



## The Flexing Phenomenon in Digital Society: An Islamic Economic Perspective on Consumption Ethics

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the growing phenomenon of *flexing*—the public display of wealth and luxury—within digital society from the perspective of Islamic economics. The research aims to understand how such self-presentations on social media reflect broader shifts in consumer values, identity construction, and moral behavior. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with a library research method, this paper analyzes classical theories of conspicuous consumption alongside Islamic teachings on moderation (*wasathiyyah*), humility, and responsible ownership (*amanah*). The findings reveal that *flexing* culture represents a transformation of consumption from a functional activity into a symbolic performance that seeks validation and social capital. From an Islamic economic perspective, this behavior contradicts the ethical principles of simplicity, gratitude, and social justice, potentially leading to materialism and moral imbalance. The study concludes that strengthening spiritual literacy, ethical awareness, and the integration of Islamic consumption principles in digital spaces are essential to guide Muslims toward a more sustainable and equitable consumption pattern.

### KEYWORDS:

Flexing phenomenon;  
Islamic economics;  
consumption ethics;  
digital society;  
conspicuous  
consumption; moral  
economy.

## INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, consumption has evolved from a purely economic activity into a symbolic expression of identity, lifestyle, and social status. The proliferation of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has intensified a global trend of self-presentation that prioritizes visibility and recognition. Within this context, the phenomenon of *flexing*—the act of displaying wealth or material possessions to gain social approval—has become increasingly prevalent, particularly among younger generations. This cultural behavior, while often dismissed as trivial, reflects deeper transformations in economic and moral consciousness that are intertwined with technological advancement and social comparison mechanisms.

Thorstein Veblen's (1899) concept of *conspicuous consumption* provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how individuals use material goods to communicate prestige and distinction. In the digital era, this tendency has been amplified by algorithmic media that reward spectacle and exaggeration. Studies indicate that social validation through likes and followers contributes to a performative consumer culture that equates visibility with success (Pentina & Zhang, 2022). Such tendencies are not confined to Western consumer societies but have also emerged prominently in Muslim-majority countries, where religious ethics ideally guide economic behavior toward balance, modesty, and social responsibility (Hassan, 2017).

From the perspective of Islamic economics, the phenomenon of *flexing* poses ethical and spiritual challenges. Islam conceptualizes consumption as a moral act governed by the principles of moderation (*wasathiyyah*), justice (*adl*), and accountability (*hisab*). Excessive self-display contradicts the Qur'anic



injunctions against arrogance (*takabbur*) and wastefulness (*israf*), which disrupt social harmony and foster inequality (Chapra, 2016). The digital performance of wealth thus not only reflects material aspiration but also signifies the erosion of moral boundaries that once governed the ethics of ownership and social representation.

Recent research within Islamic moral economy emphasizes the importance of *value-oriented behavior* that aligns economic activities with spiritual and communal objectives (Asutay, 2020). However, the expansion of social media has created hybrid spaces where religious values coexist with neoliberal ideals of self-promotion and individual success. For Muslim users, this duality generates moral ambiguity—between the desire for social recognition and the ethical imperative of humility and sincerity (*ikhlas*). The cultural normalization of *flexing* exemplifies how digital capitalism commodifies identity and transforms religiously informed consumption patterns into performative acts detached from spiritual intent (Abou-Bakr, 2021).

This paper aims to examine the *flexing* phenomenon in digital society through the analytical lens of Islamic economic ethics. It explores how the performative display of wealth alters social relations, distorts moral values, and challenges the foundational principles of Islamic consumption. By integrating sociological theory with Islamic normative teachings, the study seeks to contribute to the discourse on moral economy and the recontextualization of ethical consumption in contemporary Muslim societies. Ultimately, this research calls for renewed attention to spiritual literacy and ethical awareness as the foundation for sustainable consumption within the digital environment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of consumption and moral behavior has long occupied a central position in social and economic thought. Classical theorists such as Thorstein Veblen (1899) introduced the concept of *conspicuous consumption* to describe how individuals use material goods as symbols of social distinction rather than for their functional utility. Veblen argued that consumption often serves as a performative act to demonstrate wealth and prestige, reflecting the social stratification inherent in capitalist societies. In the contemporary digital landscape, this concept has gained renewed relevance, as social media platforms have transformed private consumption into public display, where visibility and aesthetic performance substitute for traditional markers of status (Belk, 2013).

The cultural dynamics of digital consumerism are deeply influenced by algorithmic systems that encourage self-promotion and reward visual engagement. According to Zeng et al. (2021), social media users experience heightened pressure to construct idealized versions of the self through material representation, leading to a phenomenon that merges economic aspiration with psychological validation. This process aligns with Baudrillard's (1998) notion of *symbolic exchange* in which commodities acquire meaning not merely through use value but through the signs and images they project. As a result, consumer identity becomes inseparable from digital performance, where *flexing* functions as a medium of self-legitimation within virtual hierarchies.

From a sociological standpoint, *flexing* culture represents a hybrid form of *postmodern consumption*, characterized by hedonism, self-expression, and the commodification of lifestyle (Featherstone, 2007). Unlike the traditional patterns of consumption that emphasized durability and necessity, postmodern consumerism celebrates ephemerality and spectacle. Scholars such as Campbell (2018) and Ritzer (2019) argue that this shift signifies the moral disengagement of consumption, wherein individuals seek emotional gratification and symbolic power rather than ethical or communal well-being. The digital environment amplifies these tendencies by facilitating instantaneous sharing and global comparison, effectively blurring the boundaries between private desire and public morality.

In contrast, Islamic economic thought views consumption as an act of *ibadah* (worship) and moral responsibility. The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes moderation (*wasathiyyah*), gratitude (*shukr*), and prohibition against extravagance (*israf*) as guiding principles for economic behavior (Al-Qaradawi, 1995). The prophetic tradition also warns against arrogance and ostentation, underscoring the importance of sincerity (*ikhlas*) and social balance (*adl*). Within this framework, consumption is not

merely a personal choice but a spiritual exercise that reflects one's relationship with God, society, and nature (Chapra, 2016). The aim of Islamic economics, therefore, is not the maximization of individual pleasure but the realization of *falah*—collective well-being grounded in moral values (Asutay, 2020).

Several scholars have extended this perspective by examining the tension between Islamic ethical principles and the realities of digital capitalism. Abou-Bakr (2021) observes that Muslim users of social media often navigate moral ambiguities as they seek to reconcile religious teachings with contemporary norms of success and visibility. Similarly, Hassan and Lewis (2022) highlight that the commercialization of piety and the branding of Islamic lifestyles can distort the essence of spirituality by converting ethical identity into marketable symbols. These dynamics reveal how the logics of *neoliberal individualism* and *Islamic moral economy* coexist uneasily within the digital marketplace.

In this context, the concept of *moral economy* provides an important analytical bridge. Originally developed by E. P. Thompson (1971) and later adapted by Scott (1976), moral economy refers to systems of economic exchange embedded in social norms, ethical obligations, and communal justice. Islamic economists have reinterpreted this framework to articulate a value-based economic paradigm that resists materialism and emphasizes distributive justice, mutual care, and spiritual accountability (Zaman, 2019). Applying this lens to *flexing* culture allows a deeper understanding of how moral dissonance emerges when economic behavior is detached from spiritual ethics.

Recent studies in Islamic marketing and digital ethics reinforce this concern. Ahmad and Omar (2022) found that exposure to materialistic online content correlates with higher tendencies toward *riya'* (showing off) and social envy among Muslim youth. Likewise, Yusof et al. (2021) assert that social media amplifies *ego consumption* by encouraging users to equate self-worth with digital validation. These findings underline the urgency of embedding ethical literacy and spiritual awareness in the digital economy, not merely as moral constraints but as foundations for sustainable and equitable development.

Therefore, the literature suggests that *flexing* is not simply a behavioral trend but a moral phenomenon that reflects the broader contradictions of modern consumer society. Understanding it through the lens of Islamic economic ethics requires integrating classical moral teachings with contemporary cultural analysis. Such synthesis allows scholars and policymakers to address not only the economic but also the spiritual dimensions of digital consumerism, fostering a more balanced and value-oriented approach to consumption in Muslim societies.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in an interpretive paradigm to explore the *flexing* phenomenon as a cultural and moral expression within digital society. The qualitative design is particularly suitable for uncovering social meanings, symbolic interactions, and ethical values that underlie consumer behavior, rather than measuring quantitative correlations. The research emphasizes understanding human experience from within its socio-religious and digital contexts, thereby allowing a comprehensive interpretation of how individuals construct, negotiate, and justify their acts of self-display in relation to Islamic ethical principles.

The study adopts a library research method that integrates data from scholarly literature, journal articles, books, and credible online sources that discuss digital consumerism, Islamic economics, and moral ethics. In this regard, the analysis is based on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed publications between 2015 and 2024 to ensure contemporary relevance. Primary conceptual frameworks are derived from classical theories such as Veblen's (1899) concept of *conspicuous consumption*, Baudrillard's (1998) theory of *symbolic consumption*, and Asutay's (2020) framework of the Islamic moral economy. These theoretical perspectives are contextualized within the sociocultural realities of Muslim communities living in a digital environment characterized by performative consumption.

Data collection involves a systematic review of academic sources selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria encompass literature that specifically addresses the intersection of consumption behavior, media representation, and Islamic ethics. The researcher analyzed the collected

data through a three-stage interpretive process consisting of categorization, thematic coding, and synthesis. During categorization, the data were classified into three core themes: digital identity construction, moral dimensions of consumption, and Islamic ethical responses. Thematic coding was then applied to identify recurring ideas and conceptual linkages across studies, while synthesis involved constructing a comprehensive analytical narrative connecting these insights to Islamic economic principles.

The validity of the findings was ensured through triangulation of theoretical frameworks and cross-verification of interpretations with existing empirical evidence. Moreover, reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process by continuously evaluating the researcher's positionality within the subject matter, recognizing the influence of moral and religious perspectives in interpreting cultural phenomena.

In line with [Creswell's \(2018\)](#) interpretive methodology, the research does not seek to generalize results but to deepen understanding of social meaning. The analysis is oriented toward conceptual development, illustrating how the *flexing* phenomenon reveals broader ethical tensions between Islamic moral economy and contemporary digital capitalism. Consequently, this study provides not only a sociological understanding of online consumption but also a normative reflection on how Islamic economics can inform moral regulation within digital behavior.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Cultural Transformation of Consumption in the Digital Era

The rise of social media has transformed consumption from a private economic activity into a performative act of social communication. The *flexing* phenomenon illustrates how material goods are increasingly used as symbols to construct digital identity and social distinction. This transformation aligns with [Veblen's \(1899\)](#) notion of *conspicuous consumption*, yet it extends beyond traditional economic competition by incorporating aesthetic display and algorithmic visibility as new forms of capital. In platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, ownership is less about possession and more about presentation—the ability to display one's lifestyle in a visually appealing, shareable format that signifies prestige.

This cultural shift has redefined how individuals perceive wealth, success, and morality. Studies such as [Belk \(2013\)](#) and [Pentina and Zhang \(2022\)](#) show that digital platforms amplify social comparison, leading to the normalization of extravagant self-presentation. Among younger audiences, *flexing* becomes a means of social validation, signaling belonging to aspirational lifestyles that are often unattainable in economic reality. The phenomenon thus reflects the commodification of personal image, where the self becomes both producer and product of social media economies.

In Islamic societies, such transformation introduces a complex moral tension. Islam encourages economic activity as a form of stewardship (*khilafah*) but warns against pride (*takabbur*) and excess (*israf*). The visible consumption culture evident in *flexing* contradicts the Islamic ethos of modesty (*tawadhu'*) and moderation (*wasathiyyah*). It reorients moral consciousness toward appearance rather than substance, thus eroding the spiritual dimensions of consumption that emphasize gratitude and social justice (Chapra, 2016).

### Digital Visibility and the Moral Identity Crisis

Social media's architecture promotes visibility as a measure of value. In this ecosystem, the visibility of wealth or success becomes synonymous with credibility and self-worth. As noted by [Zeng et al. \(2021\)](#), users are psychologically conditioned to seek validation through metrics such as likes, comments, and followers. This process creates what [Baudrillard \(1998\)](#) calls the *simulacrum*—a world of appearances where images of prosperity replace authentic moral and economic realities.

In Muslim contexts, such performative visibility generates moral dissonance. The digital self becomes fragmented between the authentic spiritual self, guided by sincerity (*ikhlas*), and the performative self, driven by recognition. This fragmentation can lead to what [Asutay \(2020\)](#) terms *moral drift*, where Islamic principles of justice and moderation lose their normative force amid consumerist pressures. The performance of religiosity itself may become commodified, as individuals



use Islamic symbols or modest fashion to gain visibility while unconsciously reproducing capitalist logics of branding and self-promotion (Hassan & Lewis, 2022).

Furthermore, *flexing* reinforces socio-economic inequalities. By glamorizing consumption, it perpetuates aspiration gaps between different social classes and cultivates envy (*hasad*) among viewers. This dynamic undermines the Islamic economic ideal of *falah*, which prioritizes collective welfare and balance over individualistic display. The Qur'anic admonition—"Indeed, Allah does not like those who are boastful and proud" (Qur'an, 31:18)—serves as a moral anchor that challenges the culture of self-exhibition dominating the digital sphere.

### The Intersection of Digital Capitalism and Islamic Moral Economy

The *flexing* phenomenon cannot be fully understood without recognizing its structural roots in digital capitalism. Social media platforms operate as profit-driven ecosystems that monetize attention and visibility. Algorithms prioritize sensational and visually striking content, encouraging users to engage in exaggerated displays that attract clicks and engagement. This creates what Fuchs (2021) calls *digital labor*, where individuals produce free content that generates profit for platforms while shaping their own identities through consumption.

Within this environment, Islamic economic ethics face an epistemological challenge. The moral economy of Islam is founded on the principles of justice (*adl*), equilibrium (*mizan*), and prohibition of wastefulness (*israf*). These values emphasize the sacred dimension of material life, wherein economic behavior is oriented toward gratitude (*shukr*) and social responsibility. However, the attention-driven economy reconfigures these principles by prioritizing visibility over virtue, leading to the moral commodification of faith and identity (Abou-Bakr, 2021).

This structural contradiction reveals how *flexing* embodies the collision between two paradigms: the ethical economy of Islam and the symbolic economy of capitalism. The first seeks spiritual fulfillment through balanced consumption, while the latter thrives on endless desire and differentiation. Bridging this gap requires not only moral guidance but also institutional interventions that promote ethical digital literacy and strengthen community awareness about the social consequences of performative consumption.

### Youth Participation and the Reproduction of Digital Habitus

Young people are the main agents in shaping and reproducing the culture of *flexing*. Their engagement with social media is often motivated by social mobility aspirations and peer recognition. However, as Bourdieu's (1984) theory of *habitus* suggests, such behavior is not merely individual but socially conditioned. The digital habitus of youth in Muslim societies reflects the intersection of economic aspiration, technological exposure, and cultural negotiation.

Interviews and secondary data from various studies (e.g., Ahmad & Omar, 2022; Yusof et al., 2021) indicate that many young users rationalize *flexing* as self-expression or creative entrepreneurship. Yet, behind this rationalization lies the internalization of consumerist norms that equate self-worth with ownership. Over time, these practices risk detaching moral values from consumption, turning what was once an act of gratitude into a performance of pride.

From an Islamic pedagogical standpoint, addressing this issue requires integrating spiritual education and ethical literacy into digital culture. Programs promoting *akhlaq al-iqtisad* (economic ethics) and *adab al-maal* (moral conduct in wealth) could help reorient youth perspectives toward responsible consumption. Encouraging awareness that wealth is a trust (*amanah*), not a spectacle, reinforces the spiritual purpose of economic activity as a means of achieving balance and collective prosperity.

### Toward an Ethical and Sustainable Consumption Paradigm

Reconstructing consumption ethics in the digital era necessitates a multidimensional approach. The Islamic framework provides a normative foundation for reimagining digital consumption as part of moral development rather than social competition. As Zaman (2019) and Asutay (2020) argue, the purpose of Islamic economics is to harmonize material progress with moral refinement. Thus, the antidote to *flexing* lies in cultivating *tazkiyah al-nafs* (self-purification) and embedding spiritual values into digital practices.

Educational institutions, religious organizations, and policymakers should collaborate to design ethical awareness campaigns emphasizing moderation, sincerity, and humility in online spaces. Encouraging digital *zakat* initiatives, ethical branding, and social entrepreneurship could also transform consumer behavior from self-centeredness to community-oriented growth. Ultimately, sustainable consumption in Islam is not about rejecting modernity but aligning it with divine accountability (*hisab*) and social justice.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the *flexing* phenomenon represents a significant moral and cultural transformation in the digital economy. It illustrates how social media has redefined consumption from a practical activity into a performative and symbolic act. This transformation generates new social dynamics in which visibility, validation, and digital prestige become measures of success. The normalization of self-display reveals the intersection between material desire, identity construction, and the technological logic of algorithmic capitalism.

From the perspective of Islamic economics, such a transformation constitutes an ethical deviation from the principles of moderation (*wasathiyyah*), humility (*tawadhu'*), and social balance (*adl*). The *flexing* culture contradicts the Islamic moral framework that regards consumption as a form of stewardship (*khilafah*) and gratitude (*shukr*). Instead, it promotes self-glorification and competitive individualism, which contribute to moral erosion and the widening of social inequality.

The findings underscore the need to restore the moral foundation of consumption through spiritual literacy and ethical awareness. Integrating Islamic economic ethics into digital behavior can serve as a normative guide to counter the excessive materialism embedded in digital capitalism. Education in *akhlaq al-iqtisad* (economic ethics), digital literacy programs, and public discourse on sustainable consumption are crucial for developing a culture of moderation and sincerity in online spaces.

Finally, this research contributes to the growing discourse on the moral economy by linking classical Islamic ethical principles with contemporary issues of digital consumerism. The study calls for a renewed understanding of wealth and consumption—not as instruments of self-display but as means of fulfilling social justice and achieving *falah* (holistic well-being). Thus, a truly sustainable digital economy must be one that harmonizes material progress with spiritual responsibility and ethical integrity.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the publication of this study.

## Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the paper.

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