited in Islam. However, it is crucial to recognize that the impact of flexing is not inherently positive or negative. Its consequences depend on how it is perceived and how it affects individuals and society.

One significant impact of flexing on social life is the promotion of excessive consumerism, leading to a culture of materialism and a decline in empathy and social concern. The pursuit of material possessions and the constant display of wealth can exacerbate social inequality and contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety and low self-esteem. In the context of religious life, flexing can foster excessive materialism among millennial Muslims, leading to a glamorous lifestyle and a culture of hedonism that prioritizes wealth and outward appearances over spiritual values. This can erode the values of integrity and honesty, which are fundamental to Islamic teachings. Furthermore, the focus on material possessions can hinder the development of gratitude and a sense of social responsibility, potentially impacting the fulfillment of religious obligations such as Zakat, *Infaq*, Alms, and *Waqf* (ZISWAF).

Finally, the pursuit of a "flexing" lifestyle can lead to financial instability. The constant pressure to acquire and display material possessions can encourage excessive spending and a wasteful lifestyle, which is contrary to Islamic teachings that emphasize moderation and frugality. Overall, while flexing can be seen as a form of self-expression, it is crucial to recognize its potential negative impacts on individuals and society. By promoting values of humility, gratitude, and social responsibility, we can mitigate the

negative consequences of flexing and foster a more meaningful and fulfilling life for the millennial Muslim generation in Indonesia.

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