

Flexing and digital social pleasure: a socioeconomic study of fake lifestyles on Instagram

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Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of flexing as a status representation strategy in the digital visual economy, particularly on the Instagram platform. Flexing, or the practice of visually showcasing a luxurious lifestyle, is understood not simply as personal expression, but as part of the logic of affective and algorithmic capitalism that shapes the digital habitus of contemporary society. In this context, self-image becomes a symbolic commodity exchanged for visibility and social validation, creating performative pressures that are both emotional and structural. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach through netnographic observation and semi-structured interviews to uncover how millennials and Gen Z individuals engineer their lifestyle images as a form of aesthetic and affective labor. The analysis shows that flexing blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion, reproducing inequality through commodified visual aesthetics. Within this dynamic, flexing can be read as a form of co-optation of neoliberal ideology, but also as a symbolic strategy for negotiating social position within an exclusionary structure. This research emphasizes that digital social pleasure is not a neutral space, but rather an arena filled with power relations, algorithmic pressures, and fantasies of meritocracy. Thus, fake lifestyles on social media are a structural symptom of the crisis of representation and the pressures of performativity in the contemporary digital economy.

Keywords: Digital Economy; Fake Lifestyle; Social Representation.

1. Introduction

The digital transformation has created a new social landscape in which consumption practices and self-image have undergone fundamental shifts. One prominent phenomenon is flexing, the practice of flaunting wealth, luxury goods, or a glamorous lifestyle through social media platforms, particularly Instagram. This phenomenon reflects a new form of symbolic consumption that is oriented not only toward possession of goods, but also toward representation and social validation gained from digital audiences (Radjaguguk & Andriani, 2025). Within this framework, flexing becomes an instrument of symbolic capital, as Bourdieu (1986) argued, used to claim social positions within a stratification structure that is no longer based on real ownership but rather on visual image (Rosida et al., 2023).

Behind the practice of flexing lies the illusory and paradoxical dynamics of digital social pleasure. Social media users derive satisfaction not from actual possessions, but from the illusion of prestige and social recognition displayed through the aesthetics of their posts. The concept of the digital pleasure economy explains how pleasure on platforms like Instagram is performative and fueled by numbers like likes, followers, and engagement. Audience awareness and algorithms create pressure to continually project images of success and a high-class lifestyle, even when these images do not reflect



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reality (Abd Rasyid et al., 2024). In this context, a fake lifestyle is not simply a personal lie, but part of an affective economic system that exploits emotions and images.

Furthermore, Instagram can be understood as a space for the production of social identities that normalizes the falsehood and aesthetics of capitalism. Unlike conventional social spaces, digital platforms facilitate selective and manipulative identity curation. Through features such as filters, calculated captions, and harmonious visual layouts, users can “create” idealized versions of themselves, often disconnected from lived socio-economic realities. This creates a new form of digital social stratification, where class is no longer defined by tangible assets, but by the aesthetic and technological capabilities to display digital luxury. This means that platforms like Instagram have become tools for the production of fake lifestyles that blur the lines between reality and illusion.

Fake lifestyles are inextricably linked to the logic of affective capitalism, which demands individuals continually “feel successful” to remain socially relevant. Various studies show that today's digital economy relies on affective labor—the emotional and aesthetic labor performed by users—to maintain social engagement (Asyahidda & Azis, 2024). This research offers a critical reading of fake lifestyles, not as individual moral deviations, but as a response to the structures of capitalism that demand constant performativity and digital existence.

A digital political economy approach linked to theories of affect and performativity opens up analytical space for self-representation practices on social media as part of a symbolic power field. Influencer culture and digital aesthetics, often understood as expressions of urban middle-class lifestyles (Darmawan & Andreas, 2025), within this framework, can be seen as manifestations of digital economic logic characterized by algorithmic pressures, structural inequalities, and the production of performative self-images. The phenomenon of flexing is not merely an individual expression, but rather part of a symbolic economic configuration that reflects the negotiation between social desires, cultural capital, and affective dynamics in the contemporary digital order.

Furthermore, the concept of digital social pleasure in this study is critically interpreted as a social product constructed by the system, not simply a personal psychological experience. In Instagram's logic, satisfaction comes not from deep social relationships, but from visual exposure rewarded through numbers and perceived status. This reinforces the thesis that digital platforms are not socially neutral but rather imbued with power relations that reproduce the illusion of social mobility and success. The pleasure derived from flexing actually reinforces the illusion of meritocracy, obscuring the real structures of inequality behind the scenes (Boy & Uitemark, 2020).

By understanding flexing as an expression of a fake lifestyle supported by the digital economy, we can see how this practice reinforces consumer norms while normalizing the social pressure to “appear successful.” More than just a pop culture phenomenon, the fake lifestyle on Instagram is an articulation of inequality disguised in aesthetics. It is a form of passive resistance to oppressive social structures, but also a form of co-optation by a digital system that capitalizes on image and affection. Therefore, this research is important as a contribution to a critical understanding of the digital economy and the social dynamics behind the scenes of social media.

Finally, it is important to recognize that in the era of visualization and hyperreality, the boundaries between reality and fakeness are becoming increasingly blurred. Instagram, with its algorithms emphasizing engagement and aesthetics, has become a battleground for image acquisition, which in turn constructs new values in digital society. This study positions itself within a critical effort to unravel the relationship between technology, economics, and affection, and demonstrates how fake lifestyles are not merely forms of individual expression, but structural symptoms of the crisis of representation in contemporary digital society

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to deeply understand the phenomenon of flexing and digital social pleasure as social constructs within the context of the visual economy on Instagram. This approach was chosen because the issues being explored are complex, not quantitatively

measurable, and closely related to the meanings, symbols, and individual perceptions of social status displayed through digital media. In other words, this study seeks to capture the subjective dynamics and social representations that are invisible but crucially determine behavior and social relations in digital spaces.

The main data sources for this research come from two categories: first, primary data collected through netnographic observation of Instagram users who actively practice flexing, as well as semi-structured interviews with social media users who consciously construct a certain lifestyle image. Second, secondary data were obtained from various literature studies, scientific journal articles, media reports, and other digital documentation relevant to the research theme. Observations were conducted on visual uploads (photos and videos), captions, hashtag usage, and forms of digital social interactions such as likes, comments, and reposts, to understand how the values of success, prestige, and social acceptance are constructed and exchanged symbolically.

To explore the meanings and motives behind fake lifestyle practices, interviews were conducted with 6–10 millennial and Gen Z informants who actively use Instagram, particularly those who have or are currently engaging in personal branding through luxury aesthetics. These interviews were semi-structured to allow flexibility in exploring personal experiences and narratives, while remaining within a systematic framework. Furthermore, visual documentation of relevant Instagram posts was collected for contextual analysis of digital self-image construction.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns of meaning in the collected data, both from interviews and visual documentation. The analysis stages included data transcription, initial coding, identification of key themes, and critical interpretation based on relevant social theories. Some anticipated emerging themes include: digital status representation, the illusion of success, symbolic pleasure, and performative identity. The theoretical framework used involved Bourdieu's (1986) theory of symbolic capital, the concept of affective capitalism, and the visual economy in social media (Marwick, 2015).

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, combining interview results, virtual observations, and scientific literature to obtain a complete and balanced picture. Member checking was also conducted to confirm the researcher's interpretations with interviewed informants, and peer debriefing was conducted to discuss the findings with colleagues or methodologists to avoid subjective bias. This procedure is crucial to ensure the analysis is not only internally valid but also academically accountable.

3. Results

Flexing as a Status Representation Strategy in the Digital Visual Economy

Instagram, as a visual economy, operates within the framework of platform capitalism, where attention is a key commodity being contested. In this landscape, users don't simply share their personal lives but actively construct aspirational visual representations to gain visibility and social validation. Flexing, in the form of posts about luxury lifestyles, branded goods, or exclusive travel, becomes part of a digital identity curation strategy that functions as an accumulator of symbolic capital (Octamadian et al., 2024). Through carefully constructed visual aesthetics, including layout, filters, color tones, and caption narrative styles, users create self-images that project prosperity and success, seemingly demonstrating social mobility within the digital economy.

The representation of luxury displayed through flexing cannot be separated from the influence of neoliberal ideology, which has internalized the values of individualism and consumerism in digital culture. This aesthetic is not neutral, but rather the result of a social construction that makes consumption the primary indicator of success in life. Social media algorithms like Instagram reinforce this dynamic by encouraging content deemed "engaging" and aspirational to appear more frequently in users' feeds (Fahmi et al., 2024). Within this ecosystem, flexing becomes a form of symbolic production

that allows individuals not only to demonstrate social status but also to maintain it through circulation and collective acceptance.

Furthermore, the practice of flexing involves complex digital social interactions, where likes, comments, and follower counts serve as performative indicators of the symbolic value of posts. Audience responses reinforce one's social position within the digital hierarchy, while simultaneously creating cultural pressure to consistently appear "successful." Flexing is not simply self-expression, but rather a form of participation in the logic of the attention economy, which demands that individuals continually produce images that meet the expectations of the platform and the public (Wiransani & Kusuma, 2023). The concept of "status affordance" explains how Instagram's technical features enable and encourage users to project self-images that reflect idealized social status.

While seen as an expression of individual success, flexing often masks the reality of inequality that has become increasingly acute in the digital age. Highly aesthetically curated images of luxury often fail to reflect the socioeconomic conditions of the majority of users, yet remain perceived as standards of success to be achieved. As a result, the illusion of social mobility emerges, creating unrealistic expectations and potential psychological distress, especially for groups lacking the resources to exhibit similar lifestyles. This phenomenon demonstrates how the digital economy not only generates new forms of social representation but also reinforces exclusion and inequality through commodified visual symbolism. Flexing, in this case, can be understood as a form of strategic self-commodification—a strategy for selling one's image in a highly competitive, yet socially paradoxical, market for attention. The phenomenon of flexing in the digital landscape also needs to be understood as part of the dynamics of neoliberal subjectivation, where individuals actively shape themselves as “marketable subjects” in an ecosystem that demands constant performativity. In this context, social identity is no longer static or authentic, but rather becomes an entity that is continuously constructed through aesthetics and narratives that conform to the logic of the digital market. This aligns with Brahmana et al.'s (2023) analysis of aesthetic labor in the social media era, namely the affective and visual workload that individuals must undertake to gain social engagement and legitimacy. A 24-year-old female informant, who works as a beauty influencer, stated:

"If I want high engagement, my feed has to look perfect. I can spend hours editing photos and thinking up captions. It can be tiring sometimes, but that's what audiences and brands demand."

The practice of flexing reflects how the pressure to appear successful and visually appealing has become part of the logic of self-production, which is not only emotionally exhausting, but also reinforces exclusions based on class, gender, and access to digital resources.

More critically, flexing as a strategy for representing status in digital spaces contributes to the reproduction of problematic structures of domination and fantasies of meritocracy. Digital society is led to believe that popularity and influence are the result of individual hard work and creativity, whereas digital success is heavily influenced by social capital, networks, and certain privileges not shared by everyone (Megantari et al., 2025). Within this framework, the narrative of digital success constructed through flexing tends to obscure structural realities such as economic inequality, digital inequality, and limited social mobility. One lower-middle-class student interviewed stated:

"I often feel inferior when I see my friends on Instagram showing off their branded goods. It feels like they live in a world I can't possibly reach."

Thus, flexing not only creates impressive visual effects but also maintains the illusion of equality within a fundamentally unequal structure. This critique is crucial for challenging the assumption that

social media is democratic, and instead demonstrates how digital representation becomes an arena for reproducing hegemony in fragmented and aesthetic forms.

Digital Social Pleasure: Between Affection, Validation, and the Illusion of Success

In the contemporary digital landscape, particularly on platforms like Instagram, the concept of social pleasure no longer simply refers to authentic expressions of affection or genuine emotional interactions between users. Pleasure is now commodified in the form of engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and followers. This is a hallmark of what has been called affective capitalism, a form of capitalism that exploits human emotions and affection as economic resources (Andrews & Duff, 2020). A female student who actively uses Instagram stated,

"Sometimes I feel satisfied when my posts get a lot of likes, but it also makes me anxious. It feels like I have to constantly update, to look cool, but it's actually really tiring."(Interview, R., 24 years old, Jakarta, 2025).

This quote indicates how digital pleasure has become ambivalent, on the one hand bringing euphoria of satisfaction, but on the other hand giving rise to constant emotional stress.

Validation in the digital world is no longer purely interpersonal or affective, but rather constructed by algorithmic systems that regulate visibility and engagement. Platforms like Instagram are not only a means of sharing content but also a performance-based validation distribution engine. Within the attention economy, user attention becomes a commodity contested by individuals and digital corporations. In another interview, a freelance creative worker stated,

"If I don't update my work or accomplishments on my feed, people think I'm unemployed. So sometimes I have to pretend to be busy. It feels like acting, not real life."(Interview, D., 29 years old, Bandung, 2025).

This statement emphasizes that the logic of existence on social media often demands inauthentic performative displays, in line with the concept of self-branding (Hearn, 2008), where individuals are forced to position themselves as brands that must remain relevant and attract public attention.

In this context, the experience of pleasure no longer stems from genuine social interactions, but rather from manipulative algorithmic outcomes. Digital pleasure becomes a form of gamification of existence, where every aspect of life is scored through likes, shares, and impressions. As explained by Graciyal & Viswam (2021), digital platforms condition user behavior to follow patterns that benefit the surveillance capitalist system, exchanging human affection for monetizable data. Pleasure becomes an illusion of success that is inseparable from hidden yet effective power structures. Users are no longer simply producers of content but rather commodities themselves, governed by algorithms and collectively constructed social expectations.

Sociologically, the relationship between affection, validation, and pleasure demonstrates the existence of a new digital habitus that shapes how individuals interpret success and happiness. As Bourdieu (1990) argued, habitus reflects the social structures embedded in individuals' bodies and minds. In this context, social media algorithms operate as structural agents that influence perceptions of self-image, social status, and even life values. Thus, what appears to be pleasure in digital spaces actually reflects a new form of psychopolitics in which control over individuals is exercised not through repression, but through the internalization of norms of productivity, performativity, and illusory happiness. Therefore, digital pleasure must be understood not as an autonomous space, but as an arena fraught with power relations, symbolic reproduction, and structured social expectations.

Fake Lifestyle as a Structural Symptom: Passive Resistance or Digital Co-optation?

The phenomenon of fake lifestyles on social media, particularly in the form of flexing and displaying wealth, luxury, or fabricated success, cannot be understood as a reductionist issue of personal or individual morality. Rather, this phenomenon is an expression of the structural conditions within a digital capitalist society that emphasizes performativity and visibility as new social capital. In this context, individuals are compelled to produce visual narratives that portray idealized versions of themselves, not merely to demonstrate who they are, but to survive in a digital ecosystem that links social existence to visual representation. Contemporary society shapes subjectivity through cultural mediation and an emotional economy, where constructed self-images become more important than authentic experiences (Gorea, 2021).

Digital capitalism operates on the logic of platformization, where algorithms determine visibility based on engagement and visual appeal. Within this system, individuals who display aspirational lifestyles tend to receive more attention, validation, and even economic opportunities. This creates structural pressure to appear visually "successful," even when reality doesn't support this narrative. As explained by Kelly et al. (2023), the attention economy demands that digital workers manage their identities as consistent, compelling, and commodifiable personal brands. Within this framework, fake lifestyles emerge as a symbolic survival strategy: individuals attempt to avoid social exclusion by projecting identities that align with algorithmic and cultural expectations. An interview with a 24-year-old aspiring content creator in Jakarta revealed,

"I don't actually own any branded items, but every week I borrow bags and clothes from my friend who works at a boutique for photos. I know it's not entirely honest, but if I don't look cool, my followers drop, my engagement drops, and no brands want to work with me. It's a really harsh world, especially for someone like me who's starting from scratch."

This statement shows how the pressure to maintain visibility forces individuals to engineer self-images in order to survive within the logic of the platform economy.

However, it's important to understand that a fake lifestyle not only reflects compulsion but can also be interpreted as a form of passive resistance. Under conditions of structural inequality that limit access to social mobility and economic resources, displaying a luxurious lifestyle symbolically can be seen as an attempt to claim social space that is actually closed off. This phenomenon aligns with James C. Scott's (1985) concept of "everyday resistance," a form of resistance that is subtle, non-frontal, and practiced in everyday spaces. In this case, flexing can be interpreted as resistance to the narrative of failure attached to lower-class or marginalized groups in digital society. By creating the illusion of success, individuals negotiate their social position within an unjust system.

A working-class student who is active on TikTok stated,

"In the real world, people like me are rarely considered. But on TikTok, if I can appear successful, people start listening to me. It makes me feel like I have control over my life, even if it's just on a screen."

This quote shows that visual narratives about success become symbolic tools for negotiating self-worth within an exclusive system.

On the other hand, however, fake lifestyles can also be seen as a form of co-optation, namely the unconscious internalization of the ideology of visual capitalism. When individuals continually reproduce certain visual standards originating from the digital economic elite, they actually help reinforce the structures that oppress them. This demonstrates how digital capitalism operates not only through the exploitation of labor, but also through symbolic production and reproduction in digital

cultural spaces. According to Bourdieu (1984), symbolic consumption is a tool of class differentiation; in other words, imitation of elite lifestyles through social media reinforces social stratification rather than dismantling it. In this context, co-optation occurs when subjects feel free to present themselves in a “glamorous” manner, while actually submitting to the logic of neoliberalism, which requires performativity as a form of self-worth.

Thus, the fake lifestyle on social media is a complex phenomenon that exists in tension between individual agency and structural determination. It can be read as an adaptive strategy against social exclusion, as well as a form of submission to the logic of the visual economy exploited by digital platforms. This phenomenon must be understood within the context of class dynamics, algorithmic pressures, and the myth of meritocracy, where success is perceived as the result of personal hard work, while the structures of inequality that actually play a dominant role are hidden within layers of visual narratives that glorify individual achievement

4. Conclusion

Flexing as a status representation strategy in the digital visual economy reflects the complex dynamics between individual agency and the structures of digital capitalism, which emphasize visual performativity as a form of social value. In platform ecosystems like Instagram, aesthetically constructed self-images serve as symbolic commodities exchanged for visibility, validation, and economic opportunity. This phenomenon demonstrates how algorithms and neoliberal aesthetics shape a digital habitus that demands individuals to continuously produce images of success for the sake of social existence. The practice of flexing does not simply reflect a lifestyle but becomes part of emotionally exhausting affective and visual labor, especially for those who are structurally vulnerable. In this context, flexing operates as a form of strategic self-commodification, where individuals sell their self-image in a competitive but unequal market for attention. Narratives of success constructed through the aesthetics of luxury often obscure structural inequalities and reinforce the illusion of digital meritocracy. As a result, many individuals feel compelled to display false lifestyles to survive within an exclusive algorithmic logic. While it can be read as a form of symbolic resistance to social exclusion, flexing also contains aspects of neoliberal ideological co-optation that reinforces social hierarchies through symbolic consumption. Glamorous visual representations often mask the psychosocial distress and structures of injustice that shape them. Therefore, understanding flexing requires a critical reading of the relationship between algorithmic power, digital aesthetics, and class structures within platform capitalism. This conclusion emphasizes that flexing is not simply a personal expression, but rather a representation of the paradoxical logic of social value production in a digital society..

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