



Visualizing Personal Branding: A Multimodal Analysis of 'Flexing' in Instagram

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Abstract

This study delves into the dynamic phenomenon of "flexing" in personal branding, focusing on online store owners and their strategic utilization of this behaviour on Instagram. This study employs qualitative research methods to analyze the multimodal elements that constitute "flexing" and its implications within online store owners. Findings reveal that "flexing" is not merely an exhibition of wealth but a powerful tool wielded by online store owners to strengthen their personal branding efforts. This strategic use of "flexing" has the potential to increase brand recognition, customer engagement, and sales. The study not only contributes to the understanding of this aspect of online entrepreneurship but also underscores the importance of multimodal analysis in deciphering the complexities of digital personal branding. These findings will inspire further exploration in this field and encourage online entrepreneurs to harness "flexing" for enhancing their online presence and business prosperity.

Keywords: *Flexing, Instagram, Multimodal Analysis, Online Store, Personal Branding*

Introduction

In the dynamic world of social media, fascinating and complex phenomenon has taken center stage, namely "flexing." This term born in urban communities, involves flaunting one's material goods, achievements, and way of life on digital platforms. It's like an art form of showing off one's accomplishments and possessions to a broad, often global, audience. Rhenald Kasali (2022), a lecturer and the founder of Rumah Perubahan, defines "flexing" as the act of showcasing extravagance. This term is often used to describe individuals who frequently flaunt their wealth. The phenomenon of flexing has become increasingly prevalent with the advent of social media, where people compete on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Youtube, and others to display their possessions and affluence (Suryasumirat, 2022) "Flexing" on social media platforms represents more than just an exhibition of opulence; it is a highly performative act. "Flexing" is when someone showcases what they possess on social media. Subsequently, this action is undertaken to gain recognition from others (Rifda, 2022). In this narrative, not only do they display their possessions and achievements, but they also depict an aspirational lifestyle. Darmalaksana (2022) contributes to this understanding by noting that "flexing" typically involves showcasing items such as luxury possessions, exotic vacations, private jets, substantial bank account balances, and other opulent belongings. This display usually demonstrates one's social position and status, showcases their capabilities, and creates an impression on others. Such portrayals evoke emotions and convey a sense of identity underpinned by the desire for recognition, status, and influence (Darmalaksana, 2022).

As researchers (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) mentioned, "In an age of micro-celebrity, ordinary people feel a compulsion to 'perform' their own lives for others." The practice of "flexing" aligns with this compulsion, where individuals craft an online presence that reflects their personal brand. This convergence of "flexing" and personal branding raises intriguing questions about the strategies employed in visualizing one's identity on social media platforms.

In this context, a specific group of people, namely online store owners, has adeptly harnessed the potential of "flexing." These entrepreneurs have resourcefully employed "flexing" as a potent tool for visualizing their personal branding. Through a strategic combination of visuals, narratives, and online engagement, they transform their online shops into more than just commercial endeavours; they metamorphose them into platforms for storytelling and personal branding. Experts such as (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009) emphasize the significance of personal branding in e-commerce, stating that "online retailers must now also be storytellers." For online shop owners, "flexing" represents a form of storytelling that extends beyond their products. It is a narrative that showcases not only what they sell but also who they are, their values, and their unique identity within the competitive digital market.

Personal branding is conveying an individual's skills, personality, and character, each with unique qualities, to subsequently form an identity (Agustinna

et al., 2017). Personal branding originates from the English language, where "personal" pertains to one's individuality, and "branding" is derived from the English term meaning the formation of a brand or trademark. Consequently, Personal Branding can be defined as the activities undertaken by an individual to establish a personal brand (Yusanda et al., 2021). In the business world, a brand is understood as the perception or emotions of potential buyers formed through various experiences with the product. Personal branding involves deliberately shaping and impacting how the general public perceives an individual. This is achieved by positioning the individual as an expert in a specific field or by setting them apart from others to enhance. In the case of online shop owners, "flexing" becomes a tool that enables them to convey their skills, personality, character, and unique qualities, ultimately forming compelling and memorable personal branding. A multimodal analysis emerges as an invaluable approach to grasp the nuances of "flexing" within the context of online shop owners and personal branding. This methodology transcends the constraints of textual analysis to encompass visuals, color schemes, symbols, and the strategic use of language. It dives deep into the ways in which these diverse elements interact to construct meaning, evoke emotions, and shape audience perceptions.

As stated by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), "In a multimodal context, meaning emerges from the fusion of diverse semiotic tools." They argue that visual and verbal modes are not separate but interconnected in complex ways to convey meaning effectively. Their approach of multimodal analysis involves systematically analyzing the choices made in the design of multimodal texts. This includes examining how choices in layout, color, and typography and image composition affect the overall meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

In the context of this research of "flexing" and personal branding, a multimodal analysis would involve examining not only the textual content but also visuals, layout, and other design elements used by online store owners in their social media posts. It would aim to uncover how these diverse semiotic tools work together to construct narratives, convey identity, and evoke specific responses from the audience. Multimodal analysis delves into the complex landscape of "flexing," revealing how online store owners skillfully harmonize both visual and written elements to craft their personal branding narratives within the digital media platforms.

Several studies have explored the phenomenon of flexing on social media platforms and its relationship with personal branding. Agustina's study in 2017 emphasized the significance of personal branding as a means to enhance an individual's market value. It highlighted that personal branding often evolves indirectly from an individual's profession and skills. Additionally, it introduced the Instagram account of a selebgram namely "Zahratuljannah" as a consistent and successful example of personal branding on Instagram. Yusanda et al. (2021) conducted research focusing on personal branding strategies employed by university students through Instagram. Their study shed light on the behaviors of

students when using Instagram for personal branding, such as clothing selection, showcasing achievements, and crafting motivational captions. Khayati et al. (2022) applied structural functionalism theory to analyze the phenomenon of flexing on social media. Their study emphasized how flexing has transformed into a cultural spectacle across different social classes, primarily emphasizing the flaunting of wealth and luxury. Nurhayat & Noorrizki (2022) explored the connection between flexing behavior on social media and self-esteem. Their research discussed how individuals with high self-esteem may exhibit narcissistic tendencies, which can lead to flexing behavior. Pohan et al. (2023) investigated how flexing on social media can boost popularity and shape self-image as a lifestyle. They suggested that the flexing phenomenon should be avoided due to its negative impact.

Another study by Darmalaksana's in (2022) delved into flexing phenomenon from the perspective of Islamic ethics and social media ethics based on hadith themes. This research concluded that flexing is incongruent with Islamic morals and social media ethics, emphasizing its negative impact. In line with study of Darmalaksana, Mustamin (2022) provided insights into flexing behavior on social media and its economic implications from an Islamic economic perspective. This research suggested that flexing could lead to excessive consumption and a deviation from Islamic ethical standards.

While existing research has delved into the realm of flexing, several notable gaps remain in the literature, particularly concerning online store owners and their engagement in flexing as a means to enhance their personal branding. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the behavior of individuals or celebrities, without addressing the different strategies and motivations of online store owners. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how online store owners utilize flexing as a personal branding strategy.

Furthermore, the research to date has primarily examined the textual aspects of flexing, leaving unexplored the visual and design elements that are integral to flexing posts. The application of multimodal analysis in this context is thus a critical avenue for uncovering the nuanced visual storytelling strategies employed by online store owners.

Additionally, while some studies have touched upon the potential negative aspects of flexing, such as excessive consumption, ethical incongruence, or the potential impact on self-esteem, a notable gap exists in assessing the effectiveness of flexing as a branding strategy, particularly for online store owners. Do these strategies lead to increased brand recognition, customer engagement, or sales? This is an essential aspect to explore. This study seeks to bridge this gap and provide insights into the outcomes of flexing practices for online store owners.

Addressing these gaps is imperative for a holistic understanding of how online store owners harness flexing as a powerful tool for personal branding in the digital age. This study endeavors to contribute valuable insights into the strategies and implications of flexing within the context of online entrepreneurship, shedding

light on the multimodal aspects that underpin this captivating phenomenon.

Method

This research adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, drawing from Krippendorff's (2004) content analysis theory. According to him, content analysis is research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within textual, visual, or other forms of communication. It involves the systematic examination of the content and structure of a communication, primarily to identify and quantify various aspects within it.

The study was conducted virtually on Instagram from August to October 2023, as Instagram is the platform where flexing initially emerged and continues to be widely practiced. Data sources were drawn from posts containing elements of "flexing" on the Instagram accounts of 3 (three) online store owners. The selection criteria for these informants consist of two main factors: first, they were active Instagram users who engaged in flexing on their accounts, and second, they were online store owners with substantial followings exceeding 500,000 followers. Most of these online stores specialize in selling viral skincare and fashion products highly favored by customers.

Data were gathered through a combination of observation and content analysis. Observations encompassed various aspects of informants' Instagram activities, including the types of posts, posting frequency, accompanying captions, and symbols or signs within each photo or video post. This involved visiting their profiles, exploring Instagram features such as stories, feeds, reels, and live streaming. Additionally, responses from Instagram followers, such as likes and comments on the informants' posts, were also observed.

The content analysis process began with the collection of data, where relevant posts and captions were systematically collected and organized. These data were subjected to systemic coding, where key themes, words, and visual elements related to "flexing" were identified.

In addition to content analysis, multimodal analysis, drawing from Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal theory, was employed to delve into the visual and design elements by online store owners in their flexing posts. Kress and van Leeuwen's theory emphasizes the integration of various semiotic resources to understand meaning in multimodal texts. This multimodal theory involves three critical systems of analysis: the Representational System, which delves into the interplay between visual and verbal elements to convey meaning, as observed in social media where images and captions work together to represent ideas or products; the Interactive System, concerned with how the audience engages with the content, encompassing likes, shares, comments, and user-generated content, including polls and quizzes; and the Composition System, which analyzes how elements are spatially arranged within the text, such as the placement of images, text, and emojis to create a visually coherent message. Data were then categorized according to these themes. Finally, interpretations of the findings were conducted before drawing conclusions.

"Online store owners often employ flexing" behaviour as a strategy for personal branding within their businesses. This study shows that the phenomenon of "flexing" is intricately intertwined with the personal branding strategies employed by online store owners. The behaviour of "flexing," which some consider a negative trait, as indicated in studies by Darmalaksana (2022), Pohan (2023), and Adinda (2023), is portrayed quite differently by online store owners. The "flexing" behavior exhibited by these online store owners is not solely negative; it is, in fact, utilized as a tool or means to shape their personal branding, ultimately boosting productivity and engagement with potential buyers.

Several examples of "flexing" displayed by online store owners in constructing their personal branding can be observed from some of their instagram posts, which are showcase below.

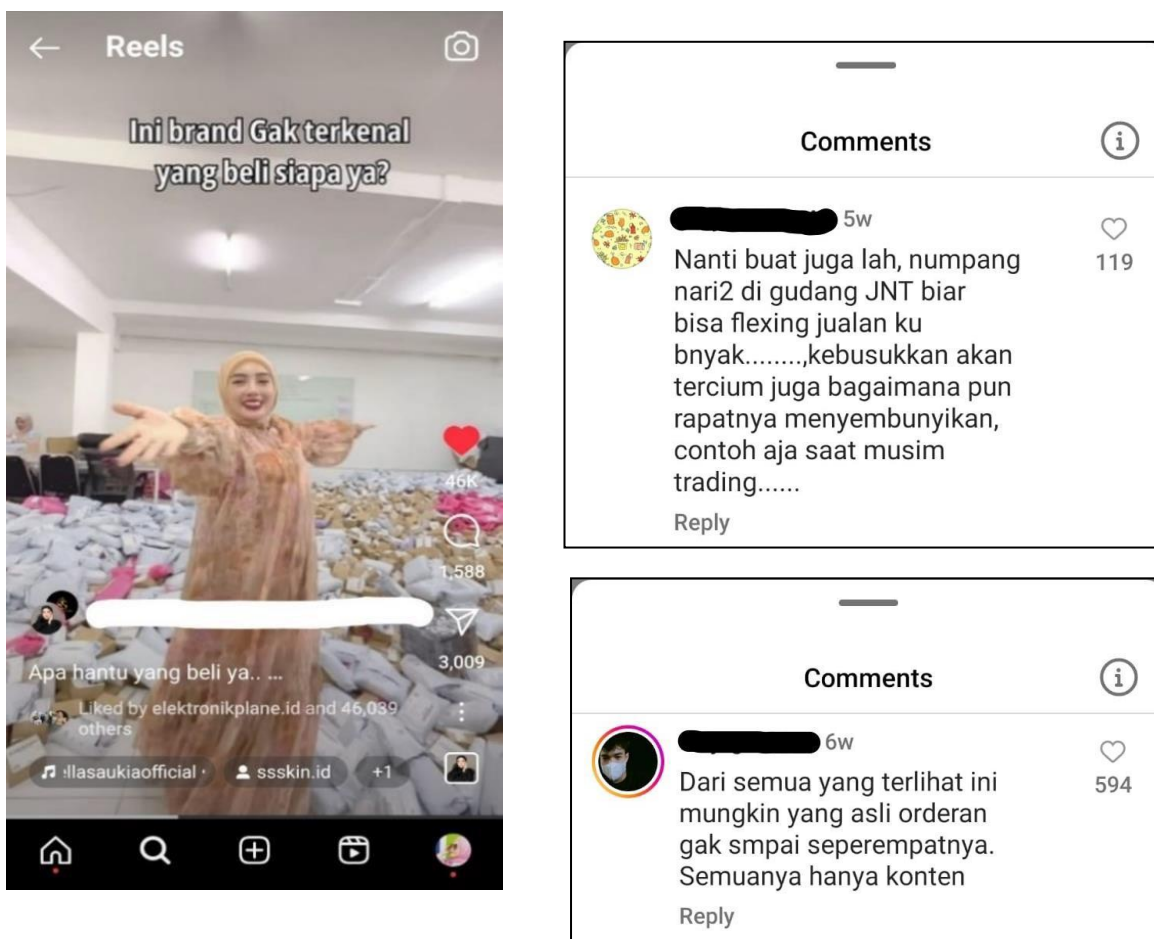


Figure 1. Excerpt 1 of 'Flexing' on Reels of an Online Store Owner
(Source: www.instagram.com/shellasaukiaofficial posted on August 24th, 2023.
Accessed and captured on October 6th, 2023)

In the provided screenshot from a Reels post on Instagram, an online store owner showcases a room filled with packages from her orders. This multimodal analysis, based on Kress and van Lauween's (2006) framework, involves an examination of three components: the representational system, the interactive system, and the compositional function, which will be discussed as follows.

In this Reels post, the representational system effectively combines various elements to convey a compelling message. Visually, the room filled with packages serves as a potent visual metaphor. The abundance of packages occupying the entire room suggests a substantial number of customers have made purchases. This visual overload signifies popularity, demand, and a high level of customer engagement with the brand. It's a powerful way to showcase the brand's success.

The textual elements contribute significantly to engagement of the audience. The text within the Reels video, "*Ini brand gak terkenal yang beli siapa?*" (Is this an unpopular brand? Who bought it?) serves multiple purposes. It sparks curiosity by raising questions about the brand's popularity, challenging common perceptions. The element of intrigue motivates viewers to continue watching, as they seek answers to these questions. Additionally, the text introduces humor into the post, making it more relatable and entertaining for the audience.

The caption, which reads, "*Apa hantu yang beli ya..*" (Who are the ghosts buying this?), extends the playful and humorous tone. This caption adds another layer to the engagement by using humor, prompting viewers to relate to the idea of mysterious "ghosts" making these purchases. It's a witty way to involve the audience and elicit reactions.

The synergy of these visual and textual elements within the representational system effectively delivers the message: the brand, despite being labeled as "unpopular," is, in fact, experiencing high demand and gaining attention. This multimodal approach successfully captures the audience's interest, prompting them to interact with the content. The result is a memorable and engaging Reels post that contributes to the online store owner's personal branding strategy.

The interaction system becomes even more evident when we look at the engagement metrics this Reels post has generated. As of now, the post has garnered 4.6 thousand likes, received 1,588 comments, and been shared 3,099 times. These numbers underscore the effectiveness of the content in encouraging interaction. The high count of like suggests that viewers are not only watching the video but also expressing their appreciation for it.

Moreover, comments play a significant role in the interaction. Within the comment section, a random sampling reveals that followers have indeed engaged with the content by sharing their thoughts. For instances, one comment, "*Dari semua yang terlihat ini mungkin yang asli orderan gak sampai seperempatnya. Semuanya hanya konten.*" (From everything shown, perhaps what's actually ordered didn't even reach a quarter. It's all just content.), reflects a critical viewpoint, demonstrating how the content sparks discussions.

Conversely, another comment, "*Nanti buat juga lah, numpang nari-nari di gudang JNT biar bisa flexing jualan ku banyak...*" (Later, I'll do it too, I'll dance in the JNT warehouse to flex that I have a lot of sales...), illustrates a playful and humorous response. This kind of exchange not only demonstrates the interactive nature of the post but also how it invites a range of reactions from the audience.

The back sound music, featuring lively and upbeat DJ music, further amplifies the interactive aspect. It sets an energetic and cheerful mood that complements the content's playful and humorous tone. This musical choice can be motivating and might prompt viewers to interact by liking, commenting, or sharing the post, aligning with the desired goals of personal branding, brand engagement, and product promotion.

The compositional function in this Reels post plays a pivotal role in conveying its intended messages and engaging the audience. The spatial arrangement and organization of visual, textual, and action elements within the post are carefully set to construct a coherent and persuasive narrative.

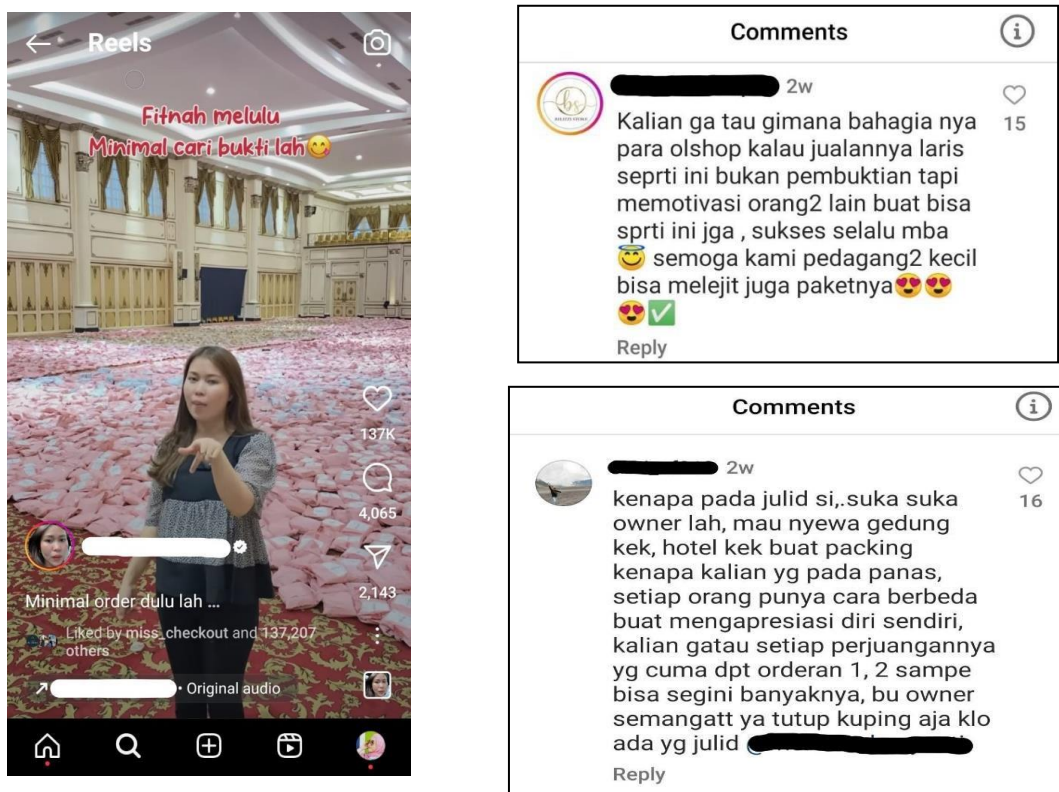
Visually, the primary element is the room filled with packages. This arrangement symbolizes a high volume of customer orders, creating a visual spectacle of popularity and demand for the brand's products. It's strategically positioned at the centre of the frame, making it the focal point of the composition. This placement ensures that viewers' attention is immediately drawn to the central message: the brand's products are highly sought after.

The text components, both within the video and caption, are well-placed to complement the visual content. The text in the video appears at the top, and it effectively introduces the central question: "*Ini brand gak terkenal yang beli siapa?*" (Is this an unpopular brand? Who bought it?). By positioning it at the top, it's the first thing viewers see, sparking their curiosity. The humorous and somewhat enigmatic nature of this text encourages the audience to continue watching and seek an answer.

In addition to spatial placement, the owner's actions, which involve showcasing the room filled with packages, align with the visual composition. This action substantiates the visual message by showing that the packages are actual and not a staged setup. The deliberate choice to physically engage with the packages reinforces the credibility of the message and supports the overall narrative's authenticity.

Overall, this Instagram Reels post effectively utilizes a combination of visual, textual, and audio elements to represent the online store owner's surprise and excitement about the high number of orders received. The interaction system invites viewer engagement through playful questions, and the compositional function conveys a narrative of unexpected success, enhanced by the dynamic music. The post aims to entertain, surprise, and potentially elicit responses and discussions from the audience, thus contributing to the online store's brand and social media presence.

Figure 2. Excerpt 2 of 'Flexing' on Reels of an Online Store Owner



(Source: www.instagram.com/melvhinahusyanti posted on September 22th, 2023. Accessed and captured on October 6th, 2023)

In this 2nd Reels post figure, a rich interplay of visual, textual, and audio elements within the **representational system** effectively conveys a compelling narrative. Visually, the deliberate staging of numerous packages within the grand

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Visualizing Personal Branding: A Multimodal Analysis of 'Flexing' in Instagram wedding hall in City X speaks to the brand's immense popularity and success. The grandeur of the setting emphasizes the scale of customer orders, turning the scene into a visual spectacle. The owner's actions, especially the gesturing toward the audience, play a critical role in creating a connection with the viewers. This gesture invites viewers to be part of the narrative and adds a personal touch to the flexing content.

The textual elements further enhance the narrative. The text within the Reels video, "*Fitnah melulu Minimal cari bukti lah*" (Stop spreading rumours, at least find some evidence), acts as a statement of assertion. This text hints at the brand's journey, possibly addressing any scepticism or rumours surrounding its success. By placing this text in the video, it becomes an integral part of the visual narrative. The caption, "*Minimal order dulu lah...*" (At least place an order first...), holds a playful and inviting tone, urging viewers to engage with the brand. It serves as a call to action while maintaining a light-hearted atmosphere.

The **compositional function** here excels in visually organizing the elements to present a captivating story. The spatial arrangement of the packages in the grand wedding hall underscores the brand's remarkable success. The text elements are well-placed to blend seamlessly with the visual content, ensuring that they don't overwhelm the overall composition. The gesturing action of the owner, directed toward the audience, reinforces the personal connection and provides a focal point for viewers to engage with.

Simultaneously, **the interaction system** surrounding this Reels post has been highly engaging, as evidenced by the post's substantial metrics, including 137,000 likes, 4,065 comments, and 2,143 shares. Comments from viewers encompass a broad spectrum of responses, from supportive and motivational messages to constructive defences of the owner's actions. For example, one positive comment reflects support and motivation: "*Kalian ga tau gimana bahagianya para olshop kalau jualannya laris seperti ini bukan pembuktian tapi memotivasi orang-orang lain buat bisa seperti ini juga, sukses selalu mba, semoga kami pedagang-pedagang kecil bisa melejit juga pakatnya*" (English: "You don't know how happy online shop owners are when their products sell like this. It's not about proving but motivating others to achieve the same. Success always, sister. Hopefully, we small-scale merchants can also have such success with our packages.")

Furthermore, another comment that initially appeared to have a negative tone, where the owner's actions were questioned, actually received a constructive

response. The comment reads, "*Kenapa pada julid si, suka suka owner lah, mau nyewa gedung kek, hotel kek buat packing kenapa kalian yang pada panas, setiap orang punya cara berbeda buat mengapresiasi diri sendiri, kalian gatau setiap perjuangannya yang cuma dapat orderan 1,2 sampe bisa segini banyaknya, bu owner semangat ya tutup kuping aja kalo ada yang julid*" (English: "Why are you all so critical? It's the owner's choice whether to rent a building or a hotel for packing. Why are you all getting heated up? Everyone has a different way of self-appreciation. You don't know their struggle, starting with just 1 or 2 orders until it became this much. Owner, stay motivated, ignore the negativity.")

This comment, upon closer examination, turns out to be a supportive and empathetic response to those questioning the owner's actions. It defends the owner's choices and underscores the diversity of approaches to self-appreciation and success. In this context, the comment serves as a positive contribution to the interaction system, reinforcing the narrative's theme of motivation and resilience. It demonstrates the nuances of viewer engagement and highlights how comments, even if they initially seem critical, can lead to constructive and supportive discussions.

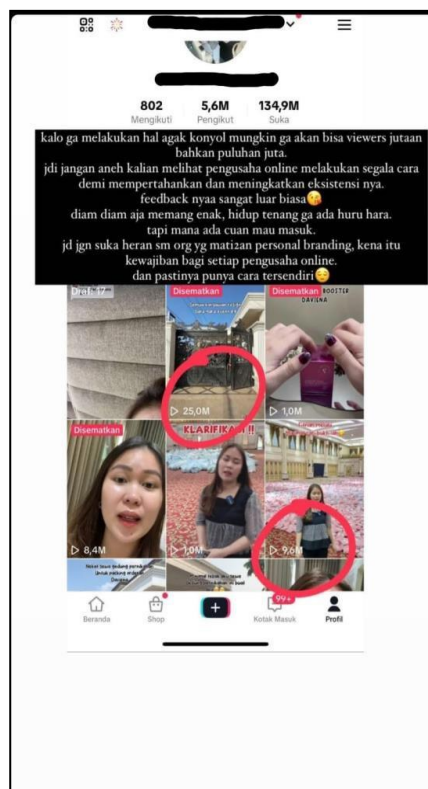


Figure 3. Excerpt 3 of 'Flexing' on Instagram Story of an Online Store Owner (Source: www.instagram.com/melvhinahusyanti posted on September 24th, 2023. Accessed and captured on September 24th, 2023)

Figure 3 is taken from a screenshot of Instagram stories of online store owners. In this story post, an online store owner showcases their TikTok account, which boasts a significant following of 5.6 million users and an impressive 134.9 million likes. The post incorporates two of the three primary elements: video and text, making it suitable for analysis within Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal framework, which includes the representational system, interaction system, and compositional function components.

The **representational system** within this post conveys a message about the online store owner's journey and approach. Visually, the video features the owner presenting their TikTok account, highlighting their remarkable metrics in terms of followers and likes. The absence of audio in the video directs the viewer's attention to the accompanying text, which plays a pivotal role in articulating the owner's perspective. The text states, "If you don't do something unconventional, you may not attract millions or even tens of millions of viewers. So, do not be surprised when you see online entrepreneurs employing various strategies to maintain and enhance their online presence. The feedback is extraordinary. While a quiet and peaceful life is pleasant, it does not lead to profits. Therefore, it is no wonder that individuals are tirelessly working on their personal branding, as it is a necessity for every online entrepreneur, and, of course, they have their own methods.

The text provides commentary on the landscape of online entrepreneurship and the pursuit of a significant online following. It suggests that embracing unconventional strategies, even if they might seem somewhat eccentric, is essential for attracting a large viewership. The owner underscores the outstanding feedback they receive and draws a contrast between a serene, tranquil life and the pursuit of financial success. They also emphasize the importance of personal branding in the online business world. The absence of audio focuses attention on the text as the primary means of conveying this message.

The **interaction system** within this post, while not as evident as in a comment-based post, is still present. The mentioned metrics (5.6 million followers and 134.9 million likes) serve as indicators of audience engagement and appreciation. The text in the post appears to address viewers, providing them with insights into the owner's approach to online entrepreneurship. The post has the potential to spark engagement by initiating discussions on strategies for building a successful online presence.

In summary, this story post combines video and text to communicate the owner's perspective on achieving a substantial online presence as an entrepreneur.

The absence of audio directs attention to the textual component, allowing the owner's message to take centre stage. The post offers viewers an opportunity to reflect on the strategies employed by online entrepreneurs and the significance of personal branding, ultimately serving as a form of engagement and education within the online business community.

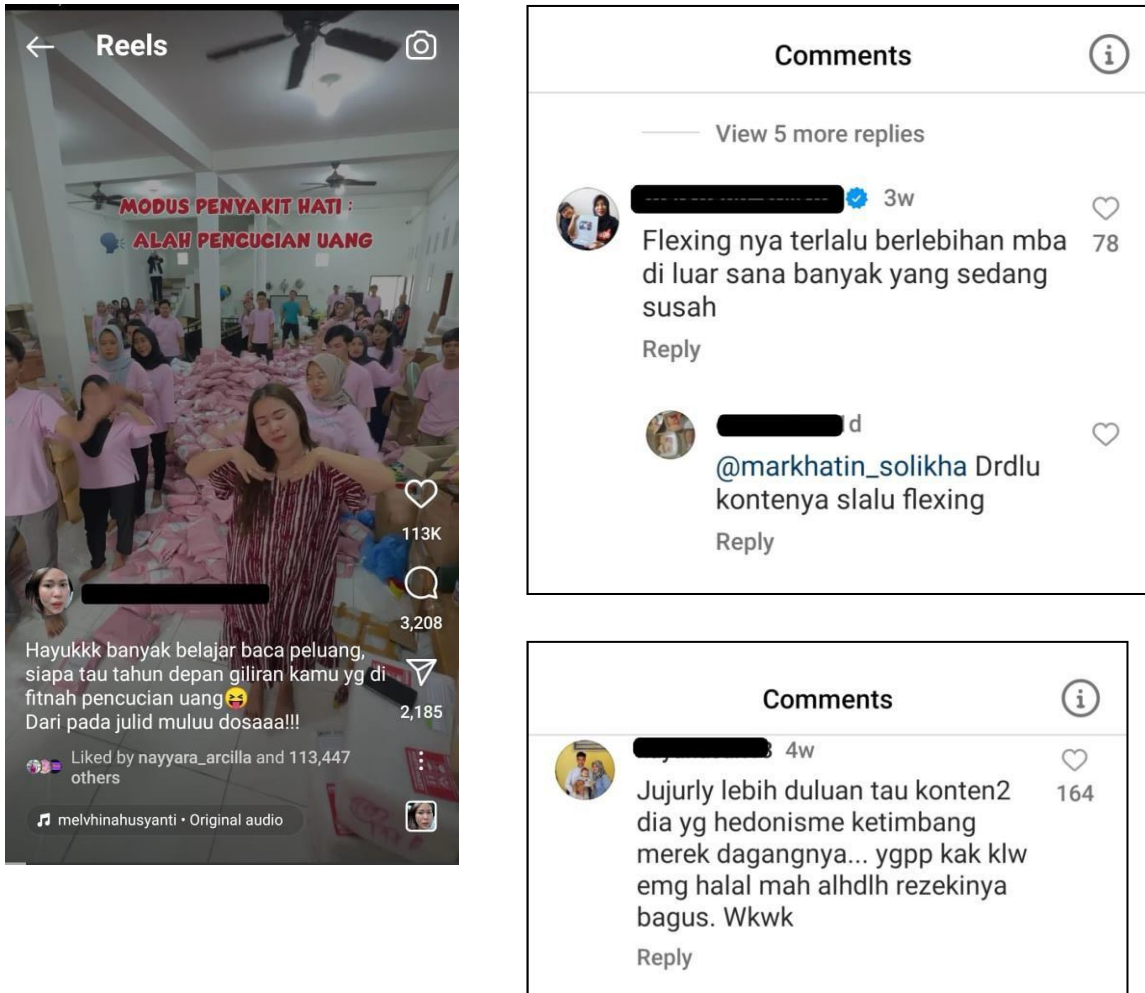


Figure 4. Excerpt 4 of 'Flexing' on Instagram Story of an Online Store Owner (Source: www.instagram.com/melvhinahusyanti posted on August 19th, 2023. Accessed and captured on October 6th, 2023)

In this Reels post, the **representational system** combines various elements to craft a rich and nuanced narrative. The visual component, showcasing a room overflowing with packages and featuring the owner and the packing team, serves as a visual metaphor for the brand's extraordinary success and the high volume of customer orders. The abundance of packages symbolizes the brand's prosperity and underscores the strong demand for its products. It is a powerful visual statement that conveys the brand's popularity and accomplishments.

The textual elements within the Reels video are particularly intriguing. The phrase "*Modus Penyakit Hati: Alah Pencucian Uang*" (The Malady of the Heart: Money Laundering Ailment) adds an element of irony and commentary. It suggests that the allegations of money laundering against the owner are, in fact, a misunderstanding of their genuine success. This text layer introduces depth to the narrative, encouraging viewers to contemplate the implications of such allegations and the motivations behind them. It also engages with the ongoing discourse surrounding the brand, making it an active participant in the conversation.

Furthermore, the caption, "*Hayuk banyak belajar membaca peluang, siapa tau tahun depan giliran kamu yang difitnah pencucian uang (emoticon mengejek). Daripada julid mulu dosaaa!!!*" (Come on, learn to spot opportunities. Who knows, next year it might be you who is accused of money laundering (mocking emoticon). Instead of constantly gossiping, accumulate evil deeds!!!), adds a layer of satire and commentary. This caption encourages viewers to shift their focus from baseless gossip to self-improvement and personal development. The use of humour in the form of a mocking emoticon lightens the tone, making it playful and engaging.

The **interaction system** is a crucial driver of the success of this post, as evidenced by its substantial engagement metrics. With approximately 113 thousand likes, 3.208 comments, and 2.185 shares, it has generated a high level of viewer interaction and response. The comments from viewers provide insights into the diverse range of responses the post has triggered.

One of the commenters takes a critical stance, expressing a negative sentiment by stating, "*Flexing nya terlalu berlebihan mba di luar sana banyak yang sedang susah*" (The flexing is excessive, ma'am, there are many people out there who are struggling). This comment reflects a common critique often associated with flexing, where viewers perceive it as excessive or inconsiderate, especially when others are facing financial challenges. It is an example of how the content has sparked discussions and debates. On the other hand, another comment adopts a more light-hearted and humorous tone: "*Daridulu kontennya selalu flexing.*" (Your content has always been about flexing). This comment might suggest that the owner has a consistent style and theme in their content, and the audience is familiar with this approach. It could also indicate a level of acceptance or even amusement regarding the flexing.

A third comment adds an interesting dimension to the discussion: "*Jujurly lebih duluan tau konten2 dia yang hedonisme ketimbang merek dagangannya... ygpp kak klw emg halal mah alhamdulillah rezekinya bagus. Wkwk*" (Honestly, I knew about her hedonistic content long before her brand... It's all good if it's halal, her

earnings are a blessing. Haha). This comment highlights that the owner's personal content, characterized by elements like hedonism and flexing, is more recognized by the viewer than the brand itself. It suggests that the owner's personal branding and content style play a significant role in how the audience perceives both the content and the brand.

The high level of engagement and the diverse range of comments demonstrate the effectiveness of the interaction system in this Reels post. It has ignited discussions, critiques, and even humorous responses, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of flexing content. This engagement is a testament to the post's impact in driving conversations and interactions among the audience.

Within the **compositional function**, the elements are meticulously arranged to deliver a compelling narrative. The spatial arrangement of packages and the celebratory dance by the owner and the packing team effectively communicate the brand's extraordinary success. The textual elements are strategically placed within the video and caption, ensuring they complement and enhance the visual content. The gestures and dance in the video act as focal points, guiding viewers' attention and engagement.

This Reels post adeptly employs multimodal elements to construct a narrative that communicates the brand's prosperity, engages with ongoing discussions, and maintains a playful and satirical tone. The careful placement of visual, textual, and gestural elements within the representational system, coupled with the interactive responses from the audience, underscores the effectiveness of this flexing strategy.



Figure 5. Excerpt 5 of 'Flexing' on Instagram Story of an Online Store Owner
(Source: www.instagram.com/ownerkedasbeauty posted on August 15th, 2023.
Accessed and captured on October 12th, 2023)

In this Reels post, an online store owner presents a visually striking scene with packages stacked from floor to ceiling in a spacious room. Accompanied by a team member, the owner gestures and appears to explain something to the audience while the team member attentively observes. The post incorporates three fundamental elements: video, audio, and text, making it suitable for analysis using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal framework, which encompasses the representational, interaction system, and compositional function components.

The **representational system** within this post effectively conveys a narrative about the owner's impressive success and the substantial customer demand. Visually, the video displays the owner surrounded by a vast array of packages, symbolizing a high volume of orders. The meticulously stacked packages reaching the ceiling create a sense of grandeur and abundance, emphasizing the brand's popularity. The dynamic interaction between the owner's gestural expression and the attentive team member suggests a collaborative approach to managing the business. The absence of audio content places the visuals at the

forefront of representation.

The **textual elements** introduce an interactive dimension through a comment from a netizen within the video. The netizen's comment, "*apa hanya di desaku yang gak ada pakek produknya kak Can*" (English: "Is it only in my village that no one uses Kak Can's products?"), reflects the engagement of the audience and sparks a potential dialogue. Additionally, the caption, "*Di kota mana aja yang belum ada kedas beauty nih?*" (English: "In which city is there still no Kedas Beauty?"), encourages interaction by prompting viewers to consider the presence of the owner's brand in different locations.

The **interaction system** is marked by engagement from viewers. The comment from the netizen signifies a response to the content, expressing curiosity and surprise about the popularity of the owner's products. This comment initiates an interactive element by engaging in a potential dialogue with the owner, opening the door for further interactions, responses, and discussions. The overall engagement, including 3,262 likes, 333 comments, and 40 shares, underscores the content's effectiveness in involving the audience.

Moreover, randomly selected comments from viewers, such as "*Di Aceh blom perna denger kk.. Msih asing,*" "*Banten juga belum ada ka candra,*" and "*Sumatera utara blom ada,*" further illustrate the engagement. These comments appear to be relatively neutral, reflecting a degree of unfamiliarity or lack of awareness regarding the owner's brand in specific regions. While not strongly positive or negative, they contribute to viewer participation and information-sharing within the online community.

In summary, this Reels post demonstrates a dynamic and multifaceted interaction system, including likes, comments, shares, and audience comments. The netizen's comment initiates engagement and prompts questions, while other comments from viewers convey their experiences and knowledge about the brand's presence in different areas. This collective engagement enhances the post's ability to connect with the audience, foster discussions, and solidify the owner's online presence and brand awareness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has delved into the intriguing phenomenon of "flexing" as employed by online store owners in the realm of personal branding.

The research illuminated that the perceptions of "flexing" are not one-sided, as the behavior, typically viewed negatively in some studies, takes on a distinct role in the hands of online store owners. Rather than merely showcasing obvious consumption, these individuals employ "flexing" as a strategic tool to boost productivity, enhance engagement with potential customers, and shape their personal brands. The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of "flexing" within the context of online entrepreneurship, highlighting its potential as a valuable marketing tool for brand recognition, customer trust, and loyalty. Additionally, this research contributes to multimodal analysis, emphasizing the significance of visual and design elements in personal branding strategies. However, the study's limitations, such as a small sample size and a focus on a single platform, should be considered, and future research should encompass a broader range of online platforms and a larger sample size for a more comprehensive understanding.

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