

Understanding Flexing as an Engagement Strategy: A Study of Gen Z's Perception of Hedonic Content on Social Media

Yurilla Endah Muliatie

Wijaya Putra University

yurillaendah@uwp.ac.id

Nurleila Jum'ati

Wijaya Putra University

nurleila@uwp.ac.id

Sri Suprapti

Wijaya Putra University

srisuprapti@uwp.ac.id

Abstract

This study explores how Generation Z perceives *flexing*—the display of luxury or achievement—as a hedonic communication strategy on social media, contrasting it with educational content in shaping user engagement. Using a qualitative exploratory design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital observations, and documentation from Instagram and TikTok accounts that consistently produce either flexing or educational content. Thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2006) framework revealed distinct engagement patterns between the two content types. Flexing attracts rapid attention through emotionally charged visuals, resulting in high but superficial engagement such as likes and brief comments. Conversely, educational content generates cognitively deeper engagement characterized by shares, saves, and reflective comments. Although the Customer Engagement Rate (CER) difference between flexing (7.2%) and educational content (6.8%) is minimal, qualitative findings demonstrate that flexing fosters “wide but shallow” engagement, while educational content encourages “narrow but meaningful” interaction. These results indicate that visual appeal drives immediate visibility, whereas informational value sustains long-term audience involvement. The study offers insights for digital creators seeking to balance hedonic appeal with substantive value to optimize both attention and lasting engagement.

Keywords: *flexing, gen Z, customer engagement, hedonic content, social media marketing*

1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of social media has revolutionized how individuals construct identity, communicate, and interact within digital spaces, yet it has simultaneously intensified *academic anxiety* regarding the superficiality and psychological implications of online engagement. In the era of the *attention economy*, visibility and validation are increasingly quantified through *likes, comments, and shares*, creating pressure for users—particularly *Generation Z*—to project aspirational lifestyles and achievements. This cultural shift toward performative self-presentation raises scholarly concern over the long-term effects of *flexing*, a phenomenon characterized by the deliberate display of wealth, luxury, or social status as a

strategy to gain recognition and credibility in digital environments. According to a 2024 Hootsuite global digital report, Indonesia ranks among the top five countries for daily social media usage, with over 167 million active users spending an average of 3 hours 11 minutes per day online—figures that underscore the societal scale of this behavior. Such statistics reinforce the urgency of understanding how hedonic and informational content dynamics shape online engagement and influence social perception among digital natives.

Previous studies have examined *flexing* primarily from psychological and cultural standpoints. Festinger's (1954) *Social Comparison Theory* explains how individuals derive self-evaluation by comparing themselves with others, providing a foundation for understanding emotional responses to ostentatious displays on social media. Erving (1986) *Impression Management Theory* further elucidates how users intentionally curate favorable self-images through symbolic cues of achievement or status. Building on these theories, Raharja et al., (2024) explored *flexing* among Indonesian adolescents and found that such practices trigger aspirational identification and envy-driven engagement. Similarly, Sarah (2024) discovered that influencer-generated *flexing* affects Gen Z's purchasing decisions and emotional well-being, particularly through admiration and social comparison mechanisms. Meanwhile, Matcu & Faraonel (2023) discussed *flexing* within global influencer marketing, positioning it as a macro-level phenomenon of digital consumerism. Although these studies illuminate psychological and cultural implications, they seldom address *flexing* as a communication strategy that directly affects measurable engagement outcomes.

In contrast, recent digital marketing research has emphasized the value of informational or educational content in fostering sustained cognitive involvement. Iyadi & Mgbame (2022) demonstrated that informational content enhances user trust and brand loyalty in emerging markets. Kaveh et. al. (2020) and Zhang et. al. (2017) conceptualized customer engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components observable in social media interactions. However, few studies explicitly compare hedonic visual content with informational content in terms of engagement depth or longevity, leaving ambiguity about which form more effectively promotes meaningful audience interaction. The academic discourse thus reveals a clear gap: while *flexing* has been recognized as a psychological and cultural expression, its comparative influence on engagement behavior—particularly among Gen Z in the Indonesian digital ecosystem—remains empirically underexplored.

This research seeks to fill that gap by offering a comparative, qualitative exploration of how Gen Z perceives and engages with *flexing* versus educational content on social media. The study examines how each content type influences both superficial and deep forms of customer engagement, operationalized through visible metrics such as *likes*, *comments*, *shares*, and *saves*. Guided by *Impression Management Theory*, *Social Comparison Theory*, and *Customer Engagement Theory*, the research formulates a central question: **How do hedonic and informational content types differently shape the nature and depth of Gen Z's engagement on social media platforms?** By addressing this question, the study aims to understand not only what drives attention but also what sustains meaningful interaction in digital contexts. The *novelty* of this research lies in integrating psychological theory with digital marketing analytics to interpret *flexing* as both a cultural act and a strategic communication tool. Unlike previous investigations that treated *flexing* primarily as self-presentation or consumer

behavior, this study positions it within the framework of content strategy—evaluating its effectiveness against educational content in generating engagement depth. Moreover, by focusing on Indonesian Gen Z audiences, it contextualizes *flexing* within collectivist cultural norms that subtly reshape how status and authenticity are displayed online.

This topic holds significant academic and practical importance. Theoretically, it contributes to the refinement of engagement models by distinguishing between *wide-but-shallow* and *narrow-but-deep* audience interactions, offering a nuanced understanding of how emotional and cognitive mechanisms jointly drive participation. Practically, it provides actionable insights for digital creators, marketers, and educators seeking to design content that balances visual appeal with informational value. In an age where visibility often outweighs substance, identifying strategies that combine hedonic appeal with cognitive relevance becomes crucial for fostering sustainable audience relationships. Therefore, this research not only responds to growing *academic anxiety* over the superficial nature of online interaction but also advances the discourse on how digital communication can evolve toward more authentic and meaningful engagement.

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of *flexing*—defined as the deliberate display of wealth, lifestyle, or achievement to attract attention or social validation—has increasingly drawn academic attention within the fields of digital communication and marketing psychology. The theoretical foundation of this behavior is rooted in *Impression Management Theory* Goffman (1986), which posits that individuals construct curated representations of the self to influence how others perceive them. On social media platforms dominated by visual culture, this theory gains renewed relevance as users craft content to project competence, prestige, or success. Complementing this framework, *Social Comparison Theory* Festinger (1954) explains how individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their achievements or possessions to others', producing affective responses such as admiration, envy, or aspiration. Both theories together offer a conceptual lens for understanding how *flexing* emerges as a social mechanism shaped by the desire for recognition and self-validation.

Several prior studies have examined *flexing* as a socio-psychological behavior. Raharja et al. (2024) conducted a literature review on *flexing* among Indonesian teenagers and found that upward social comparison often results in both positive inspiration and negative emotional strain. Sarah (2024) investigated the impact of influencer-generated *flexing* on Gen Z's consumer behavior, demonstrating that while such content enhances short-term admiration and purchase intent, it can also erode perceived authenticity and long-term trust. Haque et al., (2023) analyzed luxury branding among Indonesian *Muslimah* consumers and concluded that symbolic displays of affluence can build community engagement but risk superficiality when detached from moral or cultural resonance. Globally, Matcu & Faraonel (2023) explored the macro-marketing implications of influencer *flexing* and argued that it reflects broader capitalist values of consumption and performative success. Collectively, these studies reveal that *flexing* is not merely a personal act of exhibitionism but a social and economic phenomenon deeply embedded in digital culture.

Despite their insights, previous works focus primarily on *flexing's* cultural and psychological consequences rather than its communicative and strategic implications. Few

studies have systematically compared *flexing* with alternative content types, such as educational or informational posts, in terms of their ability to foster sustained engagement. This gap is significant, given that audience interaction has become a central metric of content performance in digital marketing. According to (Kaveh et. al. (2020)), customer engagement is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, observable through visible metrics such as *likes*, *comments*, *shares*, and *saves*. Similarly, (Zhang et. al. (2017))(Ge et al., 2017) emphasized that engagement intensity reflects not only attention but also perceived value and commitment to digital communities. These perspectives imply that *flexing*, which appeals primarily to emotion and visual stimulation, may generate rapid but shallow engagement, while educational content that offers cognitive value may elicit deeper and more sustained interaction.

(Iyadi & Mgbame (2022) further demonstrated that informational content builds trust and long-term brand relationships in emerging markets by offering relevance and authenticity. Their findings suggest that while hedonic stimuli drive visibility, cognitive satisfaction ensures loyalty—a balance few social media strategies achieve effectively. Nevertheless, no comprehensive comparative analysis has yet been conducted to explore how these distinct mechanisms operate among Gen Z audiences, who represent the most active demographic on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. This absence of comparative insight underscores the *research gap* that motivates the present study: the need to understand whether *flexing*—as a hedonic, emotionally charged strategy—produces engagement of equivalent depth and sustainability to that generated by informational, educational content.

Addressing this gap is vital not only theoretically but also practically. From a theoretical standpoint, existing literature lacks integrative frameworks that connect the emotional appeal of *flexing* with measurable engagement outcomes, leaving unanswered how *Impression Management* and *Social Comparison* interact with *Customer Engagement Theory*. Practically, digital creators and marketers face uncertainty about whether hedonic or informational approaches yield more enduring audience relationships. Previous works tend to isolate either psychological interpretation or marketing outcomes; few combine them into a single analytical model. Therefore, the present research contributes by synthesizing psychological and marketing perspectives to evaluate how Gen Z perceives and engages with both *flexing* and educational content, offering a multidimensional view of engagement encompassing emotional arousal, cognitive involvement, and behavioral response.

The central research problem addressed in this study concerns the depth versus breadth of audience engagement resulting from hedonic versus informational content. Specifically, the study investigates whether *flexing* content generates *wide-but-shallow* engagement—characterized by instant reactions and ephemeral visibility—while educational content fosters *narrow-but-deep* engagement, characterized by meaningful interaction and long-term cognitive investment. This question arises from increasing *academic anxiety* over the superficial nature of digital participation, where visibility metrics often overshadow substantive engagement. In Indonesia's hyperconnected digital culture, where users spend over three hours daily on social media (Hootsuite (2022)), such distinctions are crucial for understanding how online attention is formed, sustained, and converted into relational value.

By focusing on Indonesian Gen Z as both creators and consumers of digital narratives, this study advances prior literature in three significant ways. First, it contextualizes *flexing* within a collectivist cultural framework that modifies traditional Western understandings of

self-presentation and social comparison. Second, it expands the conceptualization of customer engagement by integrating qualitative dimensions—such as emotional resonance and

perceived informational value—into analysis typically dominated by quantitative metrics. Third, it offers a practical foundation for developing hybrid engagement strategies that combine the visual appeal of *flexing* with the substance of educational content, providing an alternative to current practices that prioritize virality over value. These contributions affirm the relevance of the study to both academic inquiry and digital communication practice, bridging theoretical insight with actionable implications for content strategy in the evolving landscape of social media marketing.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative exploratory approach designed to understand how *Generation Z* perceives *flexing* and educational content as distinct engagement strategies on social media. The qualitative design was chosen because it enables in-depth exploration of meaning, perception, and contextual behavior that cannot be captured through quantitative measurement Creswell & Poth (2018). The research was conducted between March and July 2025 in Surabaya, Indonesia, involving data from interviews, digital observations, and documentation.

The **type of research** is exploratory-descriptive, aiming to identify patterns and interpretive themes that explain how different content types shape audience engagement. The study population comprised active social media users aged 18–30 and content creators who consistently produce *flexing* or educational content. Sampling was carried out using a **purposive sampling** technique to ensure that participants had relevant experience and exposure to both content types Etikan et. al. (2016). A total of 10–15 informants were interviewed, and 5–6 Instagram and TikTok accounts were observed as digital cases, including three that specialized in *flexing* and three in educational content.

Data sources consisted of both primary and secondary materials. Primary data included transcribed in-depth interviews, digital observations, and screenshots of engagement metrics such as *likes*, *comments*, *shares*, and *saves*. Secondary data were obtained from prior studies, social media reports, and related theoretical references that supported the analysis of *flexing* and digital engagement.

Data collection techniques were divided into three stages:

1. **Semi-structured interviews** were conducted to explore participants' perceptions of both *flexing* and educational content, focusing on emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement patterns.
2. **Digital non-participant observation** was performed on selected accounts to record interaction behaviors and engagement trends in real time.
3. **Documentation** included screenshots, post analytics, and thematic summaries of user comments to support triangulation.

All collected data were analyzed using **Thematic Analysis** as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), following six sequential stages: data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and synthesizing results into interpretive narratives. This method was considered appropriate for uncovering patterns of meaning, symbolic representations, and psychological responses underlying social media engagement.

To ensure **data validity and reliability**, the study applied several verification strategies. **Source triangulation** was used to compare data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation (Denzin & Lincoln (2018). **Member checking** was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm interpretive accuracy (Lincoln & Guba (1985). An **audit trail** was also maintained to document the research process systematically, ensuring transparency and replicability of analytical decisions. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Overall, this methodological framework—integrating qualitative exploration, triangulated data collection, and systematic thematic analysis—provides a robust foundation for interpreting how *flexing* and educational content differently influence the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of *Generation Z*'s engagement within the Indonesian social media context.

4. Result and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a distinct contrast between *flexing* and educational content in shaping *Generation Z*'s engagement on social media. Data derived from interviews, observations, and documentation show that *flexing* content predominantly emphasizes visual intensity, luxury cues, and emotional stimulation, whereas educational content highlights informational clarity and perceived utility. The observed Customer Engagement Rate (CER) values—7.2% for *flexing* and 6.8% for educational content—indicate only a minor quantitative difference; however, qualitative analysis reveals that the underlying engagement mechanisms differ fundamentally. *Flexing* attracts rapid attention through short-lived emotional arousal manifested in *likes* and brief comments, while educational content generates fewer but more substantive interactions, including *shares*, *saves*, and reflective responses.

These results align with *Impression Management Theory* Goffman (1986), which posits that individuals present idealized versions of themselves to elicit favorable social evaluations. *Flexing* functions as an extension of this mechanism in digital environments, transforming visual displays of success into tools for social validation. The emotionally charged and aesthetically appealing nature of *flexing* content triggers admiration, envy, and aspiration—emotions that stimulate immediate engagement but rarely foster sustained interaction. This interpretation is consistent with the findings of Lou & Yuan (2019), who reported that visually dominant influencer content produces high visibility yet fails to cultivate deep audience trust. Similarly, Raharja et al. (2024) demonstrated that *flexing* among Indonesian youth often generates admiration and comparison but contributes little to long-term relational engagement. These studies reinforce the view that *flexing* succeeds primarily in stimulating the affective dimension of engagement while neglecting its cognitive and behavioral components.

Conversely, the deeper and more reflective interactions found in educational content support the premise of *Customer Engagement Theory* Kaveh et. al. (2020), which defines engagement as a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral elements. In this study, participants described educational posts as “useful,” “credible,” and “worth saving,” underscoring cognitive involvement as a core determinant of meaningful engagement. This finding corroborates the work of Iyadi & Mgbame (2022), who argued that informational value drives trust formation and sustained interaction in digital environments. The present study extends their conclusion by demonstrating that cognitive

satisfaction—not emotional intensity—determines the durability of audience participation. While *flexing* appeals to surface-level emotions, educational content aligns with deeper psychological needs for relevance, learning, and authenticity, thus cultivating long-term engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, the contrast between *flexing* and educational content demonstrates two distinct psychological pathways to engagement: emotional activation and cognitive processing. The emotional pathway, explained by *Social Comparison Theory* Festinger (1954), clarifies why users respond quickly to aspirational displays. Upward comparison fosters admiration and envy, leading to short, affective reactions such as emoji responses or one-word compliments. However, this emotional arousal dissipates rapidly, consistent with the short-term visibility pattern described by Haque et al. (2023) in luxury brand marketing. The cognitive pathway, on the other hand, reflects audience investment in informational value, as discussed by Zhang et. al. (2017), who found that perceived utility enhances trust and interaction longevity in social commerce. Educational content activates this pathway by providing knowledge-based satisfaction, prompting users to engage more thoughtfully through comments, shares, and saves.

The results also highlight the influence of cultural context on engagement behavior. In Indonesia's collectivist society, *flexing* often incorporates social or religious cues—such as achievements, charitable acts, or family milestones—rather than purely individualistic luxury displays. This localized expression may explain why participants perceived certain *flexing* content as motivational rather than ostentatious. Nevertheless, even in culturally adapted forms, *flexing* remains more effective at generating superficial rather than substantial engagement. The findings thus extend the argument made by Sarah (2024), who found that excessive self-promotion among influencers diminishes credibility and engagement quality. In contrast, educational content reflects social values of shared benefit and collective advancement, aligning with audience expectations of authenticity and usefulness. This cultural resonance enhances the perceived legitimacy of educational posts, leading to stronger cognitive and affective connection.

Comparing these findings with prior research further reveals the novelty of this study. Previous investigations (Raharja et al., 2024; Matcu & Faraonel, 2023) focused on *flexing* primarily as a sociocultural or psychological phenomenon, whereas this research positions *flexing* within a strategic communication framework that links content type to measurable engagement outcomes. Unlike studies emphasizing emotional consequences, this work demonstrates that *flexing* and educational content operate as distinct engagement strategies shaped by different psychological mechanisms. The findings empirically validate the hypothesis that *flexing* generates *wide-but-shallow* engagement, while educational content produces *narrow-but-deep* engagement. This dichotomy reflects the dual nature of digital interaction—where emotional appeal fuels visibility, but informational value sustains audience loyalty.

The discussion also reveals an emerging implication for digital marketing and content strategy. In an attention-driven digital economy, *flexing* remains an effective tool for instant reach, but its sustainability is limited by the absence of cognitive reinforcement. Educational content, although slower to attract attention, contributes to durable relational engagement by satisfying users' intrinsic need for relevance and authenticity. These insights suggest that

optimal engagement may be achieved through hybrid strategies that integrate the emotional appeal of *flexing* with the substantive value of educational content—a balance that mirrors the dual pathways of human engagement. As highlighted by Haque et al. (2023), emotional resonance enhances initial contact, but credibility and informational richness ensure long-term connection. Thus, content creators and brands aiming for sustained digital presence should design narratives that evoke emotion while simultaneously delivering meaningful knowledge.

In summary, this study confirms that engagement on social media is neither homogeneous nor purely quantitative. *Flexing* content amplifies attention through emotional immediacy, while educational content deepens engagement through cognitive relevance. Together, they represent complementary forces in shaping the digital attention economy. The findings contribute to theoretical advancement by bridging psychological and marketing perspectives, offering a comprehensive understanding of how content type influences engagement depth among *Generation Z* in Indonesia's evolving social media landscape.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how *Generation Z* perceives and engages with *flexing* as a hedonic communication strategy compared with educational content on social media. The findings demonstrate that both content types generate engagement, but through distinct psychological and communicative mechanisms. *Flexing* relies on visual appeal and emotional stimulation, effectively capturing rapid attention and producing high but superficial interaction, while educational content encourages reflective, knowledge-oriented responses that yield fewer but more meaningful engagements. These insights confirm the research objective that sought to distinguish between *wide-but-shallow* and *narrow-but-deep* engagement patterns among Gen Z audiences.

The study resolves the central research problem by showing that the quality of engagement depends not merely on visibility metrics but on the cognitive and emotional processes that underlie audience responses. *Flexing* activates short-term affective reactions consistent with *Impression Management* and *Social Comparison* theories, whereas educational content stimulates cognitive involvement aligned with *Customer Engagement Theory*. This duality explains why both strategies succeed within their own domains—*flexing* in achieving exposure, educational content in sustaining credibility and relational depth.

In practical terms, these findings highlight the need for digital creators and marketers to balance hedonic appeal with informational value. Content strategies that integrate the visual excitement of *flexing* with the authenticity and relevance of educational messaging may maximize both attention and long-term loyalty. For educators and public institutions, leveraging hybrid content forms can enhance message retention while maintaining audience interest in increasingly saturated digital environments.

Future research is encouraged to expand this qualitative exploration through mixed-method or experimental designs involving larger and more diverse samples, as well as cross-platform comparisons that account for algorithmic and cultural differences. Such approaches would strengthen understanding of how visual, emotional, and informational variables interact to shape sustainable engagement behavior.

Ultimately, this study contributes theoretically by linking psychological and marketing perspectives within the context of Indonesian digital culture and practically by offering a framework for designing content that aligns emotional resonance with cognitive value. By moving beyond surface metrics toward meaningful engagement, creators and scholars alike can foster a more authentic and constructive digital ecosystem.

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