

## **FLEXING CULTURE FROM THE QUR'ANIC PERSPECTIVE: Between Lifestyle And The Principle Of *Tauhid***

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### **Abstract**

Flexing culture, which refers to the act of showcasing wealth and social status, has become a common phenomenon in the digital era, especially on social media. This culture represents a materialistic lifestyle that has the potential to create social inequality and spiritual crises. This study aims to analyze flexing culture from the perspective of the Qur'an by highlighting its contradiction with the values of *tauhid*. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method using a thematic interpretation (*tafsir maudhu'i*) approach, analyzing Qur'anic verses related to wealth, arrogance, and worldly life. This study finds that flexing culture contradicts the principle of *tauhid*, as it promotes behaviors such as arrogance (*takabbur*), ostentation (*riya'*), and wastefulness (*israf*), all of which are criticized in the Qur'an. In contrast, the Qur'an emphasizes the importance of simplicity, gratitude, and the responsible use of wealth. In conclusion, flexing culture is inconsistent with Qur'anic values and should be addressed through the strengthening of spiritual awareness and ethical use of social media.

**Keywords:** Flexing Culture; Lifestyle; Qur'anic Perspective; Tauhid

### **Abstrak**

Budaya *flexing*, yaitu memamerkan kekayaan dan status sosial menjadi fenomena umum di era digital terutama di media sosial. Budaya ini merepresentasikan gaya hidup materialistik yang berpotensi

menimbulkan kesenjangan sosial dan krisis spiritual. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis *flexing culture* dalam perspektif al-Qur'an dengan menyoroti pertentangannya dengan nilai-nilai ketauhidan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan tafsir tematik (*maudhu'i*) melalui analisis terhadap ayat-ayat al-Qur'an yang berhubungan dengan harta, kesombongan, dan kehidupan duniawi. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa *flexing culture* bertentangan dengan prinsip ketauhidan karena mendorong perilaku *takabbur* (sombong), *riya'* (pamer) dan *israf* (pemborosan) yang dikritik oleh al-Qur'an. Sebaliknya, al-Qur'an menekankan pentingnya hidup sederhana, bersyukur, dan menggunakan harta dengan penuh tanggung jawab sosial. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *flexing culture* tidak sejalan dengan nilai-nilai al-Qur'an dan perlu diluruskan melalui penguatan kesadaran spiritual dan etika penggunaan media sosial.

**Kata Kunci:** Flexing Culture; Gaya Hidup; Perspektif al-Qur'an; Tauhid

## Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed communication, identity expression, social interaction, and lifestyle patterns in contemporary society. One notable phenomenon is flexing culture—the act of displaying wealth, luxury, and social status as a symbol of success and self-worth, particularly through social media. This reflects a growing shift toward materialism and social validation, raising ethical and spiritual concerns, especially within Islamic teachings.

In this context, flexing refers to boasting about financial assets or luxury possessions.<sup>1</sup> According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it denotes prideful behavior that may appear unpleasant to others.<sup>2</sup> Islam views wealth as a trust (*amanah*) from God to be used ethically and responsibly—not as a source of pride or superiority. As noted by Maharani, Islam does not prohibit

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Arga Pramudya, "Flexing in Social Media: Between Confession and Conflict in an Islamic Perspective", *Jurnal Shafa; Journal of Islamic Communication* 6 no. 1 (2023), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Kumparan. (2023). *Flexing: Pengertian, Penyebab dan Tips Mengatasinya*. Kumparan. Com. <https://kumparan.com/ragam-info/flexing-pengertian-penyebab-dan-tips-mengatasinya-20ZvHpfhgvJ>

wealth accumulation, but promotes moderation, justice, and the avoidance of wasteful consumption (*israf*).<sup>3</sup> The Qur'an strongly criticizes behaviors such as arrogance (*takabbur*), ostentation (*riya*), and wastefulness (*israf*).

Several verses highlight these values. Arrogance is addressed in Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 34, Q.S. an-Nisa [4]: 36, Q.S. Luqman [31]: 18, Q.S. al-Isra' [17]: 37. Ostentation is discussed in Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 264, Q.S. al-Ma'un [107]: 4-6, Q.S. an-Nisa [4]: 32, and Q.S. al-Anfal [8]: 47. Wastefulness appears in Q.S. al-A'raf [7]: 31, Q.S. al-Furqan [25]: 67, Q.S. al-Imran [3]: 147, and Q.S. as-Syu'ara' [26]: 151.

To deepen the analysis, this study compares classical and contemporary interpretations, particularly the works of Ibn Kathir—a prominent classical exegete—and M. Quraish Shihab, a modern Indonesian scholar. Ibn Kathir is known for narrative-rich interpretations rooted in hadith, while Shihab emphasizes context, ethics, and socio-cultural relevance. This comparative method helps illuminate how different hermeneutic frameworks interpret Qur'anic teachings on materialism and the principle of *tauhid* in modern life.

At the center of the Islamic worldview is *tauhid* (the oneness of God), which demands that all blessings, including wealth, be attributed to God and used in ways that reflect humility, gratitude, and social responsibility. Despite these spiritual principles, flexing culture is increasingly popular among Muslim communities, driven by consumerism and the normalization of luxury as a symbol of success. This raises a critical question: How does the Qur'an view the phenomenon of flexing, and to what extent does it align with or contradict the values of *tauhid*?

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<sup>3</sup> Dewi Maharani, "Rasionalitas Muslim: Perilaku Konsumsi dalam Perspektif Ekonomi Islam", *Jurnal Ilmiah Ekonomi Islam* 6 no. 3 (2020), 409.

There are several negative impacts of the flexing culture. When individuals feel compelled to maintain an image of affluence that exceeds their means, they may engage in financially irresponsible behavior—such as borrowing excessively or incurring debt—to uphold appearances. Moreover, this behavior can negatively affect others, potentially causing envy, resentment, and even legal violations.

From an Islamic point of view, such a lifestyle raises critical ethical and theological concerns. The Qur'an, as the foundational source of Islamic values, offers comprehensive guidance on human behavior, including aspects related to wealth, modesty, and social conduct. At the heart of Islamic ethics lies the principle of *tauhid*, which serves as a spiritual compass shaping a Muslim's worldview and lifestyle. When viewed through this lens, the phenomenon of flexing may contradict the Qur'anic principle of humility, sincerity, and moderation.

According to Arga Pramudya (2023), the phenomenon of flexing highlights acts of showing off wealth, displaying arrogance, and projecting a sense of self-worth that is often inaccessible to others. Some of the negative effects of flexing include depression, diminished self-esteem, loss of identity, and an overreliance on external validation. This behavior can harm an individual's mental health due to feelings of inadequacy and a perceived lack of acceptance in social environments.<sup>4</sup>

Flexing today is not limited to wealth and luxury; it has extended even into religious practices. Worship, which traditionally holds a singular meaning—devotion to God—now takes on multiple interpretations when shared on social media. One such interpretation is using worship as a form of flexing to gain social recognition and enhance personal branding. Flexing culture has evolved into a virtual tradition that is no longer exclusive to the

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<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Arga Pramudya, "Flexing in Social Media, 66-73.

upper class or the wealthy, but has also spread across lower and middle-income groups.<sup>5</sup>

Technological advancement has brought both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, it facilitates access to desired goals and broadens opportunities. On the negative side, when technology and information are misused, such as for flexing, it contributes to social isolation, economic disparity, mental health crises, conflict, violence, and environmental degradation. These problems can be addressed through the principle of *tauhid*, which can foster a more conscious, supportive, and morally grounded society—one built on awareness, mutual support, and shared reminders.<sup>6</sup>

Flexing behavior contradicts the principles of Islamic consumer ethics. It violates the norms of Islamic consumption and goes against the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith. Several verses and hadiths prohibit arrogance and extravagant display. Wealth is not meant to be flaunted or used to belittle others. While flexing may have positive implications from a marketing perspective, its social consequences tend to be predominantly negative. Flexing also indicates a lack of empathy and social awareness. Islam teaches moderation and responsibility in consumption, encouraging believers to avoid *israf* (wastefulness) to strengthen the economic foundations of the Muslim community.<sup>7</sup>

Although many studies have explored Islamic ethics in economic behavior and the moral pitfalls of digital media, there is still limited research that specifically addresses the flexing culture from a Qur'anic perspective, particularly in terms of *takabbur*

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<sup>5</sup> Ida Rosidah, "Flexing Culture in the age of Social Media; From Social recognition to self-satisfaction", *Jurnal Simulacra* 6 no. 2 (2023), 193-208.

<sup>6</sup> Muawiyah Nihayatil Ulum, "The Paradigm of Tauhid and Educational Implications Morality of the 21st Century Generation", *Jurnal Paradigma* 4 no.2,(2023), 237-242.

<sup>7</sup> Syarifah Fatimah, "Flexing; Fenomena Perilaku Konsumen dalam Perspektif Islam", *Jurnal Ilmiah Ekonomi Islam* 9 no. 1 (2023), 1204-1212.

(arrogance), *riya'* (showing off), and *israf* (wastefulness). This study seeks to fill that research gap by providing a focused Qur'anic analysis of the values related to flexing culture.

In response to this gap in the literature, this research adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach with thematic interpretation (*tafsir maudhu'i*). The main purpose of this research is to explore and analyze the Qur'anic perspective on flexing culture by identifying and interpreting verses that address the themes of arrogance (*takabbur*), ostentation (*riya'*), and wastefulness (*israf*). The data collection method in this study consists of primary data, including selected Qur'anic verses related to the themes. These verses are identified through thematic keywords such as *takabbur*, *riya'*, and *israf*. These verses will be analyzed using classical and contemporary exegeses, such as Tafsir Ibn Kathir and Tafsir al-Misbah. These interpretations will be compared to understand the moral, theological, and social implications of the selected verses in the context of contemporary flexing behavior, especially the phenomenon of flexing on social media platforms.

## Discussion

### Flexing Culture in the Digital Era

The term flexing originates from English, meaning “to show off” or “to display something conspicuously”.<sup>8</sup> According to the Cambridge Dictionary, conspicuous consumption or flexing refers to prideful behavior concerning one's possessions and achievements—especially in an excessive manner, such as the display of material wealth—which is expressed through displaying, showcasing, and demonstrating such assets by any means (whether positive or negative), with the goal of gaining attention,

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<sup>8</sup> Mardiah, Fenomena “Flexing: Pamer di Media Sosial dalam Perspektif Etika Islam”, *Proceeding International Conference on Tradition and Religious Studies*, (2002), 1.

admiration, popularity, and prestige from others.<sup>9</sup> In the context of popular culture, flexing refers to the act of showcasing wealth, luxury goods, social status, or a glamorous lifestyle in public spaces, particularly on social media platforms. This phenomenon is not merely a form of self-actualization but has become an integral part of a modern lifestyle shaped by visual consumption.

According to Veblen, in his concept of *Conspicuous Consumption*, flexing represents a form of ostentatious behavior intended to signal social status.<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon creates a social hierarchy based on appearances rather than substance. Similarly, Rhenald Kasali argue in his book that consumerist behavior and showing off (flexing) on social media do not reflect true productivity.<sup>11</sup> Through his YouTube Channel, he said that this phenomenon cannot be separated from the massive social media that encourages individuals to participate and try to get recognized.<sup>12</sup>

In the digital era, the term flexing has become popular among young people. They compete to share images of luxurious vacations, branded products, expensive vehicles, or outstanding personal achievements. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become the main media for flexing practices, which in many cases do not reflect actual economic conditions, but rather the image they want to construct in the digital space.

The flexing culture is inseparable from the social pressure in a capitalist society that defines consumption as identity. A luxurious lifestyle has become not only an aspiration but also a

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<sup>9</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, Flex, diakses 28 Juli 2023. <http://cambridge.dictionary.org./flex>

<sup>10</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 86.

<sup>11</sup> Rhenald Kasali, *Self Driving: Menjadi Driver atau Passenger?*, (Jakarta: Mizan Publika, 2015), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Syarifah Fatimah, "Flexing; Fenomena Perilaku, 1206.

new social standard, prompting individuals to craft idealized versions of themselves based on public perception. Flexing behavior is carried out to showcase a person's social status, with the hope of appearing more attractive in the eyes of others and thus expanding their social network. This is why some people feel insecure about attending parties or certain events without wearing branded items. There is a fear of being rejected or looked down upon by others. Flexing behavior can negatively impact interpersonal relationships, particularly in new or unfamiliar social environment.

## Flexing in Qur'anic Perspective

The word flexing is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. However, in terms of its meaning, causes, and consequences, the concept of flexing in Islam can be associated with several related notions, including *takabbur* (arrogance), *riya'* (showing-off), *tama'* (greed), *'ujub* (self-conceit), *hubbu al-dunya* (love of worldly life), *tabdzir* (wastefulness), and *israf* (extravagance). This research seeks to critically examine three key concepts within Qur'anic framework: *takabbur* (arrogance), *riya'* (ostentation), and *israf* (extravagance).

### 1. *Takabbur* (arrogance)

The word *takabbur* originates from the Arabic verb *takabbara-yatakabbaru*, meaning "to be arrogant" or "to boast about oneself". Terminologically, *takabbur* refers to an attitude of self-pride, in which a person believes themselves to be superior and always right compared to others. According to the *Dictionary of Religious Terms*, arrogance is the belief in one's own perfection while viewing others as inferior.<sup>13</sup>

So, the trait of arrogance can be identified through two key indicators: *first*, viewing oneself as superior, exceptional, and more

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<sup>13</sup> Shodiq dan Shalahuddin Chaery, *Kamus Istilah Agama*, (Jakarta: Sienttarama, 1983), 353.



noble than others; and *second*, looking down on others and considering their status and dignity to be inferior.<sup>14</sup>

Emi Suhemi identifies four forms of arrogance: (1) in appearance, including clothing and vehicle; (2) in the desire for honor; (3) in egocentric behavior; and (4) in boastful speech.<sup>15</sup> These traits can stem from wealth, beauty, intellect, lineage, power, or majority-group affiliation.<sup>16</sup>

The Qur'an addresses *takabbur* in several verses. In Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]:34, the arrogance of Iblis is portrayed as the first sin in the divine realm. Ibn Kathir interprets the prostration command as a divine test of obedience. All angels obeyed, while Iblis, though not an angel but among the jinn (Q.S. al-Kahfi [18]:50), was also obliged to submit due to his presence among the angels.

Ibn Kathir explains that Iblis's refusal (*aba*) and arrogance (*istakbara*) are evidence of his pride, which was rooted in his belief that he was superior to Adam. He quotes Iblis's own words from another verse:

"I am better than him. You created me from fire and created him from clay." (Q.S. al-A'raf [7]:12).<sup>17</sup>

He concludes that this initial arrogance is the source of Iblis's downfall and a model for all spiritual corruption. Ibn Kathir writes:

"His pride, envy, and refusal to obey Allah's command led him to disbelief. Thus, arrogance became the first sin in the divine realm."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Taufikurrahman, "Sombong dalam al-Qur'an; Sebuah Kajian Tematik", *Jurnal Tafsir* 9 no. 2, 2021, 195.

<sup>15</sup> Emi Suhemi, "Takabbur dalam Perspektif al-Qur'an dan Hadits", *Jurnal al-Mu'asirah* as16 no. 2, 2019, 200-201.

<sup>16</sup> Taufikurrahman, "Sombong dalam al-Qur'an, 200-208.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 1 (Riyadh: Dar Thayyibah, 1999), 127.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 1, 128.

Meanwhile, Quraish Shihab offers a thematic and ethical interpretation of the same verse. He views Iblis's arrogance not only merely as a theological error but as a symbolic expression of deeper moral corruption. According to Shihab, the narrative reveals how arrogance can lead to spiritual blindness, hindering one's ability to perceive the divine wisdom behind commands that may seem irrational. He further explains that Iblis's refusal was driven by *takabbur* rooted in prejudice—valuing his own origin (fire) over that of Adam (clay)—which he interprets as an early manifestation of discriminatory superiority, or what may be considered a form of proto-racism. He notes:

“This is not merely a story; it is a moral parable about the dangers of pride, especially when it stems from a sense of racial, intellectual, or spiritual superiority.”<sup>19</sup>

Shihab emphasizes that Iblis's arrogance made him unable to see the honor Allah bestowed upon Adam. He rejected not the act of prostration per se, but the worthiness of Adam to receive it, thus committing an epistemological error that led to existential rebellion.

In Q.S. an-Nisa [4]:36, Allah declares that He does not love the boastful. Ibnu Kathir explains that the phrase “*al-mukhtal al-fakhr*” refers to an individual who is conceited due to self-perceived superiority and who flaunts their possessions or status to others. He notes that such pride is not only morally reprehensible but also constitutes a major sin, as it entails attributing blessings to oneself rather than acknowledging them as divine favors.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in his commentary on the story of Iblis refusing to bow Adam (QS. al-Baqarah [2]: 34; al-A'raf [7]: 12), Ibn Kathir identifies arrogance as the core reason behind Iblis' defiance. He emphasizes that Iblis' refusal was not due to a lack of knowledge

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<sup>19</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishab*, vol. 1 (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2002), 204–206.

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 1, 560.

or misunderstanding, but rather a willful act of arrogance, which led to his expulsion from divine grace.<sup>21</sup>

While according to Quraish Shihab offers a contextual and psychological reading. He interprets *al-mukhtal* as someone who is deluded by their own self-image and considers themselves inherently better than others. *Al-fakhr*, in Shihab's view, refers to those who vocalize or publicly exhibit their perceived superiority. He further explains that arrogance is not only a moral flaw but also a form of epistemological obstruction: it prevents individuals from recognizing truth when it comes from someone perceived as 'lesser.' Thus, according to Shihab, this verse reflects both social and spiritual dimensions of arrogance—warning against attitudes that lead to social fragmentation and spiritual downfall.<sup>22</sup>

Q.S. Luqman [31]:18 prohibits prideful conduct in public. Ibnu Kathir explains that the verse addresses outward expressions of arrogance, which stem from deeper moral corruption. The phrase *la tusha'ir khaddaka linna*s is interpreted as a metaphor for snobbish behavior—turning one's cheek in contempt and refusing to engage others with humility. He associates this with the conduct of tyrants and those intoxicated by wealth or status. The command *la tamshi fi al-ardhi marahan* (do not walk arrogantly on the earth) is seen as a warning against vanity in one's gait and demeanor. Ibn Kathir links this to Q.S. al-Isra [17]:37, reinforcing that prideful behavior contradicts the humility demanded by Islamic teachings.<sup>23</sup> He concludes that both verbal and non-verbal arrogance reflect a diseased heart, and affirms the Qur'anic verdict: *Allah does not like those who are self-deluded and boastful (kull mukhtal fakhr)*—traits likened to Iblis.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 1, 68-70.

<sup>22</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishab*, vol. 3, 104-106.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 6, 343.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 6, 344.

Quraish Shihab offers a sociocultural and psychological interpretation. He defines *taṣa'ir* (from *ṣa'ara*) as a physical expression of arrogance—such as deliberately avoiding eye contact to signal superiority. The term originally refers to a stiff-necked camel, metaphorically conveying haughtiness or inflexibility.<sup>25</sup> For Shihab, arrogance in Islam is not only an inner defect but also a publicly performed attitude. The prohibition on arrogant walking represents Islam's commitment to egalitarianism and social harmony. Even subtle displays—through speech, dress, or posture—can carry spiritual consequences. The final phrase of the verse is, for him, more than divine disapproval; it is a theological axiom that ties ethical conduct to divine judgment.<sup>26</sup>

In Q.S. al-Isrā' [17]:37, Ibn Kathir interprets the command *la tamsyi fil-ardhi maraḥan* as a direct prohibition of haughty behavior, encompassing both outward swagger and the inner vanity that fuels it. He emphasizes that no matter one's wealth or power, humans remain limited—they cannot pierce the earth or rival mountains in stature.<sup>27</sup> He connects this verse to Q.S. Luqman [31]:18 and Q.S. al-Qasas [28]:83, all of which underscore humility as a core Islamic virtue. He writes:

“Do not walk with pride and vanity, for you are weak and humble compared to the earth beneath you and the mountains above you.”<sup>28</sup>

Shihab interprets this verse through a psychological and ethical lens. He defines *marāḥan* as exaggerated self-importance, often conveyed through body language.<sup>29</sup> He sees the Qur'an's imagery—“you will not tear the earth... nor reach the mountains”—as both poetic and theological, reminding believers

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<sup>25</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Misbah*, vol. 11, 114–116.

<sup>26</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Misbah*, vol. 11, 117.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 5, 86.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 5, 87.

<sup>29</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Misbah*, vol. 8, 516–518.

of their physical and existential limitations. Arrogance, then, is a delusion that distorts one's view of self and others. He writes:

“This verse is a moral corrective. It dismantles the illusion of superiority by reminding us that our capabilities have bounds and that humility is the path to dignity.”<sup>30</sup>

Beyond the Qur'anic verses, the Prophet Muhammad also strongly condemned arrogance, stating:

لا يدخل الجنة من كان في قلبه مثقال ذرة من كبر

“No one who has even the slightest amount of arrogance in their heart-even as small as a mustard seed- will enter Paradise”.

## 2. *Riya'* (Ostentation)

*Riya'* is derived from the Arabic root *ra'a*, meaning “to see.” In Islamic terminology, it refers to performing good deeds with the intention of being seen, praised, or admired by others, rather than sincerely seeking the pleasure of Allah. It is a form of spiritual hypocrisy that renders one's deeds void in the sight of God. Al-Ghazali classifies *riya'* as a hidden form of shirk (associating partners with God), as it prioritizes the opinion of people over that of the Creator in matters of worship.<sup>31</sup>

According to Ibn Qudamah in his book *Minhaj al-Qasidin*, *riya'* manifests in five distinct forms: (1) through the body, such as appearing physically weak or pale to signify piety; (2) through adornment, such as wearing religious attire to appear devout; (3) through speech, by excessively quoting religious texts to gain admiration; (4) through actions, such as elongating prayer in

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<sup>30</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Misbah*, vol. 8, 519.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin* Vol.3, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2005), 293.

public; and (5) through selective presence in religious gatherings solely to build a reputation of righteousness.<sup>32</sup>

In the digital age, acts of piety—charity, prayer, and religious engagement—are increasingly shared on social media, often driven by a desire for recognition. These displays reflect a shift from sincere worship to performative religiosity, facilitated by platforms that reward appearance and visibility through likes, comments, and follower counts.

One of the clearest denunciations of *riya'* appears in Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]:264, which warns: *“O you who believe! Do not nullify your charity by reminders of generosity or injury, like the one who spends his wealth to be seen by people and does not believe in Allah and the Last Day...”* Ibn Kathir explains this verse within the larger context of sincerity (*ikhlas*) and hypocrisy (*nifaa*). He likens the act of giving for show to a rock covered with dust: when rain falls, it strips the dust away, leaving the stone bare—symbolizing how the facade of piety is easily eroded when tested by hardship or death.<sup>33</sup>

According to him, such actions are spiritually barren, as they are disconnected from genuine faith. He reinforces this with a prophetic tradition in which the Prophet Muhammad states that *riya'* is “the lesser shirk,” and that on the Day of Judgment, individuals who performed deeds for reputation will be told: *“Go to those you used to show off for, and see if they can reward you.”*<sup>34</sup>

Quraish Shihab offers a complementary perspective, emphasizing the ethical dimension of the verse. For him, charity done for admiration distorts the nature of *rahmah* (compassion), and the parable of the dust-covered rock illustrates moral fragility—virtuous appearances that lack substance. He interprets

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<sup>32</sup> Ibnu Qadamah, *Minhajul Qashidin*, Translate: Kathur Suhardi, (Jakarta: Pustaka al-Kautsar, 1997), 272-273.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azhim*, vol. 1, 315.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1999), vol. 10, hadith no. 27742, 423.

*riya'* as a form of spiritual alienation: one that separates the individual not only from God but also from authentic relationships within society.<sup>35</sup>

Another critical reference is found in Q.S. an-Nisa [4]:38, which reads: “*And those who spend their wealth to be seen by others, while they do not believe in Allah or the Last Day...*” Ibn Kathir links this behavior to the hypocrites and disbelievers in Mecca, who gave for prestige rather than faith. He highlights the disconnection between outer action and inner belief, asserting that without *iman*, such charity becomes spiritually meaningless. Shihab builds on this by pointing to the psychological root of *riya'*—a craving for validation that reflects a spiritual void. For Shihab, the Qur'an condemns not only disbelief, but also the instrumentalization of religious acts for egoistic gain.<sup>36</sup>

In Q.S. al-Anfal [8]:47, the Qur'an cautions: “*And do not be like those who came out of their homes boastfully and to be seen by people...*” Ibn Kathir identifies this as a reference to the Quraysh during the Battle of Badr. They approached the battlefield not with justice, but with arrogance and showmanship, accompanied by music and entertainers, treating war as spectacle. He interprets this as a form of *riya'* beyond ritual worship—manifesting in public behavior. Shihab, in turn, sees the verse as a moral critique of any social action—religious, political, or cultural—that is driven by self-image rather than ethical or theological integrity. He warns that sincerity (*ikhlās*) must ground all forms of public engagement.

Finally, Q.S. al-Ma'un [107]:4–7 presents a comprehensive denunciation of performative piety: “*So woe to those who pray, but who are heedless of their prayer—those who make a show [of their deeds] and withhold [small acts of kindness].*” Ibn Kathir explains that the warning targets those who pray as a ritual without consciousness or sincerity, seeking social recognition rather than nearness to Allah.

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<sup>35</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Misbah*, vol. 1, 410.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, Vol. 2, 275.

He also connects *riya'* in prayer to broader moral failure, as such individuals neglect even minor obligations of kindness (*al-ma'un*). Shihab expands this view, interpreting *sahūn* (heedless) as willful negligence, not just forgetfulness. He underscores that *riya'* distorts both the spiritual and ethical fabric of religious life—turning devotion into performance and undermining genuine social solidarity.<sup>37</sup>

### 3. *Israf* (Wastefulness)

In *al-Munawwir Arabic–Indonesian Dictionary*, the word *asrafa* (أَسْرَفَ) is defined as “to squander” or “to be wasteful,” while *israf* (إِسْرَاف) denotes “excessiveness” or “extravagance.” In classical Arabic lexicons, the root *s-r-f* (س ر ف) conveys the meaning of exceeding proper bounds or behaving immoderately.<sup>38</sup>

Terminologically, *israf* refers to going beyond what is necessary, appropriate, or permissible, either quantitatively or qualitatively. In Islamic discourse, *israf* is not limited to excessive material consumption; it also encompasses wastefulness in time, speech, emotions, or behavior that undermines ethical, spiritual, or communal values.<sup>39</sup>

Raghib al-Isfahani defines *israf* as any excessive act—whether physical, verbal, or behavioral—that goes beyond a person’s capability or moral appropriateness. Yusuf al-Qaradawi similarly defines *israf* as an act of transgression and exaggeration, which is among the behaviors detested by Allah. He draws attention to its resemblance to behaviors of earlier religious

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, Vol. 8, 512.

<sup>38</sup> Mahmud Yunus, *Kamus Arab-Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Hidakarya Agus, 1992), 41.

<sup>39</sup> Depdiknas, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, third edition, (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 2005), 649.



communities, such as the Christians, who according to his interpretation, engaged in excess in religious matters.<sup>40</sup>

The term *israf* and its derivatives appear in the Qur'an more than twenty times in various contexts: spending, eating, dressing, and even in legal retribution. This repetition reflects the Qur'an's serious concern for balance (*mizan*) in human behavior.<sup>41</sup>

In today's context, the culture of flexing can be viewed as a modern manifestation of *israf*. Widely popularized through social media, flexing encourages public exhibition of luxury, often leading to wasteful spending and vanity. It represents a shift from spiritual and communal values to ego-driven consumerism.

One of the clearest references to *israf* is found in Q.S. al-A'raf [7]:31, which commands: "O children of Adam! Take your adornment at every masjid, and eat and drink, but do not be excessive. Indeed, He does not like the extravagant." Ibn Kathir interprets this verse as a prohibition of going beyond permissible limits, particularly in food and drink. He cites a hadith: "The son of Adam does not fill any vessel worse than his stomach." For him, *israf* here signals any consumption—lawful or not—that leads to bodily or spiritual harm.<sup>42</sup>

Quraish Shihab offers a broader interpretation. He asserts that *israf* is not only about quantity but also quality. It includes consuming items that may be lawful (*halal*) yet harmful to one's health or unnecessary in a given context. For Shihab, *israf* is any act of consumption lacking in ethical awareness and spiritual mindfulness.<sup>43</sup>

Another significant verse is Q.S. al-Furqan [25]:67, which praises the righteous: "And [they are] those who, when they spend, are neither extravagant nor miserly, but [hold] a balance between them." Ibn

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<sup>40</sup> Yusuf Qardhawi, *Islam Ekstrem*, (Bandung: Mizan, 1985), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Ahsin Wijaya, *Kamus Ilmu al-Qur'an*, (Jakarta: Amzah, 2006), 326.

<sup>42</sup> Ibnu Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adzim*, Vol. 3, 383

<sup>43</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, vol. 4, 248-249.

Kathir explains that Allah establishes boundaries for everything, and that both wastefulness and stinginess violate Islamic ethics. He refers to *qawama* as a balanced and commendable way of spending, which aligns with the Qur'anic principle of moderation (*wasatiyyah*).<sup>44</sup>

Quraish Shihab affirms that the verse addresses not just financial habits but ethical disposition. He sees *qawama* as context-sensitive and relational—it involves wise, fair, and compassionate spending based on need, responsibility, and awareness of others.<sup>45</sup>

In Q.S. Ali 'Imran [3]:147, the Qur'an quotes a supplication: "*Our Lord! Forgive us our sins and our excesses in our affairs, make firm our steps, and grant us victory over the disbelieving people.*" Ibn Kathir interprets *israf* in this verse as exceeding the bounds of what is permissible—either through action, intention, or speech. He underscores the humility of the supplicants, who not only ask forgiveness for explicit sins, but also for moments of overreach or imbalance, even in good efforts.<sup>46</sup>

Shihab expands this interpretation by noting that *israf* can occur even in acts of piety—when zeal overtakes wisdom, or confidence becomes arrogance. For him, the verse reflects a spiritual discipline that acknowledges the need for continuous self-correction.<sup>47</sup>

Another relevant verse is Q.S. asy-Syu'ara [26]:151, in which the Prophet Shalih warns his people: "*And do not obey the command of the transgressors (musrifin).*" Ibn Kathir interprets this in its historical context—the elites of Thamud, who lived in luxury and led others into arrogance, corruption, and disbelief. The *musrifin* were figures of excess in power and behavior. For Ibn Kathir, this verse is not

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<sup>44</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adzim*, Vol. 6, 109.

<sup>45</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbab*, Vol. 10, 516.

<sup>46</sup> Ibnu Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adzim*, vol.2, 78

<sup>47</sup> Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbab*, vol.2, 267.

only a rebuke of the elite but a warning against imitating their lifestyle.<sup>48</sup>

Quraish Shihab adds that *musrifin* refers to anyone who acts beyond the bounds of modesty, ethics, and divine guidance. In the context of flexing, individuals who flaunt their wealth and status promote a way of life that is disconnected from humility, empathy, and spiritual awareness. He emphasizes that following such figures invites moral decay and undermines communal values.<sup>49</sup>

### **Flexing: Between Lifestyle and the Crisis of *Tauhid***

In contemporary society, particularly within the digital space, flexing culture has evolved into a normalized lifestyle that equates personal value with visible material success. The proliferation of content on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube showcases curated images of luxury, fashion, vehicles, and high-end experiences. This trend fosters a culture where identity is constructed not through intrinsic values or ethical integrity, but rather through the external display of wealth and social status. As Bauman notes, "consumption has become the primary mode of self-expression and social integration."<sup>50</sup>

This phenomenon stands in stark contrast to the Qur'anic worldview centered on tauhid. The principle of tauhid not only affirms the oneness of God but also demands that every aspect of human life, including consumption and lifestyle, be oriented toward divine consciousness (*'ubudiyah*). As Ibn Kathir explains in his commentary on QS. Al-Hadid [57]: 20, "the world and its adornments are temporary trials that distract from the remembrance of God if not approached with humility."<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, Quraish Shihab interprets the same verse as a warning

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<sup>48</sup> Ibnu Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adzim*, vol. 6, 494

<sup>49</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbab*, Vol. 10, 466.

<sup>50</sup> Zygmund Bauman, *Consuming Life*, (Cambridge: Policy Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>51</sup> Ibnu Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Adzim*, Vol. 4, 311.

against the glorification of worldly pleasures, emphasizing that a meaningful life lies in proportionality, not excess.<sup>52</sup>

Flexing culture, therefore, reflects a shift from a theocentric orientation to a worldly-centric one, where the pursuit of recognition replaces the pursuit of spiritual submission. This subtle yet critical shift may lead to *syirik khafiy* (hidden polytheism), especially when actions are driven by *riya'* (showing off) rather than sincerity (*ikhlas*).<sup>53</sup> Socially and culturally, the impact of this lifestyle is far-reaching. It cultivates hedonism, where pleasure and luxury are perceived as the ultimate goals of life. Moreover, it produces psychological and societal pressures, especially among the youth, who feel compelled to keep up with perceived standards of success and beauty. This often leads to anxiety, debt, and a disconnection from core spiritual and communal values. The loss of humility and gratitude, both of which are central to the Qur'anic ethos, further intensifies the crisis of meaning in modern Muslim societies.

Contemporary examples abound. Influencers or Selebgrams frequently post content that emphasizes extravagant lifestyles, expensive brands, and luxurious vacations. While such content may be aspirational to some, it also perpetuates unrealistic standards and reinforces consumerist mindsets. In response, segments of the Muslim community have begun to raise critical awareness through counter-discourses that promote *zuhud* (asceticism), ethical consumption, and spiritual accountability. Nonetheless, the widespread appeal of flexing remains a challenge, particularly in urban, digitally connected Muslim populations where image often supersedes substance.

Futhermore the Qur'an in Q.S at-Takasur [102] warns agains the danger of excessive boasting that distracts people from their true purpose in life. Wealth is not meant to be flaunted, but

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<sup>52</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbab*, vol. 13, 380.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, Vol. 4, 344.

rather managed as a trust and utilizes for the greater good. In the Islamic economic system, those who are financially capable are given social responsibilities through zakat, infaq and shadaqah as expressions of their social and spiritual accountability.

### **Qur'anic Reinterpretation of Modern Lifestyle**

In response to the prevailing consumerist and performative tendencies of modern lifestyles, the Qur'an offers a framework of ethics rooted in modesty, responsibility, and spiritual consciousness. Far from being an outdated moral code, Qur'anic values present a dynamic alternative to the culture of excess and image-centric living. At the heart of this framework lies the ethic of simplicity (*al-qana'ah*) and social responsibility (*mas'uliyah ijtimaiyyah*), both of which aim to balance individual desires with collective welfare. The Qur'an repeatedly warns against *israf* (extravagance) and *tabdzir* (waste), as stated in QS. Al-A'raf [7]: 31 and QS. Al-Isra' [17]: 26–27, affirming that "He does not like the extravagant" and labeling wasteful people as "brothers of the devils."<sup>54</sup> This ethical directive highlights the spiritual consequence of uncontrolled consumption.

The principle of tauhid functions as the central theological axis in guiding consumption and self-expression. As a holistic worldview, tauhid affirms God's absolute sovereignty, which in turn restrains the ego's desire for domination and exhibition. Ibn Kathir interprets QS. Al-Hadid [57]: 20 as a metaphorical critique of worldly pride and material attachment, noting that life is "play, amusement, adornment, mutual boasting, and rivalry in wealth and children."<sup>55</sup> Quraish Shihab, in his contextual exegesis, emphasizes that this verse serves as a reminder for believers to avoid making luxury a life purpose, and instead cultivate proportionality in

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<sup>54</sup> Q.S al-A'raf [7]: 31 and Q.S al-Isra' [17]: 26-27. See also Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century; A Contextualist Approach*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 122.

<sup>55</sup> Ibnu Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, vol.4, 311.

worldly engagement.<sup>56</sup> When internalized, tauhid transforms lifestyle into ibadah (worship), making economic and social decisions part of spiritual accountability rather than public display.

The educational function of tauhid thus becomes crucial in confronting flexing culture, especially among urban Muslims who are deeply embedded in digital consumerism. As emphasized by Syamsul Arifin, religious education in urban settings must reframe tauhid not merely as a theological doctrine, but as a transformative ethical consciousness that influences socio-cultural behavior.<sup>57</sup> This involves integrating Qur'anic ethics into digital literacy, family values, and institutional religious instruction. Moreover, social movements such as “hijrah” communities in Indonesia increasingly seek to reclaim spiritual depth by emphasizing zuhd, ethical consumption, and collective piety.<sup>58</sup>

Ultimately, the Qur'an does not reject beauty or wealth, but offers a calibrated framework for their use. As argued by Fazlur Rahman, the Qur'an allows material enjoyment but demands its integration within the ethical and spiritual goals of Islam. A Qur'anic reinterpretation of lifestyle therefore calls for a shift from possession-centered identity to value-centered dignity, where faith regulates fashion, consumption, and self-presentation.

## Conclusion

The phenomenon of flexing culture, as observed in contemporary digital and consumerist lifestyles, stands in tension with the Qur'anic principle of tauhid when it fosters *riya'* (ostentation), *israf* (extravagance), and the construction of false

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<sup>56</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, vol. 13, 380

<sup>57</sup> Syamsul Arifin, “Urban Muslims and the Ethics of Tauhid; Rethinking Islamic Education in the age of Consumeris”, *Jurnal al-Jami'ah*, 56 No. 2, 305-328.

<sup>58</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, “The Making of Public Islam; Piety, Agency, and Commodification on the Landscape of the Indonesian Public Sphere”, *Contemporary Islam*, 3 no. 3, 2009, 229-250.

identities centered on material display. Such practices not only divert individuals from sincere servitude to God but also erode the ethical and spiritual foundations of Muslim life.

In contrast, the Qur'an promotes a lifestyle rooted in simplicity, humility, and accountability. Through the lens of tauhid, consumption and self-expression are not rejected but are regulated by divine consciousness and moral intention. This worldview offers a corrective framework to counter the excesses of performative consumerism by anchoring personal and social life in spiritual authenticity.

Practically, this necessitates the cultivation of tauhidic awareness in all aspects of life, particularly within digital culture and urban Muslim communities. Embedding the values of moderation, gratitude, and ethical restraint in education, media, and family structures can serve as a transformative response to the flexing mentality. Ultimately, living by the principles of the Qur'an means embracing a lifestyle where dignity is not measured by wealth, but by faith, purpose, and inner integrity.

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