

About Things that Can Never Be Fully Yours: A Preliminary Experiment on Flexing

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ABSTRACT

The practice of showing off (“*flexing*”) gradually becomes a daily rite across social media platforms. The current state in Indonesia has even escalated to nationwide issues. We tested the impact of materialistic display on Instagram from the perspective of the audiences using within-subject experimental design. Participants ($n=30$ undergraduates; 50% females; M age= 20.967, $SD=1.067$) were presented with (i) 3 photos of conspicuous consumption, (ii) 3 photos of conspicuous leisure, and (iii) 3 neutral photos. They then rated the extent to which each photo evoked materialistic aspirations in the domains of wealth, popularity, image, power, and social adherence. A 2 (participant’s sex) by 3 (type of situational materialism stimulus) mixed analysis ANOVA revealed that participants’ materialistic aspirations after receiving flexing photos were higher than after exposure to neutral photos ($F(2,27)=17.431, p<.001$). These impacts were consistent for female participants with regards to both consumptive and leisure photos ($ps<.01$), however male participants did not rate leisure vs. neutral photos differently ($p>.072$). Although our finding should be considered as preliminary, it highlights that brief exposure to materialistic photos on Instagram can be more contagious among females.

Keywords: conspicuous consumption; conspicuous leisure; flexing; materialistic aspiration, Instagram.

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of showing off (“*flexing*”) gradually becomes a daily rite across social media platforms. The current state in Indonesia has even escalated to nationwide issues ranging from the victims being fooled by fraudulent investments (Nurmilla, 2022) to the investigations of corruption cases (<https://www.kpk.go.id/id/berita/siaran-pers>). In this study, we examine whether the materialistic aspiration of audiences could be affected by materialistic display of unknown Instagram user.

Veblen (1899) proposed two kinds of considerations: (i) conspicuous consumption, i.e., the act of purchasing goods or services to publicly display wealth rather than to cover basic needs, and (ii) conspicuous leisure, i.e., behaviours and activities to provide tangible evidence of status. Both are conventionally considered equal in displaying materialism as a system of personal value system of ownership and social image (Bauer, 2012).

Materialistic aspiration is also known as an orientation towards extrinsic life goals (Bauer et al., 2012; Sheldon & McGregor, 2000). In addition to financial success, popularity and image are the most common materialistic aspirations (Grouzet et al., 2005; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996, 2001). Financial success means to be prosperous and materially successful, popularity is to be famous and very much admired, while image is to be physically attractive and appealing. Martela et al. (2019) recently suggest that materialistic aspiration should also include power and social adherence. Power is the domination and control over others, social adherence is both a defensive and extrinsic aspiration to be deemed fit in a particular social environment.

By knowing the impact of materialistic display on Instagram, adaptive preventive actions can be taken. Additionally, we explore the potential sex differences with regards to this impact, as past

studies typically found that females are higher in materialism particularly in conspicuous consumption (e.g., Segal & Podoshen, 2018).

METHOD

Equal number of undergraduate female and male Instagram users in Indonesia were recruited using convenient sampling to participate in a preliminary experiment on various Instagram's posts. Participants signed consent, completed demographic information, observed a series of situational materialism stimuli, and responded to self-reported measure of materialistic aspiration using Survey Monkey. Each participant was debriefed and given IDR 50,000 purchase credit at the end of the experiment.

Table 1.
Situational materialism stimuli

No	Code	Original link/ IAPS number	<u>a</u>	<u>Mean</u>
			<u>Cronbach</u>	
1.	FK01	https://unsplash.com/photos/-IAYGnq377g	.912	.557
2.	FK02	https://media.matamata.com/thumbs/2022/12/05/69396-potret-syahrini-asyik-belanja-berlian-instagramatprincessyahrini/745x489-img-69396-potret-syahrini-asyik-belanja-berlian-instagramatprincessyahrini.jpg	.947	.426
3.	FK03	https://unsplash.com/photos/z1NF4f5wMLk	.949	.406
4.	FW01	https://pin.it/6IxmyIL	.925	.525
5.	FW02	https://unsplash.com/photos/vGREyBvIX-o	.954	.342
6.	FW03	https://unsplash.com/photos/ZE4_jerPnJM	.937	.368
7.	FN01	2104	.960	.146
8.	FN02	2440	.947	.155
9.	FN03	2038	.935	.213
10.	MK01	https://unsplash.com/photos/f8vEFZ7yPuY	.932	.310
11.	MK02	https://unsplash.com/photos/RPTU8RSWzZ4	.919	.525
12.	MK03	https://www.pinterest.com.mx/pin/122793527332228953/	.923	.519
13.	MW01	https://unsplash.com/photos/pFzMVN24gCg	.911	.438
14.	MW02	https://unsplash.com/photos/9GFyyS-Rl2M	.946	.261
15.	MW03	https://unsplash.com/photos/6gigeq8KiNw	.917	.354
16.	MN01	2214	.972	.345
17.	MN02	2102	.963	.238
18.	MN03	2215	.960	.191

Note. F = female; M = male; K = conspicuous consumption; W = conspicuous leisure; N = neutral; IAPS = International Affective Picture System (Lang et al., 2008)

We employed a within-subject experimental design. The situational materialism stimuli were constructed by selecting a number of photos from free photo collection sites and the International Affective Picture System (IAPS: Lang et al., 2008) neutral photo category. The final stimuli consisted of (i) 3 photos of conspicuous consumption, (ii) 3 photos of conspicuous leisure, and (iii) 3 neutral



photos. All photos involved a central figure of the same sex as the target participant, and were modified according to the typical format and size of the photos on the Instagram Feed. The internal reliabilities of situational materialism stimuli and mean scores of materialistic aspiration were presented in Table 1.

After the presentation of each photo, participants selected (yes/no) the extent to which it inspired their materialistic strivings of wealth/financial success (5 items, e.g., “To be financially successful.”), fame/popularity (5 items, e.g., “To be admired by many people.”), and image (5 items, e.g., “To have an image that others find appealing.”). These items were translated from three domains of extrinsic goals in the Aspiration Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996, 2001; Grouzet et al. (2005). Additionally, we included two other domains of materialistic aspiration i.e., power (4 items, e.g., “People will obey me.”) and social adherence (4 items, e.g., “To be included in social circles.”) from Martela et al. (2019). Materialistic aspiration score was calculated by averaging scores from the same category of stimuli (e.g., the average of mean scores of FK01, FK02, and FK03 would create materialistic aspiration score towards conspicuous consumption photos for female participants).

RESULT

Thirty undergraduates (50% females; M age= 20.967, SD = 1.067) participated in this experiment. Since student population is assumed to have homogeneous characteristics with regards to the research variables, we employed no exclusion criteria (Yusainy, 2019). A 2 (participant’s sex) by 3 (type of situational materialism stimulus) mixed analysis ANOVA was performed to compare mean differences in materialistic aspiration (see Table 2). As expected, type of situational materialism stimulus significantly affected participants’ materialistic aspiration ($F(2,27)$ = 17.431, p <.001; see Fig.1).

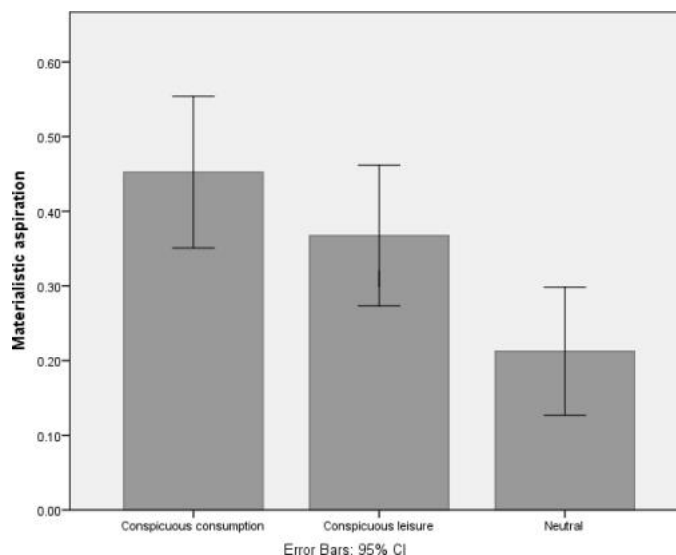


Fig.1. Effect of type of situational materialism stimulus on materialistic aspiration. Error bars indicate standard error of mean. Scale goes up to 1 as a maximum.

Simple contrasts using neutral photos as control condition revealed that participants rated higher materialistic strivings on conspicuous consumption photos (M = 0.452, SD = 0.272) compared to neutral photos (M = 0.213, SD = 0.229; $F(1,28)$ = 30.808, p <.001) and on conspicuous leisure photos (M = 0.367, SD = 0.252) compared to neutral photos ($F(1,28)$ = 27.391, p <.001). No differences were found

between ratings of conspicuous consumption vs. of conspicuous leisure ($F(1,28)= .322, p>.575$). Further, materialistic aspiration was not affected by interaction between type of situational materialism stimulus and participant’s sex ($F(1,28)= 3.322, p>.052$). As can be seen in Table 2, females did not rate differently than males on flexing or neutral photos.

Table 2.
Sex differences on materialistic aspiration based on type of situational materialism stimulus

Situational materialism stimuli	Materialistic aspiration,		<i>t</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>		
	Females (<i>n</i> = 15)	Males (<i>n</i> = 15)	
Conspicuous consumption	0.459 (0.291)	0.446 (0.262)	$t(28)= .459, p>.896$
Conspicuous leisure	0.394 (0.258)	0.341 (0.252)	$t(28)= .007, p>.579$
Neutral	0.162 (0.165)	0.263 (0.276)	$t(22.888)= 8.824, p>.234$

Nevertheless, when we analyzed the effect of type of situational materialism stimulus on materialistic aspiration separately for female and male participants, the findings varied. The overall impacts of type of situational materialism stimulus were consistent for female participants with regards to neutral photos being less inspiring than both consumptive photos ($F(1,14)= 19.025, p<.01$) and leisure photos ($F(1,14)= 28.260, p<.001$) and no differences between conspicuous consumption vs. conspicuous leisure ($F(1,14)= 1.816, p>.199$). For males, however, equal rating was given to conspicuous leisure and neutral photos ($F(1,14)= 11.783, p>.072$), although materialistic strivings on conspicuous consumption photos were still rated higher than neutral photos ($F(1,14)= 11.783, p<.01$).

DISCUSSION

The current experiment was a preliminary study on whether the practice of showing off (“flexing”) on Instagram would affect audience’s materialistic aspiration. In the digital era, information propagation in the form of a network topology allows a chain effect, for example when an issue becomes viral (Yusainy et al., 2017). Our previous study found that exposure to simple complaint quotes on Instagram posted by anonymous sources can be contagious (Yusainy et al., 2023). A similar trend was shown in the current study, in that compared to neutral photos, participants’ materialistic aspirations after receiving flexing photos (i.e., consumptive and leisure photos) were higher. Interestingly, even though Veblen (1899) conceptualization of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure were proposed way before the digital era, we found that exposure to both types of stimuli induced similar level of materialistic aspirations in our participants.

The pattern of results, however, were more consistent for females than for males. Specifically, even though females were no more (or no less) materialistic than males with regards to exposure to materialistic photos on Instagram, they were more affected by both consumptive and leisure photos, whereas male participants did not rate leisure vs. neutral photos differently. It appears that for females, the freedom to “throw away” something that most females don’t have (i.e., wasting goods and services as well as wasting time) is equally rewarding socially, whereas for males the practice of showing of leisure activities does not induce materialistic strivings. This finding stand in stark contrast to the stereotypic views of females being “Cewek Matre” (<https://www.liputan6.com/tag/cewek-matre>), colloquial Indonesian for, “Material Girl”. Nevertheless, it appears that brief exposure to materialistic



photos on Instagram can be more contagious among females.

This experiment was done by asking the same participants to repeatedly rate a series of situational materialism stimuli, thus introducing the possibility of carry-over effect. Future experiments could employ a randomized sequence of photos and randomized between-subjects design to scrutinize the possibility of whether the materialistic stimulus would trigger similar materialistic aspiration of the audience. It is also crucial to measure the audience's materialistic aspiration prior to the exposure of the photos and to increase the number of participants.

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