

# Hyperreality in the Flexing Culture of Mass Media Communication

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## Article Info

### Keywords:

hyperreality,  
simulacra,  
mass media,  
flexing culture,  
communication.

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the phenomenon of hyperreality in flexing culture in mass communication, particularly through social media. Flexing culture, as the behavior of excessively flaunting lifestyle and luxury on digital platforms, represents hyperreality in which images and simulations replace factual reality. This study aims to understand how mass media shapes public perception through the construction of manipulative virtual images, as well as its impact on individual psychology and social structures. The research method uses a qualitative approach with content analysis on popular social media and in-depth interviews with flexing actors and their audiences. This study integrates Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality with contemporary studies of flexing behavior on social media platforms as an arena of modern mass communication. The results show that hyperreality in flexing culture creates social pressure and the need for validation that impacts consumer behavior and social identity in the digital era. The implications of this research open a critical discourse on the role of mass media in producing new, simulative social realities.

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology and social media has transformed the way individuals communicate and shape their social identities. Social media has become an important platform used by audiences, especially the younger generation (Mardiah, 2022). One phenomenon that has emerged in this context is flexing culture, the behavior of excessively flaunting a luxurious lifestyle, wealth, and prestige on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Flexing is not only a form of consumerism that displays symbols of luxury, but also a social practice that shapes and negotiates social status in the virtual realm.

The flexing phenomenon is closely related to the concept of hyperreality proposed by Baudrillard (1983), a condition in which the boundaries between reality and simulation become blurred, so that images constructed through mass media become more dominant than factual reality. Mass media and digital platforms, as the primary arenas for mass communication, play a significant role in shaping a simulated world where the reality displayed is the result of engineered, attractive and aspirational images.

In this context, flexing culture on social media is not simply an individual activity, but rather a construction of hyperreality with significant social and psychological implications. Individuals engaged in flexing seek validation, social recognition, and status enhancement

through the images they project, while audiences experience social pressure and anxiety from constant comparison with a manipulated ideal life. Therefore, this research is crucial for understanding how hyperreality is constructed within flexing culture, as well as the role of mass media in producing and disseminating this image construction.

This research aims to examine the representation of hyperreality within flexing culture, the role of mass media in the construction of virtual images, and the psychological and social impacts that arise as a consequence of this phenomenon. Thus, this research will contribute to understanding the dynamics of mass communication in the digital era and the sociocultural implications of flexing practices.

Hyperreality is a concept introduced by Baudrillard (1983), which states that under certain conditions, the reality experienced by humans is replaced by a simulation or representation that appears more real than reality itself (Baudrillard, 1983). This concept is widely used in media and cultural studies to understand how mass media and digital technology create simulacra worlds that influence social and cultural perceptions.

In the context of new media, studies show that social media and digital platforms can amplify the phenomenon of hyperreality through the excessive reproduction of images and narratives, ultimately blurring the boundaries between reality and representation (Asri, 2023; Irmawati, 2024). Traditional mass media such as television and film also play a significant role in shaping hyperreal cultural identities and new social norms (Istijanto & Purusottama, 2023).

Baudrillard's comparison of hyperreality emphasizes the macro aspect, namely how media and technology shape social reality as a whole as simulacra without any basis in original reality. Hyperreality creates a world of representations that dominates and replaces actual reality. Meanwhile, social identity theory focuses more on the micro and individual aspects, namely how people construct self- and group identities based on social constructions that are also influenced by media representations. In the context of hyperreality, social identities are reshaped through the consumption and internalization of hyperreal reality.

Research on flexing culture on social media has largely been studied with reference to theories of conspicuous consumption and social identity construction. Rosida et al. (2023) revealed that flexing culture is the practice of flaunting wealth and luxurious lifestyles by content creators in Indonesia, marking a shift in the function of social media from a mere platform for interaction to an arena for virtual social competition. This phenomenon has become a strategy for defining and reinforcing social hierarchies through the manipulation of signs and symbolic values exposed to the public through various platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. This concept of excessive consumption draws on Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, which demonstrates how consumption functions as a tool to assert social status (Rosida et al., 2023).

Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality serves as an important theoretical foundation for understanding this phenomenon. Hyperreality describes a state in which simulations and images replace reality, resulting in a social life built on artificially produced mass media constructs. The media creates a reality that is not factual, but rather a simulated reality that enjoys widespread social acceptance (Baudrillard in contemporary media research). In the context of flexing culture, social media acts as a simulated space where identity and social

status are staged through manipulative images that trigger psychological gaps such as social anxiety and Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) (Rosida et al., 2023; Voicu, 2012).

Furthermore, media communication studies highlight how the images constructed in media culture not only manipulate perceptions but also create new social realities based on simulation. Voicu (2012) explains that media culture is a hyperactive arena that loses referentiality (authenticity), thus constructing a new social consciousness distorted by manipulated signs, including flexing behavior that emphasizes material excess. This transformation reflects how mass communication influences identity construction in the digital realm and can shift social values toward consumerism and hedonism.

Other research also addresses the psychosocial impact of flexing culture as part of the global phenomenon of digital consumerism, where social media users are driven to constantly present the best version of themselves to gain social recognition. This often leads to internal conflicts in the form of pressure to maintain an image, feelings of insecurity, and practices of identity camouflage (Rosida et al., 2023). Flexing has become a social phenomenon that combines hedonistic aspects with integral social strategies in the digital media era.

The two complement each other by highlighting aspects of reality and identity formation from different perspectives—Baudrillard's on the phenomenon of societal simulations at large, and social identity theory on the dynamics of self-formation within the social contexts influenced by these simulations.

Previous research has highlighted the impact of hyperreality on identity construction, social norms, and social interactions in the digital era, which is increasingly dominated by visual representations and the digitalization of culture (Jauhari, 2017). Qualitative methods using media content analysis are an effective approach to studying this phenomenon in depth (Susanto et al., 2024).

Overall, this literature review demonstrates that the flexing culture formed in the hyperreality of mass media is a multi-layered phenomenon involving symbolic construction, media-induced consumer behavior, and broad socio-psychological effects in modern society. The existence of social media as a primary arena for mass communication facilitates the spread of this culture and strengthens the role of visual simulation in shaping contemporary social reality.

Therefore, this research seeks to fill the gap in research on how hyperreality is formed and impacts mass media communication, particularly in the context of flexing culture increasingly permeated by digital simulations and hyperreal representations. This concise literature review provides an overview of key theories, empirical conditions, and relevant methodological references as a foundation for the proposed research.

## METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with cultural studies (a cultural studies approach) to understand the practice of flexing in the context of mass communication and the concept of hyperreality. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth analysis of the relationship between flexing cultural practices, the power of mass media, and the simulative

construction of social reality. The qualitative method was selected because it enables the researcher to interpret the flexing phenomena according to the participant's interpretation and comprehend the phenomenon in its natural environment (Rahmat, 2002). Qualitative research results emphasize relevance rather than generalization (Sugiyono, 2007).

The primary data was collected from digital content on popular social media platforms that serve as venues for flexing culture, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The focus of data collection was on the accounts of content creators and influencers known for their excessive display of luxurious lifestyles and symbols of luxury. The data collected included photos, videos, and captions related to flexing activities.

Digital participant observation of posts by content influencers and social media users engaged in flexing practices. Visual and textual content analysis to identify patterns of hyperreality representation and the communication strategies employed. In-depth interviews with several content creators and their followers to understand the motivations, perceptions, and psychological and social impacts of flexing behavior.

The data were analyzed using Jean Baudrillard's theories on hyperreality and simulacra as the primary theoretical framework. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify key themes related to image construction, sign manipulation, and psychosocial effects. The analysis focused on how virtual images are constructed, displayed, and received by audiences, as well as the role of media in normalizing consumer and hedonistic culture.

Data validity was maintained through triangulation of data sources (social media content and interviews) and triangulation of methods (observation and interviews). Clarity in the selection of sources and transparency in the analysis process were also applied to ensure the relevance and depth of the data.

This method allows the research to comprehensively understand the practice of flexing in the context of modern mass communication and hyperreality, as well as its complex social and psychological reinforcements. This method draws on qualitative research practices in modern media and cultural studies, such as those conducted by Rosida et al. (2023) in their study of cultural flexing in Indonesian social media.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of flexing culture on social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube demonstrates how excessive displays of luxury and wealth can shape the construction of hyperreality in mass communication. Flexing doesn't simply represent reality; it creates a simulated reality designed to appear ideal and aspirational to the audience.

Research by Bamazruk (2025) concluded that flexing culture on TikTok influences the consumer behavior of some users, particularly students, who are encouraged to purchase luxury goods beyond their immediate needs. Intense exposure to flexing content also causes psychological distress in the form of anxiety and decreased self-confidence, due to a tendency to compare personal lives with the ideal world constructed by the media. TikTok, as a social media platform, functions as a simulation arena where the reality presented is not the real reality but rather the result of a manipulated image construction.

Other research suggests that flexing is a form of self-disclosure oriented toward achieving social validation and recognition. Flexing often arises from an individual's need to overcome insecurities and social pressures online, thus encouraging widespread self-image manipulation. Mass media and communication technology act as platforms that reproduce and disseminate simulacra—images and signs that dominate social representations and blur the boundaries between reality and illusion.

Research on the phenomenon of flexing on social media shows that this behavior is not simply about flaunting wealth or a luxurious lifestyle, but also a broader form of self-disclosure, in which individuals reveal certain aspects of themselves with the primary goal of gaining attention, recognition, and social validation from their social media audience. This is because the fundamental human need for social recognition significantly influences behavior in the digital realm.

Azis & Irwansyah (2021) argue that flexing is a manifestation of social interaction facilitated by advances in communication technology and the diffusion of digital innovation. Self-disclosure in flexing not only functions as a form of self-expression but also serves as a strategy for constructing a desired social image online. Individuals who flex seek to attract attention and gain validation from their followers as a means of strengthening their identity and social status.

Furthermore, this self-disclosure behavior oriented toward achieving validation is often linked to insecurities and social pressures experienced by individuals. Flexing can be a compensatory mechanism for coping with uncertainty and self-doubt by gaining external social and psychological recognition. However, paradoxically, despite achieving recognition, individuals can also experience anxiety and stress due to the pressure to constantly maintain that image.

Another study examining the motivations for flexing in Islamic Religious Education students also found that self-disclosure is not always aimed at showing off or seeking recognition, but can also serve as a means of documenting important moments and self-expression. However, in many cases, flexing remains driven by internal drives oriented towards social recognition and validation from the surrounding environment.

Thus, flexing culture can be understood as a complex form of self-disclosure, containing aspects of strategic communication to achieve social validation and strengthen digital identity, while also reflecting the psychological and social pressures experienced by social media users.

In the context of mass communication, hyperreality is used as a strategic instrument capable of manipulating audience perceptions by presenting an overly perfect and glamorous world, thus encouraging audiences to adopt consumerist patterns and hedonistic values. This leads to changes in real social interaction patterns, including the emergence of social anxiety and the phenomenon of FoMO (Fear of Missing Out). People who become flexing audiences feel their lives are less perfect than the image presented, making social media a simulated space that impacts psychological well-being.

Research shows that flexing culture on social media, particularly on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, significantly contributes to the emergence of social anxiety and the

phenomenon of FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) among users, particularly young people and students. Intensive exposure to content depicting luxurious and consumerist lifestyles causes psychological stress in the form of feelings of insecurity and low self-confidence due to the constant social comparisons users make with the idealized image displayed.

Bamazruk (2025) found that college students who consumed flexing content were driven to engage in consumer behavior that exceeded their actual needs. Furthermore, psychological effects such as anxiety and decreased self-confidence were quite dominant negative impacts, a manifestation of FoMO triggered by the contrast between real life and the simulated world presented. This exposure fostered a fear of missing out on social experiences and opportunities seemingly enjoyed by others featured on social media.

Maghfira & Rozaq (2024), using a quantitative approach among final-year college students, stated that dependence on flexing content increased the risk of a quarter-life crisis, where anxiety about the future and life achievements became the primary concern. This dependence triggered complex cognitive, affective, and behavioral stress, leading to psychological disorders such as anxiety, frustration, and identity crises, which are closely related to the FoMO phenomenon.

Another study by Chairunnisa et al. (2023) confirmed that flexing as a self-representation strategy also has ambivalent effects; While flexing can boost self-confidence and motivation, it can also lead to social anxiety and insecurity, fueled by constant social comparisons with the "perfect" lives simulated on social media. Social media users who are frequently exposed to flexing tend to feel pressure to perform perfectly and experience a fear of missing out (FoMO) on social experiences they deem valuable.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that flexing culture on social media not only impacts consumer behavior but also contributes to the emergence of social anxiety and FoMO, which negatively impact individuals' mental health and psychological well-being.

These results indicate that flexing culture, as part of hyperreality in mass media, functions as a communication tool that produces and disseminates new, manipulative realities. Media not only present facts but also create simulated worlds that influence people's attitudes, behaviors, and social perceptions.

**Table 1.** Table of research related to flexing culture, hyperreality, self-disclosure, social anxiety, and FoMO in social media

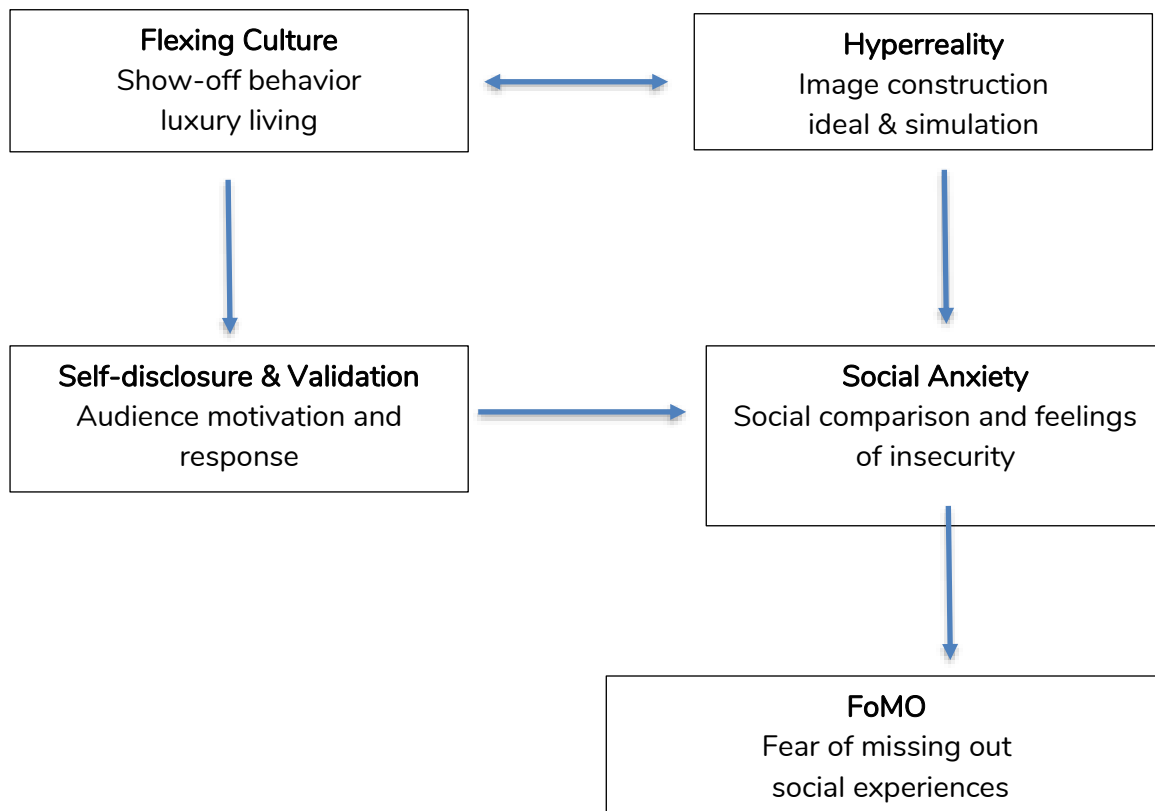
Research Aspects	Main Findings	Impact / Implications
Flexing Culture:	Flexing is the practice of flaunting a luxurious lifestyle on social media, a public spectacle	. It legitimizes social status and prestige, even though the wealth displayed may not be real.
Hyperreality in Flexing	Social media creates a manipulative, simulated world, replacing factual reality with idealized images.	Manipulating audience perceptions, encouraging consumerism and hedonism, and obscuring reality.

Research Aspects	Main Findings	Impact / Implications
Self-Disclosure and Validation	Flexing as a form of self-disclosure to gain recognition and social validation from the audience.	It enhances digital self-presence, while also triggering psychological pressure and a constant need for validation.
Social Anxiety	Anxiety caused by social comparisons with intense flexing content and virtual ideal lifestyles.	This can lead to decreased self-confidence, stress, and the risk of mental health problems, especially in younger generations.

Source: Processed Data (2025)

This table summarizes the main overview of research results related to the flexing phenomenon on social media which is linked to the concept of hyperreality, validation-oriented self-disclosure, and the impact of social anxiety and FoMO generated by social media on users.

The following is a graphic representation of the distribution and relationships between variables for visual presentation based on the summary table of research variables on flexing culture and hyperreality in social media.



**Graphic 1.** Flexing Culture and Hyperreality interact; flexing forms simulated social media content (hyperreality).

Graphic Explanation is Flexing Culture and Hyperreality interact; flexing forms simulated social media content (hyperreality). Self-disclosure and Validation stem from flexing as a communication strategy to gain recognition. This process can trigger Social Anxiety, primarily due to the comparison of reality with the ideal image. Social Anxiety, in turn, triggers the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) phenomenon, which influences social media user behavior.

This study applies Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality to understand the phenomenon of flexing culture on social media platforms like Instagram. Hyperreality explains how in the modern world, particularly in the digital realm, the boundaries between reality and simulation are blurred. Flexing content depicting luxurious and prestigious lifestyles is not simply a representation of reality, but rather a fabricated image, producing a simulation that appears more realistic and compelling than actual reality.

The results show that Generation Z is highly active in flexing by constructing an idealized self-image on social media. They frequently share manipulated or fabricated content, such as using replica branded clothing or vacation photos from sources other than their actual experiences. This condition reflects the fragmentation of the body and the false image, which aligns with Baudrillard's hyperreality depiction of simulacra, where signs and images lose their connection to the original reality.

The communication that Generation Z seeks to convey through flexing behavior in constructing an ideal self-image on social media is as follows: First, Existence and Self-Identity: Generation Z uses flexing as a way to express and construct their social identity in the digital realm. By showcasing their seemingly ideal lifestyle, achievements, appearance, and relationships, they seek to demonstrate who they are and their social standing in modern society.

Second, Status Achievement and Social Recognition. Flexing serves as a strategy to gain validation, recognition, and social status from their audience. By projecting an ideal and admirable self-image, they hope to gain appreciation, attention, and increased self-confidence.

Third, Representation of Success and Standard of Living. Through flexing, Generation Z seeks to convey a message about the standard of living they have achieved, particularly in terms of luxury and achievement. This message shapes the social construct of success that they and the wider community aspire to.

Fourth, Self-Control in the Digital Age. On the other hand, flexing also demonstrates how Generation Z finds themselves within an invisible social framework (surveillance capitalism), where their individual expression is subtly regulated by the network of interactions and norms that thrive on social media. They must adapt to the demands of this digital social landscape in order to survive and thrive.

The last, Social Critique and Negative Impacts. Although flexing serves as a means of self-expression, it also generates negative impacts such as social alienation, inequality, and exploitation due to the pressure to constantly maintain an ideal, sometimes unrealistic, image. Science and technology are advancing quickly, but morals and ethical principles are

deteriorating. The current era is called the Post Truth era, where lies can be wrapped as if they are the truth (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

In short, through flexing, Generation Z aims to communicate an ideal self-identity, socially recognized achievements, and an adaptive attitude toward the social control of digital media, while simultaneously projecting a standard of living that is a shared aspiration. In essence, flexing frames complex emotional communications, ranging from pride and validation to anxiety, insecurity, and social pressure, which are displayed in a focused manner on social media to achieve social recognition and identity.

Social media as a public arena strengthens the impact of emotional framing flexing through direct interactions in the form of likes, comments, and shares, which can increase the effects of envy and empathy along with the intensive dissemination of images. Social media functions as a desire machine that drives users to continuously produce simulated content to gain social recognition, validation, and status. As a result, it becomes difficult for people to distinguish between what is real and what is simulated, leading to the acceptance of falsehood as a more convincing reality and influencing social behavior.

Here are some examples of hashtag frequently used on social media for flexing culture, reflecting Generation Z's communication messages and emotional framing: #HardWorkPaysOff #StayFocused #DreamBig #LuxuryLife #LivingTheDream #FeelingBlessed #ThankYou #KeepGrinding #NoPainNoGain #StayReal #BehindTheScenes. These hashtag are usually accompanied by images or videos of lifestyle exhibitions, branded items, or milestones that support the communication message and the user's flexing intentions on social media.

This research also confirms that flexing culture is a complex process of reconstructing social identity in the digital world, reflecting the social and psychological pressures resulting from the need to appear perfect in the public eye. Using Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, the research explains the mechanisms behind the production and consumption of false images that engineer new social realities in digital mass media.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the relationship between Flexing Culture and Hyperreality in the context of social media is as follows: flexing culture and hyperreality interact to form simulative social media content. Flexing culture, which involves displaying luxurious lifestyles and excessive consumption on social media, creates virtual images and realities that replace factual reality. Social media becomes a space where users can manipulate signs and symbols to construct ideal and aspirational social identities. In this process, flexing is not merely a matter of showing off, but a strategy for individuals or groups to assert their social position and compete in a virtual social hierarchy. This phenomenon creates a world of hyperreality where the image perceived by the audience is more real than the factual truth. Thus, flexing culture becomes an effective mass communication medium for manipulating social perceptions and creating a new, simulation-based social reality. The impacts of this process include the rise of consumerism, hedonistic behavior, and social and psychological pressure on audiences who

continually compare their personal reality with the idealized image simulated on social media. Overall, flexing culture in the context of hyperreality reveals the shift in social media's function from a mere communication tool to a performative arena for striving for social status and recognition through the construction of simulated images. This demonstrates the power of modern mass media in shaping and directing the behavior and social perceptions of today's society.

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