



Sign-Value and Merit-Based Recognition in Student Flexing: Implications for Social Studies Education

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Merit-Based Recognition;
Sign-Value;
Social Studies Education
Student Flexing;

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study examines how sign-value operates through student flexing and how this process relates to social recognition, with particular attention to participants' evaluations of symbolic and achievement-based self-presentation in junior high school settings.

Methodology – A qualitative multi-site study was conducted in Yogyakarta. Purposive sampling involved 30 participants: 22 junior high school students from six schools who were active social media users and eight Social Studies teachers recruited through MGMP-IPS Yogyakarta. Data were generated primarily through student group interviews, with one individual student interview and one focus group discussion involving all eight teachers. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, and patterns were compared across data sources.

Findings – Five related themes were identified. Consumption objects acquired audience-dependent symbolic meanings; peer relations connected flexing with imitation, conformity, belonging, and exclusion; and main and second accounts were used for differentiated digital self-presentation. A hypothetical comparison between consumption- and achievement-related self-presentation indicated that anticipated audience reactions were among the considerations shaping how these forms of self-presentation were evaluated. Teachers also situated some instances of flexing within broader family and economic contexts without establishing causal explanations within the family. The findings do not show that symbolic recognition displaced achievement-based recognition or that follower metrics constituted a generalized status system.

Contribution – The findings provide an empirical and conceptual basis for considering reflective inquiry into value, status, belonging, recognition, and achievement as a possible pedagogical entry point. This study did not test the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach.

Received 15 August 2026; Received in revised form 22 August 2026; Accepted 27 September 2026

Jurnal Eduscience (JES) Volume 13 No. 5 (2026)

Available online 30 October 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has altered how adolescents present themselves and seek social recognition. Social media makes possessions, consumption experiences, and lifestyles continuously visible to peer audiences, creating conditions in which symbolic display can become a resource for identity and status. Student flexing — the public display of branded goods, consumption experiences, or particular lifestyles — represents one manifestation of this broader shift (Daudi, 2022; Listianti, 2022; Rosida et al., 2023; Salman et al., 2022). In such displays, objects may become important not only for their practical utility but also for what they communicate about prestige, exclusivity, and social position (Clausen, 2025; Rosida et al., 2023; Sari, 2022). Research on flexing in Indonesian social media contexts further shows that conspicuous display can function as a means of gaining social recognition and differentiating social status (Rosida et al., 2023). Flexing is therefore educationally relevant not simply as a consumption practice but as part of the social environment in which students encounter and negotiate different bases of recognition.

In educational settings, recognition is closely associated with effort, competence, and achievement developed through sustained learning (Fernández et al., 2022). Peer relations can also reinforce academic orientations. Longitudinal network research among early adolescents, for example, found that the academic engagement of both close friends and admired peers contributed to students' own academic engagement over time (Shin, 2022). Digital environments, however, make other forms of social status increasingly visible and measurable. Among adolescents, likes and followers can function as online status indicators, while receiving fewer likes than peers can elicit stronger feelings of rejection and more negative self-evaluation (Lee et al., 2020; Trekels et al., 2024). The educational concern is therefore not social media use in itself but the possible tension between achievement-based recognition and symbolic recognition. When lifestyle display, prestige, or digital visibility becomes socially consequential among peers, students may encounter competing criteria for what counts as success and social worth. This tension is educationally significant because it concerns how students interpret achievement, status, recognition, and the criteria through which individuals are socially evaluated.

Baudrillard's theory of sign-value provides the principal conceptual lens for interpreting this problem. In consumer society, commodities acquire value not only through their use or exchange but also through their differential meanings within systems of social distinction (Baudrillard, 1981; Clausen, 2025; Duvenage, 2022; Jin & Hu, 2025). An object can therefore become socially consequential both because of what it signifies about the person displaying it and because such meanings are interpreted within particular social relationships. Applied to student flexing, sign-value directs attention to how branded goods, consumption experiences, and curated displays may function as markers of identity, belonging, and status rather than merely as possessions. Previous studies provide empirical support for related processes among students. Consumption can be associated with the pursuit of social recognition rather than functional need (Sari, 2022). Peer influence and expanding digital consumption spaces can encourage status-oriented consumption and symbolic differentiation (Utomo et al., 2023), while schools themselves can become social settings in which consumption symbols influence relationships and social positioning among students (Çelik & Çuhadar, 2023). The study, therefore, uses sign-value to interpret how symbolic displays acquire social meaning through peer relations and digital visibility and how those meanings become implicated in judgments of recognition and social worth.

Within this analytical argument, sign-value hegemony refers to a recurrent condition in which sign-based criteria of social evaluation become sufficiently normalized within particular peer contexts to influence self-presentation, belonging, and judgments of status. Digital settings may provide contexts in which such meanings are displayed or circulated, but digital practices are not, in themselves, treated as evidence of sign-value hegemony. The term does not imply that symbolic recognition completely displaces academic achievement, nor does it assume that all student relationships are governed by consumption. Rather, it refers to the relative social force of sign-value when students learn which symbolic displays receive recognition,

orient aspects of their self-presentation toward those expectations, and encounter forms of inclusion, comparison, or exclusion in relation to them. Sign-value hegemony is therefore not treated as a predetermined condition that the study assumes in advance. Its analytical relevance depends on whether recurring empirical patterns indicate that sign-based expectations are repeatedly learned, validated, and reproduced through peer interaction.

The connection between this process and meritocracy lies specifically in the basis on which social recognition is granted or anticipated. Meritocratic ideals generally associate recognition with effort, competence, talent, and achievement rather than inherited or ascribed status (Fernández et al., 2022). The immediate analytical concern of this study, however, is not whether the educational system as a whole is meritocratic. Instead, the study focuses on merit-based recognition as the empirically accessible dimension of this broader ideal: the expectation that effort, competence, and achievement should carry social value. Sign-value introduces another possible basis of evaluation when recognition becomes attached to visibility, prestige, symbolic display, or socially legible markers of status. These forms of recognition are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The relevant question is whether symbolic recognition becomes sufficiently socially rewarding to be negotiated alongside recognition grounded in achievement. The study, therefore, does not infer a possible tension with merit-based recognition from the mere existence of flexing; it considers such a tension only when participants' accounts indicate that symbolic and achievement-based self-presentation may be evaluated differently in relation to anticipated recognition.

In this study, social recognition is used as the broader category of social evaluation. Peer recognition refers specifically to recognition within peer relations, while symbolic recognition refers to recognition attached to symbolic display or sign-based criteria. Achievement-based recognition refers more narrowly to recognition attached to achievement. It is treated as one empirically observable form within the broader concept of merit-based recognition, which encompasses recognition grounded in effort, competence, talent, and achievement.

This theoretical relationship also guides the analytical sequence through which the empirical patterns are interpreted. First, the study considers how objects of consumption and digital displays acquire audience-dependent meanings as signs of identity, distinction, or status. Second, it examines how peer relations may reproduce, validate, or contest these meanings through processes of belonging and exclusion, while treating digital practices as contexts of visibility and differentiated self-presentation. Third, it considers how symbolic and achievement-based criteria of recognition are related in participants' accounts. Related research shows that self-presentation, social comparison, followers, likes, and other forms of online engagement can become resources for visibility and digital social capital (Clausen, 2025; Du, 2023; Mahmudah et al., 2023). The study uses these concepts to interpret relationships among empirical patterns rather than treating them as findings in themselves. The analytical argument, therefore, moves from symbolic meaning, through its social reproduction and contextual presentation, toward its implications for the bases of student recognition.

Existing scholarship provides important but only partially connected explanations of these processes. Research on symbolic consumption and digital identity has examined how individuals consume, display, and negotiate identity and social recognition, while emerging work has begun to connect Baudrillardian consumer practices with academic outcomes (Perdana & Nur, 2025; Rosida et al., 2023; Sari, 2022; Utomo et al., 2023). Research on meritocracy has more often examined structural inequality, achievement, and changing understandings of success than the role of sign-value in everyday processes of student recognition (Chua et al., 2024; Fernández et al., 2022; Fujiono et al., 2024). Meanwhile, research in Social Studies Education and critical pedagogy has emphasized critical consciousness, digital citizenship, and social literacy (Chrismastianto et al., 2024; Colley et al., 2021; Jaffee, 2022). Baudrillardian analysis has also entered Social Studies scholarship through work on hyperreality, social media, and media education (van Kessel et al., 2025). Research in a higher-education Social Studies context has also employed Baudrillard's theory of consumer society to examine hedonistic consumption, identity expression, social recognition, and academic performance (Perdana & Nur, 2025). These developments demonstrate that Baudrillardian perspectives are not absent from

educational or Social Studies scholarship. What remains less directly explained by these strands is how sign-value embedded in students' everyday symbolic displays becomes a basis of peer recognition that is negotiated alongside achievement-based recognition within school social life.

The specific gap, therefore, does not lie in an absence of research on flexing, symbolic consumption, digital status, meritocracy, or Baudrillardian approaches to Social Studies as separate or partially connected topics. Rather, the unresolved issue is relational: how sign-value becomes socially consequential as a basis of peer recognition among students and through what peer processes sign-based expectations are reproduced; how digital practices structure contexts of visibility and self-presentation; and how these processes are negotiated alongside recognition grounded in effort, competence, and achievement. Addressing this gap is important because treating flexing only as a lifestyle, consumption, or identity phenomenon may obscure its broader educational significance. Clarifying these relationships can help explain how symbolic practices in digital and peer cultures intersect with school-based understandings of achievement and social recognition without assuming that symbolic recognition has completely displaced merit-based recognition. Such clarification also provides a more empirically grounded basis for considering what these recognition practices may mean for Social Studies Education.

This study addresses this gap by examining student flexing as an empirical context for investigating relationships among sign-value, social recognition, and participants' evaluations of symbolic and achievement-based self-presentation in junior high school settings. Conceptually, the study brings Baudrillard's sign-value theory into dialogue with educational meritocracy, not to propose a new theory of meritocracy, but to clarify a specific educational mechanism: how symbolic meanings attached to consumption and digital self-presentation may become criteria of social recognition that are negotiated alongside achievement-based criteria. The conceptual contribution, therefore, lies in connecting a Baudrillardian account of symbolic differentiation with the educational problem of merit-based recognition while keeping the two concepts analytically distinct. The pedagogical contribution is deliberately more limited in scope. Rather than testing whether Reflective Social Studies Education can restore student meritocracy, the study uses its interpretation of the empirical findings to consider Reflective Social Studies Education as a pedagogical response through which students may critically examine how value, status, achievement, and recognition are constructed in digital culture. The study, therefore, does not claim a new universal theoretical framework or a proven pedagogical intervention.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine how sign-value operates through student flexing and how this process relates to social recognition, with particular attention to participants' evaluations of symbolic and achievement-based self-presentation in junior high school settings. The following research question guides the study: How does sign-value operate through student flexing, and how is this process related to social recognition and to participants' evaluations of symbolic and achievement-based self-presentation? The implications for Reflective Social Studies Education are developed from the theoretical interpretation of the empirical findings rather than treated as the outcome of an intervention tested in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative multi-site study was conducted across multiple junior high school settings in Yogyakarta to examine how sign-value operates through student flexing and how this process relates to social recognition, with particular attention to participants' evaluations of symbolic and achievement-based self-presentation. A multi-site qualitative design was appropriate because the study examined a shared social phenomenon across different school settings without treating each school as a bounded case. The qualitative approach enabled close attention to participants' meanings, experiences, and social interactions rather than statistical relationships (Ahmed, 2024; Lochmiller et al., 2026). Reflective Social Studies Education was not examined as

an intervention or empirical outcome; its pedagogical implications were developed from the interpretation of the empirical findings.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants whose experiences and observations were relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The study involved 30 participants, comprising 22 junior high school students and eight Social Studies teachers. The student participants were active social media users. They were drawn from six junior high schools in Yogyakarta: SMPN 4 Yogyakarta, SMPN 5 Yogyakarta, SMPN 8 Yogyakarta, SMP Muhammadiyah 2, SMP Budi Mulia 2, and SMP Taman Dewasa. The teacher participants were selected because they taught Social Studies, used social media, and had experience observing student behavior related to flexing in school settings. The teachers were contacted through MGMP-IPS Yogyakarta, and all eight participated in a single focus group discussion. Including both student and teacher perspectives enabled the study to examine student flexing through students' experiences and teachers' observations of its social and educational contexts.

Data Collection

Research permission was obtained from the Education, Youth, and Sports Department of Yogyakarta City and Sleman, and from the six participating schools from which the student participants were drawn before data collection began. Pseudonyms were used when reporting participant accounts. Data were generated primarily through student group interviews, with one student interviewed individually. In addition, one focus group discussion was conducted with all eight Social Studies teachers.

The student interviews explored participants' experiences and understandings of social media use, flexing, symbolic display, peer recognition, and achievement. As part of the student group interviews, students were presented with a hypothetical choice between displaying an achievement and displaying a newly purchased pair of branded shoes. This interview prompt was intended to elicit participants' views on different forms of social media self-presentation; students were not instructed to create or upload an actual post, no particular social media platform was assigned, and no posting content restrictions were imposed. The teacher focus group explored teachers' observations of student flexing and the social, peer, family, and educational contexts in which such practices appeared. The interview and focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Instrument

The researcher functioned as the primary instrument of the qualitative inquiry. Semi-structured questions were used in the individual student interview, student group interviews, and teacher focus group discussion. The questions addressed students' experiences of flexing and symbolic self-presentation, the social meanings attached to consumption objects and digital visibility, peer recognition and belonging, and participants' understandings of achievement and social recognition. Questions for teachers also focused on their observations of student flexing within school settings and the surrounding social contexts. Follow-up questions were used to clarify participants' meanings and explore relevant experiences that emerged during the conversations.

Data Analysis

The interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2024). Analysis proceeded recursively through familiarization with the data, initial coding, development of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and preparation of the analytic account. Coding focused on participants' accounts of symbolic display, social recognition, peer relations, digital visibility, achievement, second-account practices, follower-related experiences, and family or economic contexts when these emerged in the data.

Candidate themes were examined comparatively across the individual student interviews, the student group interviews, and the teacher focus group discussion. The analysis distinguished among patterns that converged across sources, patterns that complemented one another, variations among participant perspectives, and findings specific to a particular data source. Divergent or contrasting accounts were retained when they qualified broader patterns rather than being forced into thematic agreement.

Baudrillard's concept of sign-value and the concept of merit-based recognition were used as interpretive lenses for understanding relationships among the empirical patterns rather than as predetermined findings. The analytical sequence, therefore, moved from participants' accounts and recurring empirical patterns to thematic development and then to theoretical interpretation. Reflective Social Studies Education was not coded as an empirical theme or evaluated as an intervention; it was developed in the Discussion as a pedagogical implication arising from the interpretation of the findings.

FINDINGS

The reflexive thematic analysis generated five related empirical themes concerning how student flexing operated within the participating school settings and its relation to social recognition and achievement-based self-presentation. The themes concerned the social meaning of consumption objects, peer-group conformity and symbolic boundaries, second-account practices in digital self-presentation, the relationship between symbolic and achievement-based self-presentation, and family and economic contexts described by teachers. The themes were not equally represented across all data sources; some were grounded primarily in student accounts, whereas the family and economic patterns emerged specifically from the teacher focus group.

Symbolic Meaning of Consumption Objects across Social Audiences

Students' accounts indicated that the use of consumption objects could be shaped by both practical considerations and participants' expectations about the social audience that would see them. One student explained that a pair of trousers had never been worn. When asked why, the student first explained that the trousers were still too large and also expressed uncertainty about where they could be worn. The student then distinguished between family and peer settings:

"I would feel embarrassed wearing them when going out with my parents" (S1).

When referring to being with friends, however, the student added:

"But with friends, it is fine" (S1).

This account indicates that the decision to wear the item was not based solely on practical considerations. The same object was evaluated differently depending on whether it would be seen in a family or peer setting. In this instance, the anticipated social audience formed part of the meaning attached to the consumption object.

Peer-Group Conformity and Symbolic Boundaries

Peer relations were a recurring context in students' accounts of flexing. Several students described first encountering or learning about flexing through friends, including in their elementary school years. One participant stated:

"I heard it from a friend" (S6).

Students also described the following styles and practices associated with their peer groups. One student explained:

"It varies. Here, most people tend to follow their groups, so, yes, they usually follow their circle" (S7).

The accounts indicated some variation in the role of peer influence. Some students described branded consumption as arising from personal preference. In contrast, other accounts linked similar consumption practices to following friends or to trying to be seen as comparable to peers. Other students described pressure to follow flexing practices when their peers displayed particular goods or lifestyles.

Peer dynamics also appeared in accounts of friendship boundaries. One student stated:

"I think flexing can determine our friendships" (S6),

while another said:

"People who flex tend to hang out with people who flex" (S8).

Another participant reported:

"I was excluded as well" (S9).

The teacher focus group provided more limited supporting evidence concerning peer-group belonging. One teacher referred to the pressure to remain aligned with a community:

"So that they can fit in with their community, to be part of the same circle" (T1).

Taken together, the student accounts indicate that peers were involved not only in students' exposure to flexing but also in imitation, conformity, friendship selection, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion. The teacher account provided complementary support for the importance of peer-group belonging, although this theme was represented in greater detail in the student data.

Second-Account Practices in Digital Self-Presentation

Second accounts were a recurring feature of students' descriptions of social media use. In these accounts, a second account referred to an additional account used alongside a main or first account. Students differentiated these accounts by the content posted, frequency of use, and, in some instances, the names attached to them.

One student answered:

"Second IG" (S10),

when describing where the content was usually posted. Another explained:

"I usually post most often on my second account" (S11).

A further participant distinguished the functions of the two accounts by stating:

"My main Instagram is just for important things" (S12).

Other student accounts described second accounts as spaces for personal photographs, everyday activities, leisure-related content, and some flexing-related posts. In one account, a second account was also used for content that the participant preferred that teachers not see. Some participants used account names that were less directly connected with their main identities. These accounts showed that students differentiated between main and second accounts as spaces for different forms of digital self-presentation.

These purposes were not uniform across participants. The available accounts supported an interpretation centered on differentiated content, selective visibility, and less identifiable forms of self-presentation rather than a single common purpose for maintaining a second account.

Follower numbers were also mentioned during the interviews. One participant reported having approximately 600 followers on the main account and approximately 200 on the second account. This indicated awareness of different audience sizes across accounts, but the evidence did not establish that follower numbers themselves functioned as measures of status or social recognition.

The teacher focus group provided supporting evidence regarding the presence of second-account practices. One teacher remarked:

"They say almost every student has a second account" (T2).

The clearest empirical pattern in these accounts was therefore the differentiated use of main and second accounts for digital self-presentation rather than the use of follower numbers as a measure of social value.

Tension between Symbolic and Achievement-Based Self-Presentation

The relationship between symbolic display and achievement-based self-presentation was examined most directly through a hypothetical choice posed during a student group interview. Students were asked to choose between displaying an achievement and displaying a newly purchased pair of branded shoes. This interview prompt was intended to elicit participants' views on different forms of social media self-presentation; students were not required to create or upload an actual post.

One student chose the branded shoes:

"The shoes, because I rarely win" (S2).

In this exchange, “win” referred to winning the badminton competition included in the hypothetical scenario. Another student responded:

“Flexing” (S3).

When asked to explain the choice, the student stated:

“Because if we post our achievements, people will say that we only post about achievements or something like that” (S3).

Within this hypothetical exchange, the students quoted above preferred the consumption-related form of self-presentation. S3’s explanation also indicated that anticipated audience reactions were considered when choosing between achievement-based and consumption-related forms of self-presentation. These responses do not establish that achievement was generally rejected or had lost its importance. Rather, they show that symbolic and achievement-based self-presentation could be evaluated differently when participants anticipated how others might receive their posts.

Family and Economic Contexts in Teachers’ Accounts of Flexing

Family and economic circumstances emerged specifically in the teacher focus group. These findings, therefore, represent teachers’ observations and interpretations of the contexts surrounding student flexing rather than direct accounts from students’ families.

One teacher described flexing among some students from lower-middle-income backgrounds and interpreted the behavior as an attempt to present an image of capability:

“Students from lower-middle-income backgrounds do not only flex on social media; they do it in everyday life as well. They want to show that they are capable, although if we look more deeply, they actually are not” (T3).

Another teacher associated with perceived limitations in family attention. Referring to students from what the teacher described as:

“families that are not doing well” (T1),

The teacher added:

“They seek that attention from their friends” (T1).

Other teacher accounts linked student flexing to examples observed in family environments. One teacher described parents as sometimes supporting or modeling flexing practices:

“The parents supported it and even set an example through their own involvement in flexing. So, in that sense, they were actually supporting it. That is how I see it” (T4).

Another teacher described a student whom the teacher understood to come from a lower-income family but who nevertheless came to school by car:

“There was also a case involving a ninth-grade student. It was similar to the case mentioned earlier. The student came from a lower-income family, yet they had to come to school by car. Financially speaking, however, the family was actually struggling” (T5).

The teacher accounts also contained a qualifying perspective. One teacher noted that students from incomplete or single-parent families who continued to receive strong parental attention were rarely observed displaying similar behavior. This account distinguished the family structure itself from the level of attention students received. Overall, teachers situated student flexing within combinations of economic circumstances, perceived parental attention, and parental modeling rather than identifying any single family condition as a direct cause.

The five themes are summarized in Table 1. They represent related yet distinct empirical patterns and differ in their primary data sources and the degree of support they receive across student and teacher accounts.

Table 1. Summary of Empirical Findings across Data Sources

Theme	Empirical Pattern	Primary Data Source(s)
Symbolic Meaning of Consumption Objects across Social Audiences	The use of a consumption item could involve both practical considerations and different meanings across family and peer audiences.	Student interview
Peer-Group Conformity and Symbolic Boundaries	Students described learning about flexing through peers, following group practices, friendship sorting, pressure to conform, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion.	Student interviews/group interviews; complementary evidence from the teacher focus group discussion
Second-Account Practices in Digital Self-Presentation	Students differentiated between main and second accounts based on content, frequency of use, naming, and audience. Follower numbers were mentioned but were not established as status metrics.	Student interviews/group interviews; complementary evidence from the teacher focus group discussion
Tension between Symbolic and Achievement-Based Self-Presentation	In response to a hypothetical interview prompt, the students quoted preferred the option involving branded shoes to the achievement-related option, with anticipated audience reaction informing one participant's explanation.	Student group interview
Family and Economic Contexts in Teachers' Accounts of Flexing	Teachers associated student flexing with combinations of economic circumstances, perceived parental attention, and parental modeling, while also providing a qualifying account concerning sustained parental attention.	Teacher focus group discussion

Taken together, these findings indicate that student flexing was embedded in several related social contexts. Consumption objects could take on different meanings depending on the anticipated audience, while peer relations shaped exposure, conformity, friendship boundaries, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion. Second, accounts provided differentiated spaces for digital self-presentation, although the available evidence did not establish follower numbers as a measure of social status. The hypothetical comparison between achievement and branded consumption provided more specific evidence that symbolic and achievement-based self-presentation could be evaluated differently in an anticipated social media context. Teacher accounts added a source-specific perspective concerning family attention, economic circumstances, and parental modeling. These patterns provide the empirical basis for interpreting how symbolic forms of recognition are negotiated alongside achievement-based recognition in the Discussion.

DISCUSSION

Audience-Dependent Sign-Value and Student Recognition

The first finding suggests that, in participants' accounts, the social meaning of consumption objects could not be understood solely in terms of their practical qualities. The anticipated audience also shaped how an object was evaluated. The same consumption object could be viewed differently in family and peer settings, indicating that its symbolic meaning was relational rather than fixed. This is important because it locates the significance of flexing not only in possession or consumption but also in the social conditions under which an object becomes meaningful for self-presentation and recognition. At the same time, practical considerations

remained present in participants' accounts. Symbolic meaning, therefore, coexisted with, rather than necessarily replacing, functional considerations.

This pattern confirms a broader point established in previous research: consumption objects can carry meanings related to social recognition, status, identity, and group positioning beyond their practical utility (Çelik & Çuhadar, 2023; Sari, 2022; Utomo et al., 2023). Sari (2022), for example, links student consumption to the social significance of appearance and possessions, while Çelik and Çuhadar (2023) show that objects of consumption within educational settings can serve as markers of status and group membership. The present study does not extend this literature simply by establishing that consumption may have symbolic meaning. Its more specific contribution lies in showing how, among the participating students, the meaning attached to an object could vary according to the anticipated social audience. In this sense, the findings provide a situated account of how symbolic value is negotiated rather than treating it as an inherent property of the object.

Baudrillard's concept of sign-value helps explain this pattern because commodities acquire social significance through their differential and relational meanings rather than through intrinsic properties alone (Baudrillard, 1981; Clausen, 2025; Duvenage, 2022; Jin & Hu, 2025). Applied to the present findings, the relevant theoretical point is not simply that students consumed signs, but that the social significance of those signs depended partly on the relational context in which they were anticipated to appear. The anticipated audience, therefore, represents one condition through which sign-value becomes socially consequential. At the same time, the presence of practical considerations in participants' accounts qualifies a totalizing reading of sign-value. The findings do not suggest that students related to consumption objects only as signs or that practical motives had disappeared.

From an educational perspective, this pattern suggests that educators should be cautious about interpreting consumption practices such as those described here solely as individual preferences or material choices. Such practices may also provide opportunities to examine how students associate objects with identity, social judgment, and recognition, and why the same object can convey different meanings across social relationships. The significance of the finding, therefore, lies less in identifying consumption itself as an educational problem than in revealing the socially constructed meanings through which consumption may become relevant to student recognition.

Peer Conformity, Symbolic Boundaries, and the Social Reinforcement of Sign-Value

The second finding indicates that peer relations formed an important context in which the social meanings associated with flexing were learned, negotiated, and sometimes reinforced. Participants described encountering flexing through friends, following practices associated with particular circles, experiencing pressure to align with peers, and connecting flexing with friendship selection, belonging, and exclusion. The significance of this pattern lies in the movement from symbolic meaning to social consequence. When particular consumption displays become associated with fitting into a group or with the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, sign-value becomes relevant not only to self-presentation but also to the negotiation of social belonging.

This finding broadly confirms previous research on the importance of peer influence in adolescent consumption and conformity. Mishra and Maity (2021) identify peers as a particularly influential socializing force in adolescent consumer behavior, while Sejati et al. (2024) describe conformity as a recurring feature of adolescence in which behavior can be adjusted in relation to group expectations. Research in educational contexts similarly indicates that consumption objects may contribute to group positioning and symbolic differentiation among students (Çelik & Çuhadar, 2023). The present findings are consistent with these patterns and add contextual detail by showing how peer influence around flexing was connected not only to imitation but also to belonging, friendship boundaries, and experiences of exclusion within the participating groups.

This contribution should remain qualified. Participants did not describe a uniform pattern of conformity. Some accounts attributed branded consumption to personal preference, and the teacher focus group provided

complementary but more limited evidence regarding peer belonging than the student interviews. The study, therefore, confirms the relevance of peer influence while qualifying interpretations that would treat students as uniformly governed by group expectations. Peer influence appeared as both a source of social pressure and a source of meaning, but not as an automatic determinant of individual behavior.

Baudrillard's logic of differentiation helps explain why peer contexts are particularly relevant to sign-value. Within a differential system of signs, objects of consumption can simultaneously communicate both affiliation with a desired group and distinction from others. The peer accounts in this study provide a situated illustration of that logic: symbolic displays could become meaningful partly because they were interpreted in relation to what particular circles regarded as appropriate, comparable, or socially recognizable. In this respect, peer relations provided one context in which sign-based expectations could acquire relative normative force.

The recurring combination of learning, conformity, belonging, and symbolic boundaries also provides this study with the strongest empirical basis for a qualified use of the concept of sign-value hegemony. The term is not used here to imply that consumption governed all student relationships, that every participant accepted the same symbolic norms, or that academic achievement had been displaced. Rather, it refers to situations in which sign-based evaluation criteria were sufficiently recurrent within particular peer contexts to influence aspects of self-presentation, belonging, and social judgment. The variation in participants' accounts is therefore part of the theoretical interpretation rather than evidence to be excluded from it. Hegemonic force, where analytically useful, should be understood as relative and contextual rather than total.

The educational significance of this finding does not lie in treating peer influence as inherently negative. Peer norms may support different forms of behavior under different conditions, including achievement-oriented practices. The more relevant educational question concerns how the criteria of belonging and recognition become normalized within peer relationships. For Social Studies Education, this creates an opportunity to examine how group norms, symbolic boundaries, inclusion, and exclusion are socially constructed while preserving students' agency in responding to those norms.

Second Accounts and Differentiated Digital Self-Presentation

The third finding highlights the differentiated nature of students' digital self-presentation. Among the participating students, main and second accounts were used differently depending on content, frequency of use, audience, and, in some cases, degree of identifiability. The importance of this pattern lies not simply in the existence of multiple accounts but in what their differentiated use suggests about online self-presentation. Students did not necessarily present themselves before a single, undifferentiated digital audience; instead, different digital spaces could accommodate different forms of visibility and self-presentation.

This pattern is consistent with previous research describing adolescent social media use as a process of selective presentation and identity management. Du (2023) and Jeyanthi (2022) discuss the curated character of online self-presentation, while Mahmudah et al. (2023) show that Indonesian adolescents actively control aspects of themselves displayed in digital public spaces and may use varying degrees of identifiability. The present finding provides a specific context for this broader literature by showing how such differentiation occurred through the use of main and secondary accounts among the participating junior high school students.

At the same time, the findings establish an important boundary in relation to the literature on digital social capital. Previous scholarship has suggested that followers, likes, visibility, and other quantifiable indicators can carry reputational or status meanings in some digital contexts. In the present study, however, the reported differences in follower counts only established that participants were aware of differing audience sizes across accounts. The data did not establish that follower numbers themselves functioned as measures of status, social recognition, or personal worth. The findings, therefore, qualify the applicability of a digital-social-capital interpretation to this dataset rather than confirming it. The fact that digital metrics can serve as status indicators elsewhere does not justify assigning that meaning to participants' accounts when participants themselves did not assign it.

Baudrillard's theory also has a more selective role in explaining this finding. Sign-value becomes relevant where differentiated accounts provide settings for displaying consumption-related or other symbolic content before particular audiences. It does not follow, however, that maintaining a second account is itself evidence of sign-value, nor does Baudrillard's framework explain every reason participants separated content, concealed some posts from teachers, or used less identifiable account names. Audience differentiation and selective self-presentation, therefore, provide a more direct interpretation of the empirical pattern than either digital social capital or sign-value hegemony.

The contribution of this finding is primarily empirical and contextual. It identifies differentiated account use as part of the digital settings in which students manage aspects of self-presentation, while also demonstrating the importance of distinguishing between audience awareness and status attribution. From an educational perspective, these practices provide a basis for examining how young people manage visibility, audiences, identity, and privacy across digital spaces. Such inquiry need not assume that online metrics determine students' worth; rather, it can focus on how different audiences shape decisions about what is made visible and what remains restricted.

Negotiating Symbolic and Achievement-Based Recognition

The fourth finding provides the most direct evidence in this study concerning the relationship between symbolic self-presentation and merit-based recognition. Within the hypothetical interview scenario, some participants preferred a consumption-related display to an achievement-related display. Their explanations indicated that anticipated audience reactions were among the considerations associated with that choice. The importance of this finding does not lie in demonstrating that achievement had become unimportant. Instead, it suggests that symbolic and achievement-based forms of self-presentation could be evaluated differently when participants considered how they might be received socially.

This interpretation is consistent with, but narrower than, previous research concerning digital visibility and achievement. Fujiono et al. (2024) argue that public visibility can become a competing pathway to recognition and that, in some contexts, highly visible digital performance may overshadow competence or academic achievement. The present findings are compatible with the possibility of competing bases of recognition, but they do not establish a general displacement of achievement. The empirical evidence here concerns participants' reasoning within a hypothetical self-presentation scenario rather than their actual posting behavior, academic motivation, or long-term orientations toward achievement.

This qualification becomes particularly important when the finding is considered alongside research showing that academic achievement itself can be publicly displayed and socially rewarded. Chua et al. (2024) And Fernández et al. (2022) demonstrate that achievement can become part of performative identity and a source of social recognition. Previous research, therefore, does not support a simple opposition between digital visibility and merit. Peer norms may also reinforce either achievement-oriented or alternative forms of behavior, depending on what receives social approval (Allen, 2024; Qu, 2023). The present study does not challenge those findings. Instead, it suggests that the social meaning of displaying achievement can itself be audience-sensitive. In the hypothetical exchange, some participants anticipated that achievement-related self-presentation could be received differently from consumption-related display.

The theoretical significance of this pattern lies in the distinction between sign-value and merit-based recognition. Baudrillard's concept helps explain how consumption-related displays may acquire social meaning through symbolic differentiation. Merit-based recognition identifies a different evaluative basis grounded in effort, competence, talent, and achievement. The finding suggests that these criteria can coexist and, in situations such as those participants were asked to consider, may enter into tension when different forms of self-presentation are evaluated with an anticipated audience in mind.

This interpretation deliberately stops short of treating the finding as evidence of a general "meritocracy crisis." The study did not assess whether the educational system as a whole was meritocratic, nor did it establish that sign-value had become structurally dominant over achievement. The more defensible conceptual

contribution is narrower: the findings connect symbolic differentiation with the educational problem of how different bases of recognition may be negotiated in students' social lives. In this respect, anticipated audience reception provides one empirically grounded consideration through which the relation between symbolic and achievement-based recognition can be examined.

From an educational perspective, this tension matters because students in contexts such as those examined here may encounter more than one socially meaningful criterion for what is considered worth displaying or recognizing. The finding does not establish that flexing reduces academic motivation or that students no longer value achievement. It does, however, provide a basis for asking how peer judgments influence the social meanings attached to achievement, consumption, and visibility, and how students themselves understand the relationship between recognition and achievement.

Family and Economic Contexts in Teachers' Interpretations of Flexing

The fifth finding adds an important contextual layer to the interpretation of flexing. Unlike the preceding themes, this pattern emerged specifically from the teacher focus group and therefore represents teachers' observations and interpretations rather than direct accounts from students' families. Teachers situated some instances of flexing within combinations of economic circumstances, perceived parental attention, and parental modeling. The significance of this finding lies in showing that, from the teachers' perspective, symbolic self-presentation cannot be understood solely through peer interactions or social media practices.

Previous research provides a general context for these interpretations. Studies of adolescent consumer behavior identify parents and the broader social environment, alongside peers and media, as relevant influences on consumption-related orientations (Mishra & Maity, 2021). Research on symbolic and status-oriented consumption also emphasizes the importance of social environments in shaping the meanings attached to consumption practices (Sari, 2022; Utomo et al., 2023). The present study, however, does not directly confirm causal explanations in terms of parenting or economic factors because the evidence comes from teachers' accounts rather than from family members or independent measures of family conditions.

The qualifying perspective within the teacher discussion is especially important. Teachers did not describe family structure as a sufficient explanation for flexing, and one account distinguished family structure from the perceived quality of parental attention. This variation cautions against reducing the instances of flexing described by teachers to a single-family characteristic. Economic circumstances, family structure, perceived parental attention, and parental modeling should therefore not be treated as interchangeable explanations, and the present data do not establish any of them as causes.

Baudrillard's theory has a narrower explanatory role in this theme. Sign-value can help interpret the symbolic dimension of attempts to present capability, distinction, or status, but it cannot by itself explain economic hardship, parental attention, or family structure. Bringing all of these circumstances under sign-value would overextend both the theory and the evidence. The theoretical importance of this finding, therefore, lies partly in establishing a boundary of the principal conceptual lens: symbolic self-presentation occurs within broader social and material contexts that cannot be reduced to the logic of signs alone.

The contribution of this finding is consequently contextual rather than causal. It adds teachers' interpretations of family and economic circumstances to the broader account of student flexing while preserving the source-specific status of those interpretations. From an educational perspective, this finding cautions against moralizing student flexing or reading it as straightforward evidence of materialism, economic deprivation, parental neglect, or family dysfunction. Teachers and educators may need to approach such behavior with contextual sensitivity, recognizing both the complexity of the circumstances surrounding student self-presentation and the limits of what can be inferred from school-based observation.

Integrative Conceptual Contribution and Pedagogical Implications for Reflective Social Studies Education

Taken together, the findings suggest that one important educational dimension of flexing in the studied contexts lies not only in consumption itself but also in the ways symbolic meanings can become socially

consequential. Consumption objects were interpreted in relation to audiences; peer relationships provided contexts in which particular symbolic expectations could become connected with belonging and boundaries; second accounts differentiated the audiences and spaces of digital self-presentation; and the hypothetical comparison between consumption and achievement indicated that anticipated social reception could be a consideration in decisions about which forms of self-presentation seemed preferable. Teachers are additionally situated within broader family and economic circumstances. These patterns do not establish that symbolic recognition has displaced achievement or that sign-value governs all student relationships. Rather, they indicate a set of contexts in which different criteria of recognition can coexist and be negotiated.

The conceptual contribution of the study follows from the relationship among these empirical patterns rather than from a claim that any single phenomenon is unprecedented. Previous scholarship has already examined symbolic consumption, peer influence, digital identity, social visibility, and meritocracy from different perspectives. The present study offers a bounded integration of these strands by using sign-value to interpret how symbolic meanings can become socially consequential and by using merit-based recognition to identify a distinct evaluative basis associated with effort, competence, and achievement. The contribution, therefore, lies in clarifying how symbolic and achievement-based criteria of recognition may coexist and enter into tension within particular forms of student social interaction, while keeping sign-value and merit-based recognition analytically distinct.

Within this synthesis, sign-value hegemony is most defensible as a qualified higher-order interpretation of recurring peer processes rather than as a separate empirical finding or a general structural condition. The peer accounts suggest that sign-based expectations can acquire relative normative force through processes of learning, conformity, belonging, and symbolic boundary-making within particular groups. At the same time, the variation among participants means that these expectations should not be interpreted as universally dominant. The digital findings further establish differentiated contexts of self-presentation but do not demonstrate that follower metrics constituted a generalized status system. Sign-value hegemony, where applicable, therefore refers to the contextual social force of repeatedly validated sign-based expectations, not to the total displacement of other criteria of worth.

This interpretation identifies an educational problem relevant to Social Studies Education: how students come to understand, reproduce, question, and negotiate the criteria through which social value, belonging, status, and achievement are recognized. Critical and reflective approaches in Social Studies Education emphasize critical thinking and critical literacy as means of examining social assumptions and structures (Chrismastianto et al., 2024). Reflective practice also enables learners to interrogate socially constructed meanings and dominant narratives and to develop more nuanced understandings of their participation in social and civic life (Colley et al., 2021; Jaffee, 2022). From a Freirean perspective, students' lived experiences can become starting points for dialogical, problem-posing inquiry rather than being treated only as behaviors to be corrected (Budnyk et al., 2023).

Student flexing can therefore be considered one possible pedagogical entry point for reflective Social Studies inquiry. Rather than asking students simply to accept or reject symbolic consumption, such inquiry could invite them to examine why particular objects, forms of visibility, peer practices, or achievements receive recognition; how audiences shape those judgments; and what assumptions about success, belonging, and social worth are embedded in them. The relevance of reflection follows from the character of the empirical problem itself. The findings concern socially constructed meanings and anticipated judgments rather than merely a lack of factual knowledge, making critical examination of assumptions and evaluative criteria a conceptually appropriate pedagogical response.

This pedagogical implication should nevertheless remain clearly separated from the empirical findings. Reflective Social Studies Education was not implemented or evaluated as an intervention in this study. The findings, therefore, cannot establish that reflective pedagogy reduces flexing, changes students' recognition orientations, strengthens academic motivation, or restores meritocracy. They provide an empirical and conceptual basis for proposing reflective inquiry into competing forms of recognition as a relevant pedagogical

direction. Whether such an approach is feasible in particular classrooms and whether it produces the intended educational outcomes requires direct investigation through future classroom-based and intervention research.

Accordingly, the study's practical contribution is not a validated instructional model but rather a more focused pedagogical problem in Social Studies Education. The findings suggest that students' everyday peer and digital experiences can provide material for examining how social value is constructed and how achievement is recognized alongside other forms of visibility. Reflective Social Studies Education may offer a context in which these criteria can be critically examined while allowing students to remain active participants in the digital and social environments that form part of their everyday lives. In this bounded sense, the study connects the empirical analysis of student flexing with a pedagogical direction concerned with reflection on value, recognition, and achievement rather than claiming that the proposed response has already been shown to be effective.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative multi-site study involved 22 junior high school students from six schools in Yogyakarta and eight Social Studies teachers recruited through MGMP-IPS Yogyakarta. The findings suggest that sign-value operated through student flexing in audience-dependent and socially negotiated ways: the symbolic meaning of consumption objects varied across social audiences; peer relations sometimes connected symbolic display with conformity, belonging, and exclusion; and main and second accounts differentiated the audiences and spaces of digital self-presentation. These patterns did not show that symbolic recognition replaced achievement. Rather, responses to a hypothetical comparison between consumption-related and achievement-based self-presentation indicated that symbolic and achievement-based forms of recognition could coexist and, in some situations, enter into tension when participants considered anticipated audience reactions. Teachers also situated some instances of flexing within broader family and economic contexts without establishing causal explanations within the family. Empirically, the study provides a contextual account of the social conditions in which symbolic meanings became relevant to participants' recognition of one another. Conceptually, it offers a bounded integration of Baudrillardian sign-value and merit-based recognition by clarifying how symbolic and achievement-based criteria may coexist and be negotiated within particular forms of student social interaction, without treating sign-value as universally dominant or framing the findings as evidence of a general meritocracy crisis. For Social Studies Education, the findings provide an empirical and conceptual basis for considering reflective inquiry into students' everyday peer, digital, and consumption experiences as a possible pedagogical entry point for examining how value, status, belonging, recognition, and achievement are socially constructed. Reflective Social Studies Education, however, was not implemented or evaluated in this study, so its effectiveness cannot be inferred. Because the student sample was drawn from six Yogyakarta schools and the teacher sample was recruited through MGMP-IPS Yogyakarta, the transferability to contexts beyond these settings should be assessed with caution. In addition, the most direct evidence concerning symbolic versus achievement-based self-presentation came from a hypothetical interview prompt. At the same time, the family and economic interpretations were teacher-derived rather than based on direct family data. Future research should therefore examine these recognition dynamics in actual self-presentation practices, using longitudinal and multi-informant designs, and directly investigate the feasibility and educational effects of Reflective Social Studies Education in classroom settings.

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