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A Christian Ethical Review of Flexing Culture and Social Validation on Social Media

Styadi Senjaya
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Kharisma Bandung

ABSTRACT: The rapid advancement of digital technology has fostered a pervasive “flexing” culture and an urgent crisis of social validation among the digital generation. This phenomenon poses significant challenges to ethical integrity as individuals increasingly prioritize curated online personas over their authentic identity. This study employs a qualitative method with a literature research approach to analyze these digital behaviors through the lens of Christian ethics. It synthesizes contemporary sociological trends with biblical principles to provide a theological framework for understanding modern digital motivations. The findings indicate that flexing culture is rooted in “the pride of life,” shifting the basis of identity from a divine gift to a performative achievement. Consequently, this research suggests that the church must promote “kenosis” (humility) and digital stewardship to restore spiritual integrity. This analysis provides essential guidance for navigating the pressures of the digital age with ethical consistency.

KEYWORDS: Christian Ethics, Flexing Culture, Social Validation, Imago Dei, Digital Stewardship.

I. INTRODUCTION

The massive digital transformation that has occurred over the past decade has fundamentally changed the order of human life, especially for Millennials and Generation Z who have lived within the technological ecosystem from an early age.(Reinke, 2023) Social media is no longer just a communication tool, but has become an "existential stage" that heavily dominates how individuals perceive themselves. One phenomenon that has emerged and is very concerning is flexing culture, which is the act of excessively showing off luxury, social status, and life achievements in the digital public sphere.(Campbell, 2012) This phenomenon has created a pseudo-standard of living that forces every individual to constantly compete for social validation through numerical metrics such as followers, likes, and comments.(Chinn et al., 2021)

This situation has become very urgent to address because the search for digital validation has triggered a serious identity crisis. When a person's self-worth is only measured based on what is displayed on a device screen, humans tend to experience spiritual alienation and a loss of self-integrity.(“Review of ‘Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World’ by Adam Thomas (Abingdon Press, 2011),” 2018) This culture of showing off slowly erodes the values of honesty and sincerity, where individuals prioritize "image" over "reality." For believers, this trend is a real threat to spiritual growth, as it shifts the heart's focus from worshiping God toward the worship of self and material things.(Siregar et al., 2024) If the church does not immediately respond to this phenomenon with a strong ethical review, then the digital generation will be trapped in pathological narcissism that distances them from the true essence of Christian life.(Kleden, 2018)

Previous research regarding digital interaction often only touches on technical aspects such as data security or the general psychological impact on internet users.(Omachonu, 2002) Although there are studies regarding the behavior of Generation Z on social media, discourse concerning the impact of flexing and the validation crisis through the lens of Christian ethics is still very rarely found. Much of the literature still focuses on conventional ethics and has not yet been able to address the complexity of the "digital human" struggle facing algorithmic pressure every day.(Senjaya & Herman, 2024) Therefore, this research seeks to fill that gap by linking Biblical principles of humility and contentment in Christ with the existing sociological realities of social media today. This topic has a high level of urgency as it concerns the future of the moral and spiritual integrity of the congregation amidst the tide of digital consumerism. The significance of this research lies in its effort to provide an "ethical compass" for believers so they are not swept away by the current of pseudo-social validation. Practically, this writing is much needed as a foundation for church leaders and parents in providing pastoral guidance that is relevant to the mental health challenges and spiritual crises faced by the younger generation today.(Senjaya et al., 2022)

This writing aims to find a comprehensive Christian ethical perspective regarding flexing culture and the search for social validation on social media. The research used in this writing, namely the qualitative literature study method, is expected to help God's church

provide sharp Biblical guidance and teaching for the congregation, so that they can use technology with full integrity, remain humble, and stay focused on God's will in the midst of a world that thirsts for human recognition.

II. METHOD

The research used in this writing is a qualitative method with a literature study approach (library research).(Sugiono, 2015) This method was chosen to explore in depth the literature data related to the phenomenon of flexing, the social validation crisis, and relevant Christian ethical principles. The first step taken in this research was to collect various primary and secondary reference sources, which include Biblical texts as the main foundation, contemporary theological books, as well as national and international scientific journals published within the last five years.(Zed, 2014)

The data that has been collected is then analyzed descriptively-analytically using a theological anthropological and Christian social ethics approach.(Nanik & Hendriani, 2016) The researcher performs a synthesis between the sociological reality of social media and the truth of God's word to find a complete framework of thought. Through this research procedure, it is expected to produce an ethical review that is sharp and applicable for the congregation and church leaders in responding to the shift in identity values in the digital era.(Senjaya & Herman, 2024)

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Phenomenon of Flexing Culture and the Psychosocial Dynamics of the Digital Generation

Definition and Manifestation of Flexing in the Digital Space

Terminologically, the term flexing in a contemporary context refers to the act of conspicuously showing off wealth, achievements, or lifestyle with the aim of demonstrating a certain social status.(Campbell, 2012) However, in the digital era, the meaning of flexing has undergone a significant expansion. It is no longer limited only to the exhibition of physical assets such as luxury vehicles or jewelry, but has mutated into a very complex "identity curation" strategy. In social media ecosystems such as Instagram, TikTok, and X, flexing manifests in the form of lifestyle documentation that appears perfect, ranging from international travel, access to elite social circles, to career achievements portrayed as flawless.(Reinke, 2023)

For Millennials and Generation Z, the digital space has become a theatrical stage where the boundary between reality and representation becomes blurred. The manifestation of flexing today is often packaged very subtly through aesthetic narratives or humblebragging (covert showing off), where someone displays luxury under the guise of expressions of gratitude or minor complaints.(Kim et al., 2018) This creates a distorted standard of living, where an individual's success is no longer measured by the quality of their character or integrity, but by their ability to produce content that attracts mass attention.

This phenomenon indicates a shift in values within digital society, from a culture of "being" to a culture of "appearing."(Triwijayati et al., 2022) This behavior ultimately forms a cycle where every individual feels pressured to constantly update their digital image in order to remain considered relevant within the highly dynamic social strata of the internet.(Gaol & Hutasoit, 2021)

Attention Economy and the Trap of Digital Validation

In the contemporary digital ecosystem, attention has transformed into the most valuable economic commodity. This phenomenon is known as the attention economy, where social media platforms are systematically designed through algorithms to capture and maintain user attention for as long as possible.(Yıldız, 2015) For the digital generation, especially Generation Z, this implies the emergence of subconscious pressure to constantly produce "clickable content."

Social media algorithms are not neutral; they work by providing psychological rewards in the form of quantitative metrics, such as the number of likes, views, and shares, which neurobiologically trigger the release of dopamine in the user's brain, creating a cycle of dependency on digital appreciation.(Patasik et al., 2023)

Dependency on these metrics ultimately traps individuals in what is called the "validation trap." When an individual engages in flexing and the algorithm spreads that content widely until it gains high interaction, that individual feels they have attained absolute social recognition. Conversely, low digital interaction or minimal likes are often interpreted as social rejection or a failure in building self-existence.(Simatupang et al., 2022)

This creates extraordinary emotional vulnerability, where a person's self-esteem becomes highly volatile and dependent on algorithmic performance that is often unpredictable. The pressure to remain relevant in this "attention economy" forces individuals to constantly enter a vortex of image competition, which slowly distances them from the spiritual depth and peace of heart that should be found in God, rather than in the noise of cyberspace recognition.(Himes, 2007)

Psychosocial Impact: The Erosion of Happiness and the Crisis of Inner Depth

Psychosocially, the culture of flexing and the massive pursuit of digital validation bring destructive impacts on the mental well-being of the digital generation. One of the most tangible impacts is the emergence of the phenomenon of extreme social comparison. When individuals are constantly exposed to the "best lives" of others curated on social media, they tend to evaluate their own lives as something less valuable or inadequate.(“Review of ‘Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World’ by Adam Thomas (Abingdon Press, 2011),” 2018) This triggers feelings of envy and chronic dissatisfaction with the realities of daily life. The pressure

to always appear successful and happy creates a heavy psychological burden, which often leads to social anxiety, low self-esteem, and even symptoms of depression.(Portin, 2020)

Furthermore, this validation crisis results in the erosion of the depth of human relationships. In a digital ecosystem that prioritizes image, interactions often become shallow and are oriented solely toward performative gains.(Kutaula et al., 2024) Young people tend to lose the ability to build vulnerable and honest connections, fearing that if their weaknesses are exposed, their social value will decline.

Just like the phenomenon of seeking instant solutions for loneliness through commercial services, this culture of showing off actually demonstrates an "emotional hunger" that is never truly satisfied by digital metrics.(Osewska & Stala, 2021) Consequently, instead of finding authentic fellowship, individuals become increasingly isolated behind their device screens, trapped in the pursuit of fleeting satisfaction that ultimately erodes inner peace and true happiness, the kind that should stem from personal integrity and sincere relationships with others and with God.(Arifianto, 2023)

Theological Anthropological Review: Heart Motivation and the Fall of Man

The Pride of Life (*Keangkuhan Hidup*): The Theological Root of Flexing

In the Biblical narrative, the fall of man into sin (Genesis 3) not only impacted the breakdown of the legal-spiritual relationship between humans and God, but also triggered an existential crisis regarding self-worth. Before falling into sin, humans possessed a perfect sense of security because their identity was rooted entirely in their relationship with the Creator. However, post-fall, feelings of deep shame and nakedness emerged, forcing humans to seek independent ways to cover that "emptiness."(Reinke, 2023) The first human's attempt to sew fig leaves can be seen as a prototype of modern human efforts to construct a "mask" or a self-image deemed worthy in the eyes of their peers.

This crisis of self-worth manifests massively in the digital era through dependency on social validation. When humans lose the certainty of God's love and acceptance, they tend to seek substitutes through public recognition. Social media, with all its features, offers instant compensation for the insecurity experienced by humans.(Sitinjak, 2023)

Every like and positive comment received functions as a "digital fig leaf" used to cover inner fragility. The problem is that validation sourced from fellow creatures is fluctuating and is never enough to satisfy the depths of the human soul. This explains why flexing behavior is often done repetitively; because the thirst for recognition is a consequence of a soul that has been severed from the true source of living water.(Sasono & Boiliu, 2025)

Furthermore, the pursuit of validation in cyberspace often becomes a form of modern idolatry. Humans tend to deify public opinion and turn the "digital stage" into a judge that determines whether or not their lives are meaningful. From a Christian ethical perspective, this is a form of self-alienation, where individuals lose their spiritual autonomy by allowing algorithms and social trends to dictate their intrinsic value.(Azka, 2023) If self-worth is no longer based on the fact that humans are unconditionally loved by God, then humans will remain trapped in an exhausting competition of image. The desire to be "seen" and "recognized" on social media is actually a subconscious cry from a soul longing for the restoration of an identity that has been lost since the events in the Garden of Eden.(Tebaldi & Gaddini, 2024)

Therefore, resolving the culture of flexing and the thirst for validation is not enough through psychological advice about self-confidence alone. A theological restoration is required, where individuals realize that their crisis of self-worth can only be healed through reconciliation with Christ.(Siregar et al., 2024) Only in His grace, humans no longer need to struggle to show off luxuries or achievements to gain recognition, because they have been fully accepted as children of God. Without this strong theological foundation, the digital generation will continue to chase the shadows of pseudo-validation, which in the end will only leave a greater emptiness within their hearts.(“Review of ‘Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World’ by Adam Thomas (Abingdon Press, 2011),” 2018)

The Desire to Be "Like God"

If traced further back, the root of human obsession with digital adoration is actually an echo of the ancient temptation offered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden: "you will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). The primordial desire to be the center of attention and the arbiter of truth over oneself has now found its most effective medium through social media. The culture of flexing is not merely showing off wealth, but an effort to build a "digital throne" where the individual becomes the primary object of worship.(Pasuang et al., 2025) In cyberspace, everyone has full control to create their own version of a "world," in which they act as both the creator and the ruler of the narrative.

The impact of this excessive self-characterization is the loss of orientation toward devotion to Christ. In Christian ethics, the primary purpose of human life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever; however, the culture of digital validation transforms this into glorifying the self and enjoying the praise of humans.(Mano et al., 2025) This devotion to the "idol of self" is often unrecognized because it is packaged in the form of a commonplace modern lifestyle.

In fact, every time someone intentionally engages in flexing to provoke admiration and envy, they are repeating the same pattern of rebellion that occurred at the beginning of human history. Therefore, the integrity of a believer is tested in their ability to remain a

witness who points to the glory of God, rather than becoming a barrier to that glory through the ambition of accumulating social capital for themselves.(Hermawan et al., 2024)

The manifestation of this desire to be "like God" is seen in the way digital humans pursue the communicable attributes of God in a pseudo-fashion, such as omniscience and omnipresence. Through the continuous use of status updates and story features, individuals seemingly wish to be present anywhere and at any time within the minds of their followers.(Himes, 2007) Moreover, the constant need for social validation indicates a thirst for glory that should belong to God alone. When someone feels satisfied by massive praise on social media, they are actually enjoying an "imitation of glory" that steals God's right to worship. This creates a dangerous ethical condition, where humans no longer see themselves as limited creatures, but as entities that must be continuously admired.("Review of 'Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World' by Adam Thomas (Abingdon Press, 2011)," 2018)

The Dialectics of Identity: The Image of God (*Imago Dei*) vs. the Digital Image

Theology of the Image of God (*Imago Dei*): Identity as Received, Not Achieved

The primary foundation for understanding human worth in Christian ethics is the doctrine of *Imago Dei*. The Bible affirms that humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27), which bestows an intrinsic dignity that does not depend on achievement, wealth, or social recognition.(Chinn et al., 2021) Identity as the Image of God is a "given identity," which means the value of a human being is already complete and whole from the moment of creation. In this context, self-worth is not something that must be fought for or constructed through public performance, but rather something that must be received with gratitude as a gift of creation.

However, contemporary digital culture has shifted this identity paradigm into an "achieved identity." On social media, an individual feels worthy only if they are capable of displaying a self-image that is successful, attractive, and validated by the masses. This creates a serious theological distortion, where humans no longer view themselves through the lens of God's Word, but rather through the lens of fluctuating algorithms.(Siregar et al., 2024) If identity as the **Image of God** is a stable anchor for the soul, then the digital image is quicksand that constantly demands ceaseless content updates. The individual's inability to distinguish between their true identity before God and their digital profile on social media often culminates in spiritual exhaustion and existential crises, as seen in the phenomenon of seeking instant fulfillment of social needs among the younger generation.(Patasik et al., 2023)

The ethical resolution to the thirst for validation lies in the understanding that in Christ, every believer has already received "ultimate validation." The doctrine of justification by faith declares that God has accepted and loved humans not because of what they show off, but because of what Christ has done.(Patasik et al., 2023) Awareness of an identity that is already "final" in God should liberate a person from the need to engage in flexing. When a person's identity is firmly rooted in the *Imago Dei*, then praise or criticism on social media no longer possesses the power to determine their self-worth.(Tebaldi & Gaddini, 2024) Therefore, the current task of the church is to restore the congregation's understanding of the glory of their identity as children of God, who do not require digital "filters" to appear worthy in the eyes of the world.(Yıldız, 2015)

Identity Distortion on Social Media: Between Reality and Digital Curation

Identity distortion in the digital space begins when individuals start to sharply distinguish between the "true self" and the "curated self." On social media, every user has full authority as the editor of their own life narrative, where failures, weaknesses, and life's struggles are often eliminated to make room for polished success and happiness.(Tebaldi & Gaddini, 2024)

This curation process creates a pseudo-reality that only displays pieces of the best moments (highlight reels), so that one's identity is no longer whole but fragmented. In Christian ethics, this becomes a serious issue because truthfulness is a fundamental value that demands alignment between the internal and the external. When someone consciously displays only the side deemed likely to trigger public admiration, they are actually trapped in the practice of "digital hypocrisy" that slowly kills their own authenticity.(Sasono & Boiliu, 2025)

This practice of using a "digital mask" is rooted in the fear of rejection if one's weaknesses are seen by the public. Consequently, individuals prioritize reputation management over character growth. Identity, which should be organic and grow in truth, transforms into a commodity that must be constantly managed to maintain social "market value.".(Pasuang et al., 2025) The theological impact of this distortion is the obstruction of the process of sanctification, because sanctification requires the acknowledgment of weakness and a dependence on the grace of God. If an individual already feels satisfied with a digital image that appears holy or successful, they will no longer feel the need to deal with the reality of their sin before God.(Sitinjak, 2023) This phenomenon is extremely dangerous for the spiritual growth of the younger generation, as they become accustomed to living in two different worlds: a digital world full of falsehood and a real world full of fragility yet neglected.

Moreover, this identity distortion undermines the essence of Christian fellowship (*koinonia*). Genuine fellowship requires vulnerability and honesty among the members of the body of Christ.(Osewska & Stala, 2021) However, the culture of flexing and social validation instead drives everyone to compete with one another in displaying perfection.

When social media is filled only with curated images, the space for confessing sins to one another and bearing each other's burdens disappears. In the view of Christian leadership ethics, integrity is the unity between what is believed and what is practiced, both in private and public spaces.(Kéri, 2020) Therefore, identity distortion on social media not only harms the individual but also weakens

the collective witness of the church, as God's people become trapped in a "digital theater" that prioritizes outward appearance over genuine internal transformation.(Reinke, 2023)

Integrity and Radical Honesty: Manifesting Christ through Authenticity

The ethical solution to the identity crisis in the digital era does not mean withdrawing completely from social media, but rather applying the principles of integrity and radical honesty in every digital interaction. In Greek, the word for "truth" or *aletheia* does not merely refer to factual accuracy, but to openness and non-concealment. Christian integrity demands that a believer lead a whole and non-fragmented life, where what is thought, spoken, and displayed on social media is a reflection of the internal reality being transformed by the Holy Spirit.(Senjaya & Herman, 2024)

This radical honesty challenges the culture of flexing by displaying life as it truly is, including the courage to acknowledge limitations and dependence on God's grace, rather than constantly polishing an image of pseudo-perfection.

The application of this digital integrity requires discernment in distinguishing between transparency that edifies and unnecessary self-disclosure. Radical honesty does not mean that one must expose every detail of their private life but rather ensures that whatever is shared is motivated by the desire to glorify God and build up others, not to steal glory for oneself. In Christian ethics, the motive behind an action determines the moral value of that action.

If the primary motivation for using social media is to seek human validation, then that person's integrity is under threat. Conversely, when someone dares to display authenticity, including failures overcome by grace, they are actually providing a more powerful testimony of Christ's transforming power than merely showing off material luxury.(“Review of ‘Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World’ by Adam Thomas (Abingdon Press, 2011),” 2018)

In the end, radical honesty in the digital space is a form of obedience to the command to "put away falsehood and speak truth each one to his neighbor" (Ephesians 4:25). For a digital generation weary of algorithmic falsehoods, the authenticity of believers can become a unique appeal that points to the truth of the Gospel.(Chinn et al., 2021) Believers are called to be "letters from Christ," open and readable by everyone, including through their social media profiles. By maintaining integrity between their real and digital lives, God's people not only protect their own mental and spiritual health from the poison of craving validation, but also demonstrate that true self-worth is found in God's eternal acceptance, not in the fleeting applause of the virtual world.(Kéri, 2020) This alignment is the core of Christian leadership and witness in a society that is increasingly hungry for authentic truth.(Reinke, 2023)

Christian Ethical Challenges: Digital Narcissism and the Humility of Christ

Narcissism as a Modern Idol

In psychological discourse, narcissism is often viewed as a personality disorder or merely an excessive self-love. However, through the lens of Christian ethics, digital narcissism, manifested through the culture of flexing, must be understood as a form of modern idolatry. The essence of idolatry is not just worshipping statues; rather, it occurs when a created thing, in this case, the "self-image", usurps God's position as the center of attention and the source of satisfaction.(Reinke, 2023) Social media has provided an altar for the practice of self-worship, where individuals, whether consciously or unconsciously, expect adoration from fellow humans through digital validation metrics. This condition reflects what Martin Luther called *incurvatus in se*—the human condition of being "curved in on oneself," which makes one blind to the glory of God and the needs of others.(Kéri, 2020)

Digital narcissism creates an illusion that the world revolves around individual interests. This is clearly evident when every life moment, even spiritual activities, is converted into content for the sake of gaining "attention capital" from the audience.(Omachonu, 2002) From an ethical perspective, this behavior damages the moral order because the orientation of life shifts from giving to taking attention.

The insatiable pursuit of social validation demonstrates that "human praise" has become an idol demanding sacrifices of time, honesty, and inner peace. If a believer feels more alive when receiving thousands of likes than when in intimate fellowship with God, then ethically, they have experienced a shift in loyalty from the Creator to the fleeting "screen idol."(Kéri, 2020)

Furthermore, this narcissism becomes a major obstacle to spiritual growth due to its nature of closing oneself off from correction and vulnerability. The culture of flexing demands that an individual always appear superior, thereby closing off the space for confessing sin and weakness before God and the community.(Himes, 2007)

As a result, Christian faith, which should be transformative in nature, becomes performative, touching only the outer surface without changing the depths of the heart. This crisis is very real for the digital generation, who often struggle to distinguish between a successful life in the eyes of God and popularity on social media. Therefore, deconstructing digital narcissism is not merely an effort at character improvement; it is a spiritual battle to restore the throne of the heart to Christ, the only object of worship who is worthy.(Osewska & Stala, 2021)

The Ethics of Humility (Kenosis): The Antithesis of Flexing Culture

The radical response of Christian ethics to the culture of flexing and the digital thirst for validation is found in the concept of *kenosis*, or the self-emptying of Christ. In Philippians 2:5-8, the Apostle Paul provides a fundamental ethical framework for believers, wherein Christ—who exists in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped or maintained, but instead emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant.(Portin, 2020) This *kenosis* lifestyle is a total antithesis to the spirit of

flexing. If the digital world encourages individuals to "fill themselves" with images of success and luxury, Christian ethics calls His people to "empty themselves" of the ambition for self-glory in order to emulate Christ. Humility in this context is not merely an attitude of politeness, but a theological orientation that acknowledges that all glory belongs to God alone, and humans are merely stewards of His grace.

In its practice on social media, the ethics of humility challenges believers to stop making themselves the center of the narrative. The culture of showing off seeks to build a "small kingdom" for oneself through the accumulation of social capital, whereas Christian humility seeks to build the Kingdom of God through service that remains unseen by the public.(Patasik et al., 2023)

This creates an ethical paradox: in a world obsessed with being "seen" and "known," believers are instead called to possess an inner satisfaction when doing good without the need for validation from the number of likes or comments. The ability to remain humble amidst technological access that enables self-deification is tangible proof of genuine internal transformation. Without the discipline of humility, the use of social media will continue to be a means for the "old self" to seek fleeting glory.(Hermawan et al., 2024)

Furthermore, the ethics of *kenosis* provides a new perspective on defining success and ownership. For believers, the presence of wealth or achievements, which are often used as objects of flexing, should not be viewed as symbols of social status, but rather as means to sincerely bless others. Integrity in Christian leadership and life is tested when an individual is capable of achieving great things yet still chooses to display Christ rather than show off themselves.(Patasik et al., 2023) In this regard, honesty concerning the heart's motivation becomes crucial; is a post intended to inspire, or is it meant to trigger excessive admiration for oneself? By instilling the value of Christ's humility, the church can help the congregation tear down the walls of digital pride and build bridges of fellowship based on a love that does not seek self-praise.(Arifianto, 2023)

Pastoral Implications: Developing a Spirituality of Digital Stewardship

Ethical and Theological Literacy in the Church

The church as a faith community can no longer remain passive or simply act as an observer in the face of the rapid tide of digital transformation affecting the behavior of the congregation. The ethical challenges arising from the culture of flexing and the crisis of social validation demand that the church provide adequate theological literacy to serve as a "moral compass" for believers.(Portin, 2020) This literacy is not merely technical regarding how to use social media but rather touches the depths of the heart's motivation and value orientation. Christian character education within the church must be able to provide relevant answers on how Biblical principles are applied in daily digital interactions. This is crucial to help the congregation distinguish between using technology as a means of stewardship and using technology as a means of destructive self-worship.(Kutaula et al., 2024)

The implementation of this ethical literacy must be carried out systematically through various formative spaces, ranging from pulpit sermons to smaller discipleship groups. The church needs to equip the congregation, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, with the ability to perform theological critiques of online narratives that frequently distort self-identity.(Kéri, 2020)

Through Biblical teaching, the congregation is invited to realize that their self-worth is final in Christ, such that they no longer need to seek exhausting and superficial validation. This research finds that when the congregation has a strong theological foundation regarding the *Imago Dei*, they are better able to navigate social pressures on social media with full integrity and humility.(Reinke, 2023)

Furthermore, this literacy includes practical guidance on the "ethics of digital presence." The church must encourage the congregation to reflect on every post: is the content built upon honesty, or is it merely image curation intended to provoke envy? Just as it is vital to maintain truth in leadership and social relationships, the digital integrity of the congregation serves as a tangible form of faith witness in a world full of falsehoods.(Senjaya & Herman, 2024) By providing sharp and applicable literacy, the church of God can help the congregation to not merely be passive consumers of technology, but rather to be witnesses of Christ with integrity in the digital space. This effort is a form of holistic pastoring to ensure that the spiritual identity of the people remains preserved amidst the highly dynamic developments of the times.("Review of 'Digital Disciple: Real Christianity in a Virtual World' by Adam Thomas (Abingdon Press, 2011)," 2018)

The Practice of Spiritual Disciplines in the Digital Age

The implementation of Christian ethics in facing the tide of digital validation requires practical steps through spiritual disciplines adapted to the contemporary context. Spiritual disciplines in the digital age are not merely religious routines, but a form of resistance against algorithms that constantly pull human attention away from God. One highly relevant practice is "social media fasting" or digital fasting, where a believer intentionally ceases digital interactions for a specific period to recalibrate the orientation of their heart.(Chinn et al., 2021)

This practice helps individuals silence the "voice" of the world that demands validation and begin listening to the voice of God in stillness. By performing this discipline, the congregation is invited to realize that true satisfaction of the soul is not found in the clamor of virtual appreciation, but in quiet fellowship with the Creator.(Chinn et al., 2021)

Furthermore, the concept of "**digital simplicity**" needs to be emphasized as part of the believer's lifestyle. Digital simplicity means using technology intentionally and selectively, focusing on what truly builds faith and glorifies God. This serves as an ethical response to the culture of flexing, which constantly demands excessive self-prominence.(Reinke, 2023) Believers are called to

develop a sense of **contentment** in Christ, such that they no longer feel the need to prove their self-worth through displays of luxury on social media.

This discipline helps the people guard their hearts to remain humble and avoid being trapped in the competition of superficial social status, just as it is vital to maintain the integrity of the heart in every aspect of service.(Siregar et al., 2024)

Pastoral Care for Millennials and Generation Z

Pastoral strategies for Millennials and Generation Z amidst the culture of social validation must focus on restoring authentic community. The church needs to create spaces where this generation feels safe to be themselves without having to wear a "digital mask."(Omachonu, 2002) Effective pastoring does not merely involve imposing prohibitions on social media use, but rather providing empathetic accompaniment for the identity struggles they experience. Church leaders must serve as role models in demonstrating integrity between real life and digital presence, so that the younger generation sees that true happiness is found in honesty and vulnerability before God.(Omachonu, 2002)

Through small and intimate discipleship groups, the church can help the digital generation dismantle the "silo mentality" that often leaves them feeling isolated despite having many followers on social media.(Omachonu, 2002) The focus of pastoring must be directed toward inward transformation that yields the fruit of the spirit, rather than merely superficial outward performance. Thus, Millennials and Gen Z will not only survive amidst the onslaught of the flexing culture, but they will also be able to become agents of change who bring the values of the Kingdom of God into the digital space. It is this holistic and contextual pastoral approach that is expected to assist the church of God in guiding the congregation through the increasingly complex challenges of the age.(Kéri, 2020)

V. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the analysis and discussion presented, this research concludes that the phenomenon of flexing and the crisis of social validation on social media represent fundamental ethical challenges to the integrity of Christian faith in the digital age. From a theological-anthropological perspective, the culture of showing off is rooted in the human condition fallen into sin, where the center of worship shifts from God to self-worship through the pursuit of fleeting recognition from fellow humans. This culture has distorted human identity as the Imago Dei into a performative identity, artificially curated to meet algorithmic expectations and social pressures.

This research finds that the most radical ethical response to digital narcissism is the example of Christ's humility (kenosis). Believers are called to possess complete integrity, where digital authenticity and honesty become a tangible form of faith witness. By realizing that self-worth is already "final" and "finished" in the redemptive work of Christ, God's people no longer need to be trapped in the competition for superficial social status. The use of technology grounded in the principles of digital stewardship will transform social media from a means of displaying luxury into a means of glorifying God and edifying others.

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