

Flexing Culture and Online Vanity: Ethical Reflections from Hadith and Cyber Psychology

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Abstract This study addresses the limited integration of Hadith studies and cyber psychology in explaining the ethical and psychological implications of flexing culture on social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. Existing research has largely examined online self-presentation from either psychological or religious perspectives, leaving a gap in interdisciplinary analysis. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, this research analyzes a corpus of publicly accessible flexing-related digital content and representative user interactions on TikTok and YouTube. The data are interpreted through thematic Hadith analysis alongside Goffman's self-presentation framework and Festinger's social comparison theory. The findings demonstrate that the public display of wealth, lifestyle, and personal achievements in digital environments not only risks fostering *Riya'* and diminishing sincerity but also intensifies social comparison, envy, and pressure to maintain unrealistic self-images. The study's novelty lies in proposing an operational ethical-psychological framework that systematically links Hadith principles of sincerity, modesty, and *wasathiyah* with cyber psychological mechanisms underlying online validation and social comparison. This interdisciplinary perspective extends existing scholarship by offering a value-based analytical framework for understanding digital behavior rather than merely providing normative religious critiques. The study concludes that digital literacy initiatives should integrate Islamic ethical values with mental health considerations and recommends policy interventions to promote responsible content creation and healthier forms of digital engagement.

Abstrak Penelitian ini membahas keterbatasan integrasi antara studi hadis dan psikologi siber dalam menjelaskan implikasi etis dan psikologis dari budaya "flexing" di platform media sosial seperti TikTok dan YouTube. Penelitian yang ada umumnya mengkaji presentasi diri daring baik dari perspektif psikologis maupun keagamaan, sehingga meninggalkan celah dalam analisis interdisipliner. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisis konten kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis kumpulan konten digital terkait "flexing" yang dapat diakses publik serta interaksi pengguna yang representatif dari TikTok dan YouTube, yang ditafsirkan melalui analisis tematik hadis bersama dengan kerangka kerja presentasi diri Goffman dan teori perbandingan sosial Festinger. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pameran kekayaan, gaya hidup, dan pencapaian pribadi di lingkungan digital tidak hanya berisiko memicu *Riya'* dan mengurangi keikhlasan, tetapi juga memperkuat perbandingan sosial, iri hati, serta tekanan untuk mempertahankan citra diri yang tidak realistis. Keunikan studi ini terletak pada usulan kerangka kerja etis-psikologis operasional yang secara sistematis menghubungkan prinsip-prinsip Hadis mengenai keikhlasan, kesederhanaan, dan *wasathiyah* dengan mekanisme psikologi siber yang mendasari validasi dan perbandingan daring. Perspektif interdisipliner ini memperluas kajian akademis yang ada dengan menawarkan model analitis berbasis nilai untuk memahami perilaku digital, bukan



sekadar memberikan kritik keagamaan normatif. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa inisiatif literasi digital sebaiknya mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai etika Islam dengan pertimbangan kesehatan mental, serta merekomendasikan intervensi kebijakan untuk mendorong pembuatan konten yang bertanggung jawab dan bentuk-bentuk interaksi digital yang lebih sehat.

Keywords Flexing Culture; Hadith Studies; Cyber Psychology; Digital Ethics.

Introduction

In an ideal social order, digital media ought to serve as a productive space where people can freely express themselves, share knowledge, and broaden their networks, without falling into the traps of status competition or shallow self-promotion.¹ Platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, both popular across generations, have the potential to serve as spaces for creativity, inspiration, and empathy.² Within this framework, ethical values, whether rooted in religious teachings or in principles of social psychology, play a crucial role in ensuring that every form of self-expression remains aligned with norms of modesty, honesty, and responsibility toward one's audience.³

Yet the reality of today's online landscape has drifted far from this aspiration. The culture of flaunting wealth, commonly referred to as flexing, has carved out an increasingly dominant presence on TikTok and YouTube. Videos showcasing luxury goods, exclusive cars, or extravagant vacations have become a trend that attracts massive attention and engagement. The viral phenomenon of "Citayam Fashion Week" in Indonesia vividly illustrates this trend, showing how flexing has trickled down even to grassroots levels: teenagers and young people from modest backgrounds occupying public spaces while dressing and performing as though they were models on high-fashion runways.⁴ At the same time, the rise and fall of public figures and Instagram celebrities entangled in scandals has revealed how much of this glamorous lifestyle was constructed: luxury homes and high-end vehicles were often rented solely for the sake of image, a façade to maintain social prestige.

Research in cyber psychology has repeatedly highlighted the harmful effects of flexing on mental well-being. McComb et al. (2023) found that repeated exposure to content showcasing wealth can trigger negative social comparison and lower self-esteem.⁵ Similarly, Xiumei Yan et al. (2025) demonstrated that social media users are prone to believing that other people's lives are happier and more successful than they really are, an illusion that fuels envy and discontent.⁶ From the perspective of media sociology, Mears (2025) argued that the attention economy drives content creators toward increasingly extreme productions, all in pursuit of visibility and algorithmic reward.⁷ Islamic teachings

¹ Marie K Heath, Daniel G Krutka, and Benjamin Gleason, "'See Results Anyway': Auditing Social Media as Educational Technology," *Information and Learning Sciences* 125, no. 9 (2024): 650–72.

² Rakesh Kumar, Kamal Kishore Upadhyay, and Kumar Bhaskar, "Role of Social Media in Developing Creativity Among Youth," *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice* 30, no. 1 (2024): 2039–46.

³ Isha Sharma et al., *A Text Book On Human Values And Ethics* (Academic Guru Publishing House, 2023).

⁴ Advan Navis Zubaidi, "TikTok Effect: Study Of Citayam Fashion Week," *Ekspresi Dan Persepsi : Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi* 7, no. 1 (2024): 162–74, <https://doi.org/10.33822/jep.v7i1.6406>.

⁵ Carly A McComb, Eric J Vanman, and Stephanie J Tobin, "A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Social Media Exposure to Upward Comparison Targets on Self-Evaluations and Emotions," *Media Psychology* 26, no. 5 (2023): 612–35.

⁶ Xiumei Yan et al., "They Shouldn't Be Richer than Me: How Visual Wealth Exposure on Social Media Increases Relative Deprivation," *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 19, no. 2 (2025).

⁷ Ashley Mears, "Bringing Bourdieu to a Content Farm: Social Media Production Fields and the Cultural Economy of Attention," *Social Media+ Society* 9, no. 3 (2023): 20563051231193028.

add another layer: hadith literature warns against *Riyya'*, the act of displaying one's deeds or achievements merely to be seen by others, as well as against wasteful indulgence that offers no real social benefit.⁸ Despite the existence of these separate strands of scholarship, relatively little research has attempted to synthesize ethical reflection from hadith with analytical tools from cyber psychology to provide a comprehensive reading of the flexing phenomenon. It is precisely this gap that the present study seeks to fill.

The significance of this research lies in its attempt to bring together two disciplines, Islamic ethics derived from hadith and the field of online psychology, to grasp the culture of flexing holistically. The study is not merely descriptive; it aims to weigh the phenomenon both morally and psychologically. Its central objectives are to identify the impacts of flexing on both content creators and audiences, and to propose ethical principles that social media users can adopt to avoid the destructive effects of wealth display.

TikTok and YouTube are driven by algorithms that inherently favor emotionally charged content, particularly posts that highlight material abundance. This creates a feedback loop: the more visually striking the content, the greater its chance of going viral, and the stronger the incentive for creators to escalate their displays of wealth.⁹ Within such an ecosystem, flexing is no longer a matter of personal choice alone; it has become a survival strategy in the content economy, where attention functions as currency and visibility translates into influence.

From the standpoint of hadith, there are clear warnings against *Riyya'* and against spending lavishly without social benefit.¹⁰ These narrations emphasize *wasathiyah*, the principle of balance, and modesty as hallmarks of noble character. Their relevance in the digital era is striking, as social media amplifies selective self-presentation and allows people to curate public identities that often diverge sharply from the realities of daily life.

The "Citayam Fashion Week" phenomenon offers a particularly telling example. On the one hand, it reflects the creativity and boldness of youth who challenge socio-economic boundaries by reclaiming public spaces. On the other hand, it underscores how consumerist values, legitimized by online attention, can seep into grassroots practices. Social media amplifies this duality by providing the same platform for praise and admiration as for criticism and ridicule.¹¹

The scandals surrounding various influencers reveal another side of digital culture: the collapse of carefully curated online personas. Renting luxury sports cars, borrowing opulent residences, or staging lavish backdrops highlight how flexing is less an individual quirk than a symptom of broader social pressures tied to validation and symbolic competition in the digital public sphere.¹²

A thorough understanding of this phenomenon requires a multidisciplinary lens. Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation explains how individuals consciously manage their performances

⁸ Mizza Azzahra Putri and Abrar M Daud Faza, "Qur'anic Solutions to the Flexing Culture of Consumerism According to Tafsir Muhammad 'Ali Ash-Shabuni," *Al-Afkar, Journal For Islamic Studies* 8, no. 3 (2025): 1002–22.

⁹ Kumar, Upadhyay, and Bhaskar, "Role of Social Media in Developing Creativity Among Youth."

¹⁰ Putri and Faza, "Qur'anic Solutions to the Flexing Culture of Consumerism According to Tafsir Muhammad 'Ali Ash-Shabuni."

¹¹ Novida IRAWAN, Sunarto SUNARTO, and Ridzki Rinanto SIGIT, "Erving Goffman's Dramaturgy About The Self-Existence Of Youth in "Citayam Fashion Week"," *International Journal of Environmental, Sustainability, and Social Science* 4, no. 3 (2023): 765–73.

¹² Marco Pedroni, "Meso-Celebrities, Fashion and the Media: How Digital Influencers Struggle for Visibility," *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 5, no. 1 (2016): 103–21.

before an audience,¹³ while Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison sheds light on the psychological urge to evaluate oneself against others.¹⁴ Islamic teachings, by contrast, offer a normative framework grounded in hadith that emphasizes sincerity, moderation, and humility as antidotes to the excesses of self-display.

This study employs a qualitative approach, combining hermeneutics for interpreting relevant hadiths on *Riya'*,¹⁵ moderation, and public ethics, with digital ethnography to trace the production and consumption patterns of flexing content on TikTok and YouTube.¹⁶ The analysis unfolds in two stages. First, by identifying and interpreting hadiths relevant to flexing, considering both their textual meanings and contextual implications. Second, by examining digital content to see how those values are either reflected or ignored in online practice. This dual approach allows for insights that are not only textual but also contextual, connecting timeless moral principles to the lived realities of today's digital spaces. Cyber psychology provides a theoretical lens to understand how technology mediates social interaction, shapes identity, and influences emotion.¹⁷ When paired with hadith studies, this lens enables moving beyond merely explaining behavior to offering normative guidance for healthier digital conduct.

Ultimately, this research contributes a novel interpretive model for understanding flexing culture by combining ethical reflection rooted in hadith with empirical analysis from online psychology. Its focus extends beyond problem identification to the formulation of actionable ethical principles for digital life. The overarching goal is to equip social media users with critical awareness, helping them navigate the pressures of flexing culture without sacrificing their personal integrity or the moral fabric of society.

The Dynamics of Flexing Culture on Social Media: Empirical Findings from TikTok, YouTube, and "Citayam Fashion Week"

The culture of flexing on social media, particularly on platforms like TikTok and YouTube, represents a shift in digital-era communication patterns that increasingly prioritize image and public perception.¹⁸ This practice relies heavily on visual and audiovisual media to highlight luxury possessions, exclusive experiences, and carefully staged personal achievements designed to capture broad public attention. Common examples of flexing include showing off international designer goods, high-end vehicles, trips to exotic destinations, and fashion choices aligned with global trends. Such content is deliberately crafted to construct narratives of success and affluence, which, in turn, shape how audiences perceive content creators' social status (Marwick, 2015). In this context, visual representation becomes a symbolic tool for projecting identity, often carrying as much weight, or even more, than

¹³ Efrat Tseëlon, "Is the Presented Self Sincere? Goffman, Impression Management and the Postmodern Self," *Theory, Culture & Society* 9, no. 2 (1992): 115–28.

¹⁴ Ferhat Caliskan et al., "Social Comparison Theory: A Review and Future Directions," *Psychology & Marketing* 41, no. 11 (2024): 2823–40.

¹⁵ Alex Nanang Agus Sifa and Ahmad Faizal Adha, "Understanding the Hermeneutic Debate as a New Method of Understanding Hadis," *Journal of Hadith Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 54–72.

¹⁶ Yang Zhao, "TikTok and Researcher Positionality: Considering the Methodological and Ethical Implications of an Experimental Digital Ethnography," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (2024): 16094069231221374.

¹⁷ Areej ElSayary, Rafeeah Abdulaziz Alzaffin, and Maryam Eisa Alsuwaidi, "Navigating Digital Identities: The Influence of Online Interactions on Youth Cyber Psychology and Cyber Behavior," in *Proceedings of the 18th International Multi-Conference on Society, Cybernetics and Informatics: IMSCI 2024* (International Institute of Informatics and Cybernetics, 2024).

¹⁸ Pooja Singh and Ajay Kumar Singh, *The Digital Revolution: Exploring New Media in the 21st Century* (Crown Publishing, 2025).

objective reality itself.¹⁹

Table 1. Representative Empirical Patterns of Flexing Content Observed on TikTok and YouTube

Theme	Typical	Content Characteristics	Representative Caption or Video Narrative	Analytical Observation
Luxury	consumption	Display of branded bags, watches, or sports cars	<i>"Hard work pays off. This is only the beginning."</i>	Wealth is framed as evidence of personal achievement and social success.
Exclusive travel		Videos featuring business-class flights or luxury resorts	<i>"Manifest your dream life."</i>	Aspirational narratives encourage upward social comparison among viewers.
Lifestyle	performance	Cinematic house tours and daily routines	<i>"A normal day in my life."</i>	Ordinary activities are aestheticized to construct an idealized identity.
Citayam Fashion Week		Street-fashion performances documented for online audiences	Short runway-style walks uploaded with trending music	Public spaces become stages for identity performance and symbolic recognition rather than purely fashion expression.
Motivational	flexing	Before-and-after success stories emphasizing material rewards	<i>"From zero to luxury through consistency."</i>	Material acquisition is presented as the primary indicator of success, reinforcing status-oriented narratives.

Source: from observations of content on TikTok, YouTube, and news

Analysis of the sampled TikTok and YouTube content revealed recurring linguistic patterns emphasizing wealth and recognition. Several creators accompanied luxury displays with captions such as *"Hard work pays off," "Welcome to my dream life,"* or *"This is what consistency looks like,"* while comment sections frequently contained responses including *"I wish I had this life"* and *"One day I will be like you."* Rather than serving merely as descriptive statements, these expressions illustrate how visible consumption becomes intertwined with aspirations, perceived social status, and audience engagement. These empirical observations provide the basis for interpreting flexing behavior through theories of self-presentation and social comparison rather than relying solely on normative assumptions.

TikTok and YouTube, as the dominant platforms, operate through algorithms that prioritize highly engaging content. This incentivizes creators to consistently produce content that elicits emotional responses from viewers (Bucher, 2018).²⁰ As a result, flexing content enjoys a heightened chance of widespread exposure, as it can easily trigger awe, aspiration, or even social envy. At the same time, creators often feel pressured to escalate their displays of wealth to maintain or expand their follower base, setting off a recurring cycle of symbolic competition.

The case of Citayam Fashion Week in Jakarta provides an especially interesting example of flexing rooted in local creativity while also carrying social and economic aspirations. The phenomenon began with a group of teenagers gathering in a public space in Dukuh Atas to showcase their eclectic

¹⁹ Floor Fiers, "Hiding Traces of Status Seeking: Contradictory Tagging Strategies on Instagram," *Social Media+ Society* 6, no. 2 (2020): 2056305120937318.

²⁰ Yang Huang and WeiMing Ye, "'Traffic Rewards', 'Algorithmic Visibility', and 'Advertiser Satisfaction': How Chinese Short-Video Platforms Cultivate Creators in Stages," *Convergence* 30, no. 1 (2024): 659–82.

clothing styles, often mixing thrifted pieces with high-fashion elements. The presence of cameras and online publication transformed these gatherings into a kind of status performance, even though not all outfits were made up of expensive, branded items. The event's popularity, amplified by mainstream media and social platforms, illustrates how identity performance can be simultaneously mediated through both physical and digital public spaces.²¹

From a sociological perspective, Citayam Fashion Week demonstrates the appropriation of global pop culture within a local setting, where the aesthetic and symbolic values of fashion outweigh its utilitarian function. On the one hand, it can be seen as a form of empowerment: young people using visual expression to negotiate identity in the face of economic limitations. On the other hand, competition and the pursuit of public validation persist, indicating that this phenomenon still carries elements of flexing, albeit in a more egalitarian form.²²

Flexing is not limited to non-celebrities. Social media influencers and public figures frequently engage in it on a much larger scale. One striking example is the phenomenon of a "fake luxury lifestyle," in which properties, vehicles, or luxury goods are rented solely for content production. This strategy allows influencers to project an image of wealth without actual ownership. Yet, it still significantly shapes audience perceptions of their social status.²³ The implications of such practices go beyond personal image. They raise ethical and psychological concerns, particularly when consumed by younger, more impressionable audiences.

A consistently staged, fabricated lifestyle can distort followers' perceptions of reality. By showcasing only select highlights, influencers often conceal struggles, failures, or financial hardships. As a result, audiences may internalize unrealistic standards of success, which can lead to frustration, diminished self-esteem, or the urge to imitate consumerist behavior without sound financial consideration.²⁴ The analyzed content suggests a recurring association between visible material success and positive audience engagement, indicating that algorithmically amplified displays of consumption may normalize status-oriented self-presentation.

Social media algorithms play a crucial role in amplifying these trends. TikTok and YouTube optimize content distribution based on interaction levels, meaning posts that spark strong emotional reactions, such as admiration for displays of wealth, are more likely to go viral. This structural pattern creates powerful incentives for creators to showcase increasingly extravagant lifestyles, even if artificially staged.²⁵ Public attention effectively becomes a form of "social currency" with real-world exchange value through sponsorships, brand deals, and monetization opportunities.²⁶

The concept of "social currency" here refers to the ability of creators to convert visibility and

²¹ Ichwan Hakim, "Citayam Fashion Week as the Cultural Identity of Jakarta's Generation Z," *Jurnal Komunikasi Ikatan Sarjana Komunikasi Indonesia* 9, no. 2 (2024): 430–40.

²² Jeanne Noveline Tedja and Rizki Ramadhan Budhianti, "'Citayam Fashion Week' Phenomenon Viewed from Perspective of Family Sociology and Fulfillment of Child's Rights," *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research* 06, no. 06 (2023): 3279–82, <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v6-i6-08>.

²³ Alton Endarwanto Hadi Susanto et al., "Lifestyle: Flexing Behavior in Social Media," *International Journal of Economics (IJE)* 2, no. 1 (2023): 27–31, <https://doi.org/10.55299/ijec.v2i1.410>.

²⁴ Rezig Hania and Oulddjaballah Souad, "Social Media Influencers and the Fabrication of Social Reality through Digital Platforms: Analyzing Jean Baudrillard's Viewpoint," *Aleph* 11, no. 5 (2024): 27–49.

²⁵ Jakub Sedláček, "Big Social Data and the Study of Celebrity Fandom," 2023.

²⁶ Chunfeng Lin, "The Fetishized Identity Economy: Persona Capital, Staged Class, Platform Capitalism on Short-Video Platforms," *Social Media+ Society* 11, no. 3 (2025): 20563051251353750.

public recognition into economic or symbolic resources.²⁷ As metrics such as views, likes, and comments become primary indicators of success, creators are pushed to develop strategies that maximize engagement. In practice, this often means escalating the frequency and intensity of flexing content. It is also important to acknowledge the aspirational dimension of flexing. For some audiences, such content serves as a source of inspiration or motivation to pursue higher standards of living.²⁸ But without critical awareness, these aspirations can quickly morph into destructive social pressures. Economic and social differences between creators and their audiences are frequently overlooked, which leads to disproportionate expectations of personal achievement.²⁹

These findings indicate that audiences may benefit from enhanced media literacy to critically evaluate curated online representations and distinguish them from everyday realities, particularly by recognizing the constructed nature of visual narratives on social media. Media literacy involves understanding that not everything shown online reflects the full reality, as well as cultivating the skills to evaluate content within its social and economic context. Such awareness can reduce the risks of falling into unhealthy social comparisons.

Taken together, Citayam Fashion Week and influencers' staged lifestyles reveal two distinct spectrums of flexing. The former emerges from grassroots creativity and public space, while the latter is built on carefully curated and commercialized images. Both illustrate how social media serves as a performative arena that mediates the interplay among identity, status, and aspiration.³⁰ Recognizing these distinctions is crucial for avoiding simplistic generalizations that ignore the social and economic complexities behind each form of flexing.

It is equally important to understand that the culture of flexing does not exist in isolation but is deeply shaped by the dynamics of digital capitalism, which thrives on monetizing attention. With a system that prioritizes visibility and engagement as its primary commodities, social media structurally encourages behaviors that construct idealized images. Flexing, therefore, is not merely an individual choice but part of a systemic logic that molds collective behavior.³¹

From an ethical standpoint, this phenomenon blurs the line between authentic self-expression and image manipulation that can mislead audiences. The lack of clear regulations on content transparency, especially for staged visuals or fabricated lifestyles, further complicates efforts to distinguish genuine representation from outright fabrication.³² This underscores the need for interdisciplinary dialogue that brings together media studies, sociology, psychology, and ethics.

Ultimately, the dynamics of flexing culture on social media, whether through grassroots expressions like Citayam Fashion Week or curated influencer lifestyles, highlight the importance of examining the relationship between technology, image, and social status within a broader framework.

²⁷ Maxi Heitmayer, "The Second Wave of Attention Economics. Attention as a Universal Symbolic Currency on Social Media and Beyond," *Interacting with Computers* 37, no. 1 (2025): 18–29.

²⁸ Chingching Chang, "Being Inspired by Media Content: Psychological Processes Leading to Inspiration," *Media Psychology* 26, no. 1 (2023): 72–87.

²⁹ Brooke Erin Duffy et al., "The Nested Precarities of Creative Labor on Social Media," *Social Media+ Society* 7, no. 2 (2021): 20563051211021370.

³⁰ Emad Khazraee and Alison N Novak, "Digitally Mediated Protest: Social Media Affordances for Collective Identity Construction," *Social Media+ Society* 4, no. 1 (2018): 2056305118765740.

³¹ Gianpiero Petriglieri and Jennifer Louise Petriglieri, "The Work Is Alive! Systems Psychodynamics and the Pursuit of Pluralism without Polarization in Human Relations," *Human Relations* 75, no. 8 (2022): 1431–60.

³² Radu M Meza, Andreea-Alina Mogoş, and George Prundaru, "Idols of Promotion and Authenticity on TikTok," *Media and Communication* 11, no. 4 (2023): 187–202.

This requires analysis of algorithmic influence, the attention economy, and the psychological and social consequences that follow. Such understanding is valuable not only for researchers and media practitioners but also for everyday users who actively participate in today's digital ecosystem.

Islamic Ethical Perspectives: Analyzing Hadith on *Riya'*, Simplicity, and Balance

The phenomenon of flexing on social media, when viewed through the lens of Islamic ethics, calls for a strong grounding in the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, which provides moral guidance on motivation, attitude, and self-expression. One of the most relevant ethical principles in this context is the prohibition of *Riya'*, showing off. *Riya'* is not limited to ostentatious displays of worship; it also covers flaunting wealth, status, or achievements purely to gain social recognition.³³ In a hadith narrated by Muslim, the Prophet ﷺ made it clear that any act done with the intention of showing off loses its spiritual value before God, even if it earns human praise.³⁴ When applied to flexing on platforms like TikTok or Instagram, content that's driven primarily by the pursuit of likes, views, and comments risks falling into the realm of *Riya'*, especially if the underlying motivation is not authentic expression but shallow, temporary validation.

The value of simplicity, or *zuhd*, in Islam doesn't mean rejecting wealth or valuable possessions altogether. Instead, it emphasizes keeping the heart free from attachment to material things.³⁵ A hadith narrated by Tirmidhi explains that true *zuhd* means not prioritizing this world over the hereafter and being content without obsessively chasing more.³⁶ In a digital culture that thrives on curated images of luxury, the principle of *zuhd* challenges the consumerist narratives fueled by algorithms. A social media user who presents their life as simple and unembellished, even when they could flaunt wealth, is, in fact, practicing *zuhd* by maintaining a healthy balance between enjoying worldly blessings and staying mindful of the eternal.

Another key dimension is *wasathiyah*, or moderation. As highlighted in the Hadith and reinforced by the Qur'an (al-Baqarah: 143), *wasathiyah* is about staying in the middle path and avoiding extremes, whether stinginess or extravagance.³⁷ On social media, this principle serves as a guide to avoid two extremes: withdrawing completely from public expression or going overboard with self-promotion. *Wasathiyah* encourages a balance between the individual's right to self-expression and their moral responsibility not to incite envy, resentment, or social pressure in others.

The famous hadith collected by Bukhari and Muslim about intention, "Actions are judged by their intentions," offers a powerful framework for evaluating flexing behavior. Two people might post the same picture of an expensive item, yet the moral weight of each act differs depending on intent. One might be trying to inspire others to work hard, while the other simply wants to flaunt status. A sincere intention can transform what looks like showing off into a form of motivation or even subtle *da'wah*. The

³³ Hartono Hartono and Faiqo Izzaniyah, "Riya In The Realm Of Social Media (An Examination Of The Interpretation Of The Works Of Wahbah Az-Zuhaili And M. Quraish Shihab)," *El-Umdah* 6, no. 2 (2023): 103–18.

³⁴ Mufidatun Nur Aini et al., "A Study of Hadiths About Riya'in the Book of Hidayatus Salikin Perspective of Abdul Samad Al-Falimbani," *Suhuf: International Journal of Islamic Studies* 36, no. 1 (2024): 1–11.

³⁵ Kalsoom Paracha, "Concept of ZUHD Meaning and Requirements, An Islamic Perspective," *Southern Journal of Arts & Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2024): 52–59.

³⁶ Muhammad Zafran, "Framework of Islamic Consumer Behavior: Exploring the Foundation of Islamic Consumer Behavior and Motivation," *Journal of Business Administration and Management Sciences (JOBAMS)* 4, no. 2 (2022): 8–30.

³⁷ Aleksandar Grizhev, Ivan Blazhevski, and Ruzica Cacanaska, "Moral Foundations for Peacebuilding Dialogue: A Comparative Analysis of Orthodoxy and Islam," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 45, no. 5 (2025).

challenge in the age of social media, however, is that intentions are hard to measure objectively. This is why self-reflection becomes an essential ethical practice.³⁸

Flexing often gets amplified by the very structure of social media platforms. Algorithms on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram are designed to boost content that stirs strong emotions, whether admiration or envy.³⁹ As a result, showing off becomes a highly effective growth strategy, even though it runs counter to Islamic ethical principles. From this perspective, the hadith against *Riya'* speaks not only to individual behavior but also offers a critique of the platform designs that profit from public attention.⁴⁰

The case of "Citayam Fashion Week" in Indonesia illustrates this ethical ambivalence. On one hand, it showcased creativity, self-expression, and even resistance against fashion norms dominated by the middle and upper classes. On the other hand, it also encouraged consumerist mimicry, borrowing luxury items or leveraging sponsorships to project a glamorous image that didn't always match reality. From the lens of simplicity in the hadith, this is an example where positive aspirations get tangled with the temptation of *Riya'* when social validation becomes the main driving force.⁴¹

The principle of *zuhd* also speaks directly to the world of public figures and influencers who flaunt luxurious lifestyles, often staged or exaggerated for content. Renting cars, properties, or designer goods solely for appearances is the exact opposite of the hadith reported by Ahmad, which states that true wealth is wealth of the heart, being satisfied within.⁴² *Zuhd* reminds us that real value doesn't lie in possessions paraded before others but in integrity and sincerity.⁴³

In this sense, *Wasathiyah* offers practical guidance for content creators. For example, an influencer under contract with a luxury brand can still promote products without excessive glorification that widens social inequality. A moderate approach provides useful information about products without pressuring audiences into unhealthy consumerism. This places social responsibility at the heart of digital professionalism.

Intent becomes even more complex when content creation is commercial. A creator might intend to educate viewers about investment or financial management by using luxury visuals as examples. Without clear context, though, the message could easily be misread as simply promoting materialism.⁴⁴ In light of the hadith, clarifying intent is critical so that the message aligns with honesty and

³⁸ Muna Hajar Roslan et al., "Da'wah on the Social Media: The Youth Engagement in Digital Islamic Content," *International Journal Of Research And Innovation In Social Science (IJRISS)*, IX (2454), 2025, 1161–72.

³⁹ John M Jordan, *The Rise of the Algorithms: How YouTube and TikTok Conquered the World* (Penn State Press, 2024).

⁴⁰ Layyinatus Sifa, Muhammad Syachrofi, and Winarto Winarto, "FLEXING CULTURE FROM THE QUR'ANIC PERSPECTIVE: Between Lifestyle And The Principle Of Tauhid," *TAJDID: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 22, no. 2 (2023): 566–90.

⁴¹ Leni Maulida, Serlyana Yuriska, and Hanief Monady, "Relevansi Hadits Tentang Pendidikan Karakter Dalam Menghadapi Era Disrupsi Teknologi: Studi Tematik Hadits Tentang Akhlak," *Jurnal Ilmiah Nusantara (JINU)* 2, no. 5 (2025): 168–81, <https://www.ejurnal.kampusakademik.co.id/index.php/jinu/article/view/5320>.

⁴² Tamam Odeh Abdullah Al-Assaf, "Luxury in Islam, Between Prohibition and Permissibility," *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science* 7, no. 10 (2019): 1–18, <https://ijlass.org/articles/7.10.1.1-18.pdf>.

⁴³ Abd Wahid et al., "Utilizing Zuhd Hadiths for Upper-Class Crime Prevention," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 23, no. 2 (2023): 263–82, <https://doi.org/10.22373/jiif.v23i2.17353>.

⁴⁴ Justyna Kramarczyk and Mathieu Alemany Oliver, "Accumulative vs. Appreciative Expressions of Materialism: Revising Materialism in Light of Polish Simplifiers and New Materialism," *Journal of Business Ethics* 175, no. 4 (2022): 701–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04628-9>.

trustworthiness.⁴⁵

On a broader social level, hadiths about *Riya'*, simplicity, and balance could serve as foundations for developing ethical digital literacy in Muslim communities.⁴⁶ This literacy goes beyond safe media usage; it cultivates the ability to examine one's motivations and assess the content one produces or consumes. An ethics curriculum grounded in the Hadith can encourage a reflective habit before posting content that might spark envy or set unrealistic standards for life.

Flexing also highlights the tension between freedom of expression and moral responsibility. While civil law in most countries does not regulate showing off on social media, the Hadith provides a preventive moral framework. Principles like *Riya'*, *zuhd*, *wasathiyah*, and sincere intention help individuals navigate their digital image wisely, ensuring that freedom of expression doesn't come at the cost of harming oneself or others morally and psychologically.

From the perspective of religious psychology, applying these prophetic principles also works as a form of self-control against the social pressures fueled by algorithms. Recognizing that human praise is fleeting helps reduce dependency on external validation, which in turn lessens the urge to flex.⁴⁷ This aligns with the broader objectives of Islamic law (*maqasid shariah*), such as preserving dignity, intellect, and wealth from harmful or wasteful use.

Integrating Cyber Psychology with Hadith Ethics: Moral and Psychological Implications

Bringing together the framework of cyber psychology and the ethical principles of the Hadith opens up a multidisciplinary approach to analyzing the phenomenon of flexing on social media, from both moral and psychological standpoints. This integration matters because the culture of flaunting wealth or curated achievements online affects not only the self-image of the poster but also the psychological well-being of those who view it. In this context, Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation provides a useful starting point. It explains how individuals construct a "stage" on social media, carefully selecting symbols, visual cues, and narratives to create a specific impression in their audience's minds.⁴⁸ Social media offers a unique environment where the "front stage" and "back stage" can be engineered, often by modifying reality through visual manipulation, lighting, or even props that aren't actually owned.⁴⁹ This strategy raises moral questions around authenticity and integrity in online communication.

Leon Festinger's Social Comparison Theory also plays a central role in understanding the audience's response to flexing.⁵⁰ Constant exposure to content highlighting wealth, appearance, and

⁴⁵ Muya Syaroh Iwanda Lubis and Nurhayati Nurhayati, "Hadiths Related To the Ethics of Honest and Responsible Communication," *Dharmawangsa: International Journal of the Social Sciences, Education and Humanitis* 4, no. 1 (2023): 17–24, <https://doi.org/10.46576/ijssseh.v4i1.3521>.

⁴⁶ Latifah Abdul Majid et al., "Exploring Innovations and Challenges in The Study of Hadith in The Digital Era," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 14, no. 3 (2024): 1044–58, <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v14-i3/20957>.

⁴⁷ Mala Hayati and Luthviah Romziana, "Budaya Flexing Di Media Sosial Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Mentalitas Masyarakat," *Pendas: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Dasar* 10, no. 02 (2025): 211–34.

⁴⁸ Fan Zhang et al., "'An Image of Ourselves in Our Minds': How College-Educated Online Dating Users Construct Profiles for Effective Self Presentation," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 9, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1145/3710929>.

⁴⁹ Saiful Amelia, Luky; Amin, "ANALISIS SELF-PRESENTING DALAM TEORI DRAMATURGI ERVING," *Pendidikan Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial* 1, no. 2 (2022): 173–87.

⁵⁰ Abraham P Buunk and Frederick X Gibbons, "Social Comparison: The End of a Theory and the Emergence of a Field," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 102, no. 1 (2007): 3–21, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.09.007>.

glamorous lifestyles can trigger envy, feelings of inferiority, and dissatisfaction with one's own life.⁵¹ These effects are amplified by social media algorithms that prioritize high-engagement content, making flexing posts more likely to dominate users' feeds. Empirical studies suggest that passive consumption of such content can undermine psychological well-being, worsen mild depressive symptoms, and drive compulsive consumerism as a coping mechanism.⁵²

Table 2. Integrative Analytical Framework between Cyber Psychology and Hadith Ethics in Interpreting Flexing Culture

Cyber Psychology Construct	Psychological Explanation	Corresponding Hadith Principle	Integrative Mechanism	Expected Behavioral Outcome
Self-presentation (Goffman)	Individuals strategically construct desirable public identities.	<i>Ikhlas</i> (sincerity) and prohibition of <i>Riya'</i> .	Hadith ethics evaluates not only external performance but also the moral intention underlying self-presentation.	More authentic and ethically grounded digital expression.
Social comparison (Festinger)	Users evaluate themselves by comparing with others, often generating envy or dissatisfaction.	<i>Qana'ah</i> (contentment) and gratitude.	Hadith redirects comparison from material achievement toward spiritual and moral excellence, reducing destructive comparison.	Greater psychological well-being and lower envy.
Online validation seeking	Likes, shares, and followers become indicators of self-worth.	Purification of intention (<i>niyyah</i>) and seeking divine approval rather than public approval.	Ethical orientation shifts motivational focus from external validation to intrinsic moral purpose.	Reduced dependence on algorithmic approval.
Consumer identity performance	Luxury consumption is displayed to communicate status.	Zuhud and moderation (<i>wasathiyah</i>).	Hadith critiques excessive symbolic consumption while permitting responsible enjoyment of wealth.	Balanced self-expression without excessive status signaling.
Algorithm-driven amplification	Platform algorithms reward emotionally engaging displays.	Social responsibility (<i>maslahah</i>) and avoidance of harm (<i>mafsadah</i>).	Ethical evaluation extends beyond individual motives to the societal consequences of digital content.	Responsible content creation and reduced harmful flexing.

⁵¹ Kaukab Abid Azhar, Che Aniza Che Wel, and Siti Ngayesah Ab Hamid, "‘They Post, I Scroll, I Envy, I Buy’—How Social Media Influencers Shape Materialistic Values and Consumer Behavior Among Young Adults in Malaysia," *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research* 20, no. 3 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer20030172>.

⁵² Ebru Enginkaya and Munise Hayrun Sağlam, "Social Commerce Platforms Role in FoMO Driven Consumption: The Hidden Psychological Toll of Continuous Use," *IEEE Access* 13, no. April (2025): 77395–417, <https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2025.3565127>.

The ethical teachings of the Hadith, however, offer a counterbalance to these negative effects. The Prophet's warnings against *Riya'* (showing off) highlight the danger of displaying one's deeds or possessions for the sake of human recognition rather than divine approval.⁵³ Applied to the digital world, *Riya'* can be understood as the underlying motive behind content designed purely to polish one's image, without regard for truth or social value. This principle aligns with psychology's critique of excessive self-presentation. While it may capture attention, it ultimately erodes authenticity in online relationships.

The Hadith's principle of moderation and simplicity (*zuhd*) emphasizes spiritual value over material value. *Zuhd* does not demand renouncing wealth but rather using and displaying it proportionally, without fueling social inequality or excessive consumerism.⁵⁴ In the context of cyber psychology, this can be seen as a form of self-regulation, helping individuals resist the urge to flaunt luxury while strengthening psychological resilience against social pressure to look flawless online.⁵⁵

The concept of balance (*wasathiyah*) offers another framework for navigating online interaction. It cautions against extremes, whether indulgent hedonism or rigid asceticism that rejects any form of self-expression.⁵⁶ *Wasathiyah* creates room for healthy creative expression, allowing content to remain visually appealing while avoiding displays that can breed psychological strain in viewers.⁵⁷

At the heart of this integration is *niyyah* (intention), a key principle for distinguishing genuine self-expression from showing off. In psychology, intention represents the intrinsic motivation behind behavior.⁵⁸ In Islamic ethics, it is the moral measure that determines the value of a person's deeds. In digital spaces, reflecting on one's intention before posting content can act as a moral checkpoint: Is this post meant to share something beneficial, to inspire others, or simply to draw applause?⁵⁹

Unlike conventional approaches that simply place religious ethics alongside psychological explanations, the present study conceptualizes Hadith ethics as a regulatory mechanism operating within the psychological process itself. Goffman's theory explains how individuals strategically manage impressions, but it remains largely descriptive and value-neutral regarding whether such performances are ethically desirable. Similarly, Festinger's social comparison theory explains the emergence of upward comparison without prescribing mechanisms to restrain its harmful effects. In contrast, Hadith principles such as *niyyah*, *ikhlas*, *zuhd*, and *wasathiyah* introduce normative constraints that reshape the

⁵³ Mufidatun Nur Aini et al., "A Study of Hadiths About Riya' in the Book of Hidayatus Salikin Perspective of Abdul Samad Al-Falimbani," *Suhuf* 36, no. 1 (2024): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.23917/suhuf.v36i1.3431>.

⁵⁴ Muhammad Fahrurrozi and Siswoyo Aris Munandar, "Zuhud And Its Application In Economic Life: Case Study Of Tarikat," *Religia* 27, no. 2 (2024): 268–84, <https://doi.org/10.28918/religia.v27i2.8527>.

⁵⁵ Saniya Atalatti and Urmila Pawar, "Addictive Interfaces How Persuasion, Psychology Principles, and Emotions Shape Engagement," *Interactive Media with Next-Gen Technologies and Their Usability Evaluation*, 2024, 47–66, <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781032664828-4>.

⁵⁶ Ahmad Wafi Nur Safaat, "Konsep Zuhud Menurut Syekh Abdul Qodir Al Jailani: Studi Kitab Tafsir Al Jailani," *SINDA: Comprehensive Journal of Islamic Social Studies* 4, no. 2 (2024): 106–21, <https://doi.org/10.28926/sinda.v4i2.1532>.

⁵⁷ Laili Fachrul Umam, "Implementasi Nilai-nilai Zuhud Terhadap Sikap (Studi Analisis Nilai Kesederhanaan Dalam Jiwa Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor)," *AL-AFKAR: Journal for Islamic Studies* 7, no. 3 (2024): 1137–63, <https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v7i4.1223>. Implementation.

⁵⁸ Ayelet Fishbach and Kaitlin Woolley, "The Structure of Intrinsic Motivation," *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 9 (2022): 339–63, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012420-091122>.

⁵⁹ Afrilianti Nabila, "Integrasi Nilai-nilai Islam Dalam Pembentukan Niat Dan Motivasi Belajar Siswa Melalui Pendidikan Agama Islam: Telaah Psikologi Pendidikan," *IHSANIKA: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam* 3, no. 3 (2025): 104–14, <https://doi.org/10.59841/ihsanika.v3i3.2853>.

motivations underlying self-presentation and redirect social evaluation toward moral rather than material criteria. Consequently, the integration proposed in this study is not merely additive but transformative, as Hadith ethics modifies existing cyber psychological explanations by embedding moral intentionality and social responsibility into digital behavior.

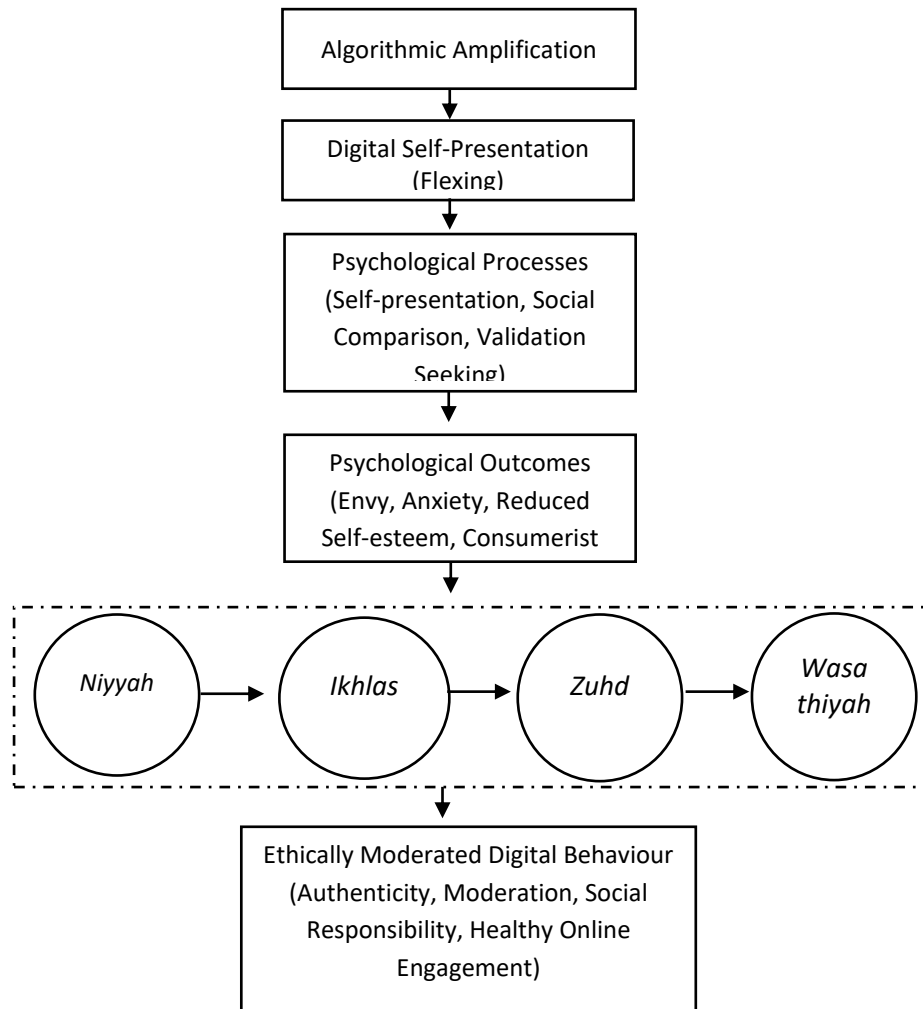


Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Integrating Cyber Psychology and Hadith Ethics in Flexing Culture

This framework proposes that Hadith ethics functions as a moderating mechanism rather than merely a complementary moral discourse. It intervenes in the psychological processes underlying digital self-presentation by redirecting motivations, regulating behavioral expression, and mitigating negative psychological outcomes.

Together, these theoretical and ethical insights form a model for interpreting the culture of flexing in ways that not only identify behaviors and their impacts but also propose moral and psychological strategies for mitigation. This model maps the relationship among the intensity of self-presentation, audience exposure to flexing, the resulting psychological effects, and potential interventions that cultivate sincerity, simplicity, and social responsibility.

In practice, sincerity serves as an internal safeguard against *Riya'*, simplicity balances aesthetics with substance, and social responsibility ensures that shared content does not exacerbate inequality or

place psychological burdens on others.⁶⁰ These values can be reinforced through digital literacy education grounded in Islamic ethics. Such an approach goes beyond teaching technical skills by raising awareness of the ethical dimensions of online interaction.

On the policy level, this understanding could inspire media regulators to design ethical content guidelines that take psychological impacts into account. For instance, platforms could be encouraged to flag extreme flexing content or fine-tune algorithms to elevate more educational and inspirational posts.

For content creators, this framework provides a blueprint for building a healthier personal brand. Visual aesthetics remain important, but they are balanced with meaningful substance that adds value to audiences. This perspective is not only relevant to individuals but also to brands and institutions, helping them avoid marketing practices that indirectly fuel harmful consumerism.

Audiences, too, can benefit by cultivating critical awareness in how they consume content. By understanding self-presentation mechanics and social comparison dynamics, users can reduce the negative effects of flexing exposure and shift their focus toward content that enriches knowledge, skills, and moral values.⁶¹

Theoretically, this integration enriches cyber psychology by introducing an ethical dimension rooted in religious teachings. It allows analysis to move beyond descriptive accounts toward normative guidance. For Hadith studies, it extends the relevance of the Prophet's teachings into contemporary issues not explicitly covered by classical jurisprudence or modern law.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that Hadith ethics does not merely complement cyber psychology but actively reconfigures its explanatory framework. Whereas cyber psychology primarily accounts for how and why individuals engage in digital self-presentation, Hadith ethics introduces evaluative criteria concerning intention, moderation, and social responsibility that explain whether such behavior should be encouraged, limited, or transformed. This integrative model, therefore, functions simultaneously as an explanatory and normative framework for analyzing flexing culture in contemporary digital environments.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the phenomenon of flexing on social media can be more fully understood through an integrated analytical framework that combines Hadith ethics and cyber psychology. Based on the qualitative analysis of flexing-related digital content and the thematic interpretation of Hadith concerning *Riya'*, *niyyah*, *zuhd*, and *wasathiyah*, the findings indicate that algorithmically amplified digital self-presentation encourages patterns of online validation seeking and upward social comparison. These processes are associated with psychological consequences such as envy, perceived social pressure, and diminished self-esteem, while also raising ethical concerns about sincerity and excessive image construction.

A principal contribution of this study is the development of an operational integrative model in which Hadith ethics functions not merely as a complementary moral discourse but as a moderating framework that reshapes the psychological mechanisms underlying digital self-presentation. Whereas Goffman's theory explains impression management and Festinger's theory accounts for social

⁶⁰ William C. Symonds, "Pathways to Prosperity," *Educational Leadership* 69, no. 7 (2012): 35–39, <https://doi.org/10.64717/ajass.v5i2.140>.

⁶¹ Thi Cam Tu Dinh and Yoonjae Lee, "Understanding the Psychological Drivers of Online Self-Presentation: A Survey Study on Social Media Exposure, Social Comparison, Social Network Type and FOMO.," *BMC Psychology* 13, no. 1 (July 2025): 781, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-03117-w>.

comparison, Hadith principles introduce evaluative dimensions centered on intention, moderation, and social responsibility. In this way, the proposed framework extends existing cyber psychology by incorporating ethical criteria that can redirect digital behavior toward authenticity and balanced self-expression.

The study also contributes to the broader literature by positioning religious ethics as an active explanatory component rather than solely a normative reference. The analysis suggests that the interaction among algorithmic amplification, self-presentation, and audience psychology is mediated by ethical values that can mitigate harmful forms of validation-seeking and consumerist pressure. This interdisciplinary perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of flexing culture than approaches relying exclusively on psychological or theological explanations.

Practically, the findings support integrating ethical reflection into digital literacy initiatives, encouraging users and content creators to critically evaluate the motivations and potential social consequences of online self-presentation. Future studies should strengthen this framework through larger empirical datasets, cross-platform comparative analyses, and mixed-methods designs that test the proposed relationships between psychological processes and Hadith-based ethical interventions across diverse digital contexts.

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