

CONFRONTING FLEXING SOCIETY IN THE DIGITAL AGE THROUGH MUHAMMAD IQBAL'S PHILOSOPHY OF MORALS

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Abstract: *This research aims to explain that in the digital age, society is confronted with a flexing society. This phenomenon occurs because the moral and value system governing social life has been reduced to mere commodities measured primarily by the ownership of goods. This study identifies an interconnectedness between contemporary capitalism, social media, and consumerism and their collective role in eroding moral foundations and individual self-determination. A primary consequence of consumerism is the erosion of moral standards and the emergence of a culture of conspicuous consumption. This flexing society, facilitated by social media, subsequently degrades morality and autonomy, as individuals become trapped in the pursuit of illusory goals shrouded within a world of hyper-reality. Through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's simulacra and the moral philosophy of Sir Muhammad Iqbal, this study specifically constructs a unique normative philosophical argument regarding the restoration of existential selfhood amidst the encroachment of hyper-reality. Using qualitative methods and hermeneutic interpretation of Gadamer's philosophy, this study demonstrates that Iqbal's concept of *kbudī* is not merely a theological idea, but rather an instrument of ontological resistance capable of deconstructing the entrapment of individuals within the algorithmic image, as their lives are trapped in the pursuit of an illusory reality veiled within the world of hyperreality. This research concludes the importance of a moral framework that is holistic, integral, and objective through Iqbal's framework, which offers a solution to digital alienation while repositioning the autonomous human being as a creator of meaning, not merely an object of simulated consumption.*

Keywords: *Consumerism, Digital Age, Flexing Society, Iqbal's Moral Philosophy, Moral Degradation.*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan bahwa di era digital, masyarakat dihadapkan pada fenomena budaya pamer. Fenomena ini terjadi karena sistem moral dan nilai yang mengatur kehidupan sosial telah direduksi menjadi sekadar komoditas yang diukur terutama berdasarkan kepemilikan barang. Penelitian ini menunjukkan adanya keterhubungan antara kapitalisme

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kontemporer, media sosial, dan konsumerisme dengan degradasi moral dan krisis identitas. Dampak dari konsumerisme adalah hilangnya panduan moral dan munculnya fenomena budaya pamer di masyarakat. Fenomena budaya pamer yang difasilitasi oleh media sosial ini kemudian mendegradasi moralitas dan otentisitas diri, karena hidup mereka terjebak dalam mengejar sesuatu yang bersifat ilusi yang terselubung dalam dunia hiperrealitas. Melalui lensa simulakra Jean Baudrillard dan filsafat moral Sir Muhammad Iqbal, penelitian ini secara khusus membangun argumen filosofis normatif mengenai pentingnya pemulihan eksistensi diri di tengah kepongakan hiperrealitas. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif dan hermeneutika filosofis Gadamer, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa konsep *khudi* Iqbal bukan sekadar gagasan teologis, melainkan sebuah instrumen resistensi ontologis yang mampu mendekonstruksi keterjebakan individu dalam citra algoritma, karena hidup mereka terjebak dalam mengejar sesuatu yang bersifat ilusi yang terselubung dalam dunia hiperrealitas. Riset ini menyimpulkan pentingnya panduan moral yang bersifat holistik, integral, dan objektif melalui kerangka Iqbalian yang menawarkan solusi terhadap kecenderungan mempertontonkan status sosial di era digital, sekaligus memposisikan kembali manusia yang otonom sebagai pencipta makna, bukan sekadar objek konsumsi simulasi.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Degradasi Moral, Era Digital, Filsafat Moral Iqbal, Masyarakat Pamer, Konsumerisme.*

Introduction

We now inhabit the digital age, a period defined by the rapid advancement of information and communication technology systems. While the remarkable growth of social media has undoubtedly enhanced access to information, it has not been without significant consequences (Istijanto and Purusottama 2023, 2276620). Social media has become an integral part of daily life, especially for Generation Z, known as the first generation to grow up in a fully digital environment. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube serve as sources of entertainment while also providing a space for them to shape their identities, follow trends, and define their lifestyles. Furthermore, this technology has commodified style and status (Jaelani et al. 2012, 156–57). Evidence of this claim is seen in the manipulation of public opinion through filter bubbles and the phenomenon of social comparison that forces individuals to adopt artificial identities for the sake of digital status (Khayati et al. 2022, 113–21).

Many people are driven to show up in their lives to gain recognition, appreciation, or validation from the digital world (Hartono 2024, 132–45). Content that is presented quickly, engagingly, and is easily accessible makes it easier for many people to be influenced to follow what's trending, including when it comes to purchasing items or adopting a certain lifestyle (Hayani et al. 2025, 2184–93). Consequently, consumption has sparked a shift in public perceptions of reality and the ideal life, leading to moral degradation and a loss of self-autonomy.

In this context, moral degradation refers to the erosion of conventional ethical values due to the addictive effects of social media, where individuals tend to disregard empathy in favor of validation or digital engagement. Meanwhile, the loss of self-autonomy is defined as the reduction in individual agency in making independent decisions due to the intervention of algorithmic design and massive social conformity pressures. This article aims to examine the impact of the

proliferation of social media within digital society, particularly the phenomena of moral degradation and the loss of self-autonomy in social life. This decline occurs because prevailing moral systems and values have been reduced to commodities, measured solely by material possessions, thereby giving rise to various forms of social deviance and violations within digital society.

Moral degradation and the loss of self-autonomy are consequences of the failure, both individual and social, to uphold ideal ethical and moral principles. This failure stems from society's disorientation regarding reality and the goal of life. Furthermore, moral degradation occurs because moral justification no longer effectively constrains an individual's actions within society. This ineffectiveness is a direct result of the increasing difficulty in distinguishing between right and wrong, a confusion fueled by a manipulated reality. Based on the preceding analysis and given that digital society is characterized by profound uncertainty, the contemporary world requires an integral, rational, and objective theoretical foundation for ethics, as conceptualized in Muhammad Iqbal's philosophy of morals.

Muhammad Iqbal's philosophy of morals was chosen because he places human beings as autonomous moral agents who are also God's vicegerents (*khaliḥah*) on Earth. The main task of this representative can only be fulfilled through the development of self-consciousness (*khudī*), and Iqbal's concept of *khudī* is not merely a theological idea, but rather an instrument of ontological resistance capable of confronting the era of a flexing society that traps individuals in algorithmic images, as their lives are trapped in the pursuit of an illusory reality shrouded in a world of hyperreality.

This research employs qualitative methods and critical reflection. The primary method is hermeneutical interpretation with Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics approach, focusing on Muhammad Iqbal's writings, particularly *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, to extract the essential meaning of *khudī* as a philosophical concept of the self. This phenomenon of flexing society in social media is critically examined through contemporary theories of digital culture and identity drawn by Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, and Zygmunt Bauman. This method was chosen because this study is not merely a sociological description, but a critical and hermeneutic reflection aimed at aligning philosophical texts with contemporary reality.

The hermeneutic steps in this study are operationalized as follows: First, the author begins with a pre-understanding, namely the initial identification of the crisis of authenticity in the phenomenon of flexing society trapped in digital simulacra. Second, a process of horizon fusion is carried out, in which the horizon of Muhammad Iqbal's thought on *khudī* is dialogued with the horizon of the 21st-century digital world. In this stage, Iqbal's thought is not only treated as a historical text, but as a dialogue partner that provides answers to the problems of hyperreality. Third, this study applies the hermeneutic circle to understand the dialectical relationship between individual consumer behavior on social media (as part) and the structure of global capitalism and the ontological identity crisis (as

a whole). Finally, through the principle of application, this study produces a new synthesis of meaning that the concept of *kbudī* is an instrument of resistance to restore human beings' autonomy. Thus, Gadamerian hermeneutics in this research serves to deconstruct the entrapment of individuals in the image of algorithms and reconstruct the position of human beings as creators of meaning amidst the siege of simulation.

This analysis proceeds in two stages: first, applying this framework to conduct a critical reflection on the phenomenon of flexing society on social media; and second, reconstructing *kbudī* as an ethical and spiritual response to the fragmentation of the self in the digital age. This critical reflection enables the study to generate normative philosophical arguments rather than empirical generalizations, thereby contributing to the development of a dialogue between Islamic ethical thought and moral discourse in the global digital age. In philosophy, the primary purpose of using the critical reflection method is to encourage individuals to examine and evaluate everything they hear, see, or read before forming their own judgments or opinions about a particular issue or event (Browne and Keeley 2007).

This work is based on research established by Austin Duncan-Jones, John Kekes, and Peter Singer. These scholars contend that a primary cause of moral degradation in the digital age is the profound divergence in individual attitudes, values, and life goals (Walmsley 2013, 31–52). This divergence culminates in a state of moral blindness, characterized by an insensitivity to the suffering of others and a dysfunction of the moral sense (Francot 2014, 203).

This article adds to the discussion by identifying another cause: the erosion of self-understanding and its relation to the world. This erosion is a consequence of the emergence of simulated realities, which possess the capacity to generate alternative realities and invert fundamental categories such as right-wrong and good-evil. Consequently, the solution proposed in this article is to fortify the understanding of the essential nature of the self by reintegrating the element of wholeness into the human person.

Consumerism, Flexing Society, and Digital Society

There are four fundamental value concepts that society consumes: benefit value, exchange value, sign value, and symbolic value. Among these four values, the symbolic value that signifies class, status, or lifestyle is the most highly demanded within digital society. According to Jean Baudrillard's conception, digital society, including social media, fundamentally does not reflect reality but has instead become a reality. This is what Baudrillard terms hyper-reality, a condition in which media no longer represent reality but have become a self-contained reality, wherein the mediated image is perceived as more real than reality itself (Bakti et al. 2019, 147–66; Baudrillard 1998; Ren 2025, 105–11).

Media reality is the result of a simulation process, in which the representations found in the media have been produced and reproduced by the media itself into a self-contained reality. In fact, these representations often diverge from, or even contradict, the original signs or objects they purport to reference (Rosida et al. 2023,

193–208). The realities constructed on platforms such as Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube constitute a new reality termed by Baudrillard as simulacra. This concept of simulacra not only explains how a sign is represented but also encompasses social relations and power dynamics involved in this process (Firmansyah et al. 2024, 27–34).

This simulacra reality is formed by the combination of a liberal capitalist economic system and information and communication technologies that have developed in Western countries, a system that Baudrillard identifies as a system of consumption. Simulacra reality is essentially a type of reality constructed from signs of reality that lack a natural referent or have become detached from their natural referent (Bakti et al. 2019, 147–66; Baudrillard 1994, 1–20). These signs subsequently possess the capacity to represent things freely and be interpreted arbitrarily; in other words, they have become signs that interchange randomly, a process known as simulation (Firmansyah and Subandiyah 2025, 305–15).

The proliferation of a simulated reality cannot be separated from the consumer system, globalization, and advancement in information and communication technology. The influential power of information technology, particularly through social media, has influenced the way people think and act, both individually and as groups, and holds the potential to erode humanity's fundamental understanding of themselves and the world around them (Jaelani et al. 2012, 156–67)

A congruent view is posited by Jean Baudrillard, who contends that the consumption of objects is fundamentally an act of sign consumption that is not primarily concerned with use-value to fulfill practical functions or specific basic human needs, but rather with symbolic value, which serves to demarcate class, status, or other social distinctions (Baudrillard 1994; Firmansyah and Subandiyah 2025, 305–15) For instance, owning a motor vehicle of a specific brand can project an image of the owner occupying a particular social position. Similarly, purchasing a residence in a certain area can position an individual as if they belong to a specific social stratum within the community.

The act of consumption is entirely delegated to the individual, based on their desires and financial capacity. Through consumption, the individual simultaneously constructs a desired identity. Furthermore, consuming signifies participation within a community of other individuals, bound by shared activity (Bakti et al. 2019, 162–63). This participation reinforces social bonds, imbues the action with meaning, and provides an 'approval of numbers' for those involved (Armawi 2017, 314–23). The mere acts of standing in a concert crowd, attending a live sporting event, or sitting in a cafe confer immediate social recognition. This acknowledgment validates one's presence and signifies belonging to a collective, requiring no further justification (Bakti et al. 2020, 81–98). An individual need not undertake laborious efforts to prove their devotion to an artist, as their mere presence within the crowd is sufficient demonstration of it.

The pattern within consumer society is analogous to a Society of Individuals. Norbert Elias redefined the concepts of society and the individual by replacing the terms and/or versus, which are commonly used to link society and the individual,

with of. According to him, the relationship between society and individuals is not one of opposition or two separate entities, but rather reciprocal. Society shapes individuality, and conversely, the individual also shapes society through their actions carried out within the interconnectedness of social networks. Thus far, the concepts of the social and the individual seemed separate, but now the two are interconnected.

Bamazruk et al. in their research demonstrate a link between flexing society and social media and consumer behavior. Flexing society on social media creates new social standards that make many users feel compelled to adopt this lifestyle even if it doesn't align with their financial circumstances. This culture can create social pressure and foster impulsive consumption behavior (Bamazruk et al. 2025, 1–10). Social media is a digital space that allows individuals to interact, share information, and shape their self-image. Social media also plays a major role in shaping purchasing decisions through influencers, viral content, and recommendations from other users

Visual, fast-paced, and easily accessible content gives social media significant influence over how people make decisions. Platform algorithms like those on TikTok and Instagram further amplify this influence by presenting content tailored to users' interests, including shopping content, viral trends, and luxurious lifestyles. This constant exposure can influence perceptions of need and drive consumerist behavior (Pasenrigading et al. 2025, 68–81). Many people are driven to project a certain lifestyle to gain recognition, appreciation, or validation from their digital environment. Branded goods, luxury activities, and viral trends are viewed as symbols of self-worth that need to be displayed to the public. This pattern creates a condition where desires are more dominant than needs.

The consumer system is a defining characteristic of contemporary capitalism that dominates life in the digital age within digital society. The act of consumption is inherently a personal act, as the experience is a purely subjective one for each individual (Bodislav and Georgescu 2025, 252–53). There is not inherently right or wrong in consumer choices, as each choice has its own validity. This is based on the concept that the significant element is not the specific object chosen, but rather the process of selection itself. It is then realized that what is compelling about consumerism is the manner in which responsibility is fully delegated to the individual. The freedom granted to each individual, paradoxically, also burdens them with subsequent accountability. Satisfaction, happiness, or even the opposite, that is disappointment, must be entirely borne by the individual.

Although satisfaction and happiness are the intended goals sought through consumption, they are inherently difficult to achieve because human desires and appetites continue to grow, while the means to achieve that satisfaction are limited. One strategy employed by capitalists to ensure consumers never reach a state of complete satisfaction is to gradually devalue a commodity. This process prevents individuals from reaching a point of satisfaction and fosters an addiction to continued consumption (Debord 2024, 1–7). Every promise of satisfaction offered by producers for a given product must be perpetually deferred to foster a sense of

frustration that drives people to pursue it even more (Monica et al. 2022, 1198–99). This is why there is a need for new products and means which are expected to provide greater satisfaction and happiness. This is how capitalism operates in the digital age through social media to create a consumerist society (Tiggemann and Anderberg 2020, 2183–99). Producers persistently proffer illusory promises and idealized images to attract consumers, even though genuine satisfaction remains unattainable from every new product or commodity (Kusumawati et al. 2022, 196–97).

Debord paid serious attention to the relationship between consumption and consumers and the digital society (Best and Kellner 1999, 130–31). He stated that the trajectory of social life in this era can be understood as a decline from being to having and subsequently from having to appearing (Debord 2024, 7–30). This condition of decline is a manifestation of the commodity initiating a process of colonization of social life. Debord also introduced a new term: the spectacle, an inverted image of society in which relationships between commodities have replaced relationships between people. The spectacle is not a collection of images, but rather a social relationship mediated by images (Debord 2024, 7–30; Aji and Tohir 2020, 169–82).

The spectacle cannot be understood merely as a visual deception produced by social media technology, nor as simple decoration or a trivial aspect of society. On the contrary, it functions as the very heart of that society, even propagating epidemic models of what is deemed an ideal social life. In his writing, Debord states, “*The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: ‘what appears is good; what is good appears.’*” (Best and Kellner 1999, 129–56; Debord 2024, 7–8). The *spectacle* brings about a concrete inversion of life; it is an autonomous movement of the non-living.

In Zygmunt Bauman’s view, consumerism functions as a mechanism for adaptation within the digital society, which is characterized by pervasive uncertainty, a condition he terms as survival-and-gratification consumerism (Bauman 2007, 65–68). Here, consumerism is defined not as the act of consumption aimed at fulfilling needs, but rather as the consumption of products as a means of realizing freedom or actualizing desires (Dalgliesh 2014, 97–98). Bauman cites the assertion by Harvie Ferguson that contemporary consumerism is stimulated by fantasy (Bauman 2007, 60–65).

Within digital society, we also observe that the fervent desire for identity is, in part, underpinned by the inherent instability constructed within that very society (Davis 2016, 137–64). The minimal degree of trust that can be placed in social media, coupled with the resulting ambiguity, compels individuals to adopt identities as markers of belonging. These identities provide access to certain feelings, such as security, which can only be obtained through them. As Lars Dencik argues, there exists a longing to seek out or construct new groups to gain acceptance and enhance a sense of collective security (Bauman 2007, 68).

Information and communication technology, particularly through social media, constitutes a form of economic colonization that has provoked resistance

within society. Consequently, new social movements have emerged, espousing diverse and relative moral perspectives. This liberal moral relativism ultimately erodes the established society's moral order. All aspects of life have now been reduced to mere representations or images. These images, detached from the full context of lived experience, merge into a continuous stream of existence, rendering the wholeness of life irrecoverable and rendering society increasingly inauthentic. Daily life is dominated by computer screens and the incessant imagery presented by social media, leading to a distorted human perception of the world. This condition is what is termed the pseudo-world.

Moral Degradation in Digital Society

As elucidated above, information and communication technology, through social media, generates needs-imagery produced through the operations of the production system. According to Baudrillard, the logic employed by the consumer system is itself fundamentally rooted in a mode of operation resembling a game steeped in magical thinking, a logic he deems amoral and more primitive than rational thought (Baudrillard 1998, 176). Consequently, concerns of morality and self-autonomy are marginalized within the global landscape, overshadowed by advancements in economics and information technology.

Some circles may argue that moral issues do not warrant serious discussion, as such debates only lead to a moral deadlock or because morality contributes little to economic, scientific, and technological progress. However, others maintain that the discussion of morality remains a crucial undertaking in the contemporary era, particularly given the proliferation of new forms of crime and the increasing permissiveness of societal attitudes towards various forms of deviance (Singer 2011). This is because the consumer system operates on the principle of sign manipulation, meaning that from its very foundation, both the system itself and its underlying values inherently contain elements of manipulation or deception. In other words, this system functions to dismantle traditional moral principles and values, replacing them with those that support and perpetuate the consumer system itself (Agustina et al. 2025, 108–26; Baudrillard 1998, 176).

Numerous philosophers, including Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Stocker, have been concerned for several decades with concerns regarding moral degradation in the digital age (Hookway 2013, 841; MacIntyre 2007, 2–23; Stocker 1976, 453). MacIntyre, for instance, argues that the world we face today is rife with a simulation of morality, in the sense that we continue to use key concepts in moral language, yet have largely lost sight of their substantive core, both in theory and in practice (MacIntyre 2007, 23). MacIntyre's argument aligns with Baudrillard's theory of simulacra regarding how the consumer system operates to replace traditional moral values with the ersatz moral values of consumerism itself (Agustina et al. 2025, 108–26; Baudrillard 1994, 124).

The proliferation of the consumer system's ersatz moral values fuels the phenomenon of solipsism, a condition in which individuals use their own subjective experiences as the fundamental point of reference for interpreting the

world around them (Searle 2004, 215). Such individuals prioritize their own experiences and perspectives over those of others. Even if the existence of others is acknowledged, it is reduced to merely an extension of the individual's own subjective experience. This condition inherently diminishes a person's capacity for self-understanding and comprehension of the external world. Furthermore, the phenomenon of solipsism fosters selfish and individualistic tendencies, making individuals less capable of tolerating differences. This occurs because the subjective dimension now dominates over the objective dimension within the individual. Consequently, anything that does not align with a person's subjective values or preferences is rejected, deemed inferior, or immediately regarded as an enemy to be suppressed (Heriyanto 2013, 35–36).

According to Roy Bhaskar's critical realism perspective, someone who reduces reality to their own personal experience, or to only what they know directly, will see reality from a flat or one-dimensional perspective. The consequence of this flat view of reality is that they can only perceive the world and its complexities from a single perspective. As a result of this flattened view of reality is that they can only perceive the world and its complexities from a single vantage point. Consequently, when confronted with a complex, multidimensional problem, their understanding remains limited, leading to restricted solutions that may benefit their own group but inflict suffering upon others (Bhaskar 2013, 35; Huda 2020, 43–44). Such an approach is essentially inadequate, as it fails to resolve the underlying problems and creates new ones, thereby exacerbating the complexity of the existing situation.

Furthermore, another negative consequence of separating signs from their referents in the digital age is the erosion of critical thinking skills. This erosion manifests as a diminished ability to evaluate errors and to seriously detect, discuss, and challenge deception, fraud, and manipulation (Groff 2004, 10; Potter 2007, 74–75). According to Groff, the ability to identify errors, fraud, or deception is a crucial skill and key to improving one's own circumstances and those of society and freeing them from the grip of contemporary capitalism and oppressive or coercive social structures, such as those found in the digital age. Groff recognizes that a social system is rife with power structures characterized by alienation, domination, and oppression (Mukhlis and Asnawi 2023, 41–42). This is the most concerning aspect of this simulation logic in the digital age, as it has profound implications for both moral degradation and the loss of self-autonomy.

The prevailing rules fail to help individuals navigate the complexities and uncertainties of daily life. This inadequacy stems from the fact that these rules were created by the modern capitalist system, which regards moral issues as unimportant, since morality does not contribute to economic, scientific, and technological progress. Meanwhile, the contemporary world has moved beyond the modern phase and entered the postmodern or contemporary era. This transition, on the one hand, has caused moral guidelines to continue losing their relevance, while on the other hand, the fundamental human need for direction, guidance, or a framework persists.

Junren Wan, as a Chinese moral philosopher, also highlighted the degradation

of morality in the West. According to Junren, the world is currently facing a more serious problem than simply weakening morality, as human beings have lost their ability to explain the role of morality in both the practical and theoretical worlds. This is in addition to the inability of human beings in this era to appreciate or value virtues and traditional values such as obedience, self-development, harmony, compassion, prudence, justice, humility, courage, self-cultivation, and so forth (Li and Ye 2017, 49–50). A more worrying problem is the diminishing human capacity for objective, serious, systematic, integrated, and personal reflection on moral values. Furthermore, individuals demonstrate an inability to recognize these values and respond to them consistently, intelligently, and responsibly.

This condition can be described as non-ideal because the world and the reality that human beings face are profoundly complex and multi-layered, while their perspective remains confined by the modern worldview, which reduces the world to empirical experience. Consequently, other aspects of reality in the world that cannot be perceived by the human senses are deliberately ignored or marginalized, and even deemed non-existent (Potter 2007, 74–75). Finally, when certain moral rules are applied in real-life contexts, they are perceived as contradicting general human moral intuitions, thereby sparking debate and controversy.

The essence of morality is knowing what actions are good and bad for a person and what is right and what is wrong, but in the world of simulation, as Baudrillard said, good and bad or right and wrong have merged into one, making it difficult for us to discuss moral issues seriously, and moral deadlock and moral blindness have occurred. This has resulted in a state of moral deadlock and moral blindness (Baudrillard 1998; Bauman and Donskis 2015). Furthermore, the linguistic turn, as logical positivism popularized, reduces the substance of morality to the realm of language (Foot 2003; Zuziak 2023, 85–86). From this perspective, moral issues are matters of emotion, personal feeling, and individual choice rather than rational deliberation. Consequently, morality is relegated to the realm of the subjective. Disappointment with the immoral practices in daily life caused by social media, with its inherently simulated nature, motivates the author to seek alternative solutions to these problems.

Why is reorientation of thinking toward moral values that are integral, holistic, and impartial necessary? This intellectual reorientation is necessary because the old paradigm, which contains epistemic fallacies and is inherently reductive in nature; it must be replaced immediately by a new moral/ethical system that is non-reductive and integral. One of the negative consequences of reductive thinking is an individual's inability to distinguish beneficial change from detrimental change. Consequently, what they perceive as positive may lead to negative outcomes. For instance, moral relativism and nihilism were originally conceived as correctives to classical moral theories, which were criticized for disregarding local contexts and imposing rigid moral constraints. However, these modern frameworks ultimately deprive humanity of a solid moral foundation, leading to submission under reductive assumptions. As a result, such theories are seldom accepted in their original form and often undergo premature transformation

Therefore, conspicuous consumption now defines society, with widespread luxury goods purchases signaling individual prestige and social standing (Bakti et al. 2020, 81–98). Ultimately, a culture of conspicuous display characterizes the majority of the digital society (Faiza et al. 2025, 13–14).

In the context of the Muslim community in Indonesia, this phenomenon extends to spiritual and religious rituals, which are displayed on social media to signify status and class; for instance, umrah has shifted from worship to flexing (Hidayat 2022, 1970–81). Consequently, moral degradation manifests itself in a shift from moral values to performative behavior (digital *riyā'*) and the normalization of backbiting in cyberspace. This is reinforced by the MUI Fatwa No. 24 of 2017, which responded to this degradation in moral standards. Furthermore, the loss of self-autonomy is evident in the erosion of individual agency in religion due to the dominance of algorithms, which create polarization and the commodification of religious symbols for social status. The culture of flexing in Indonesian Muslim society manifests not only in the form of vulgar displays of wealth but also through the commodification of symbols of piety. The phenomenon of spiritual flexing, such as excessively documenting religious practices on social media, demonstrates how moral values have been degraded into mere tools for digital image-building and the enhancement of social status.

Therefore, we need to adopt a non-reductive moral perspective on reality and the world. We need to understand phenomena within their original context rather than forcing them to conform to an individual's subjective assumptions. Furthermore, given that our lives today exist in a world that is constantly changing, unstable, and uncertain, it is reasonable to demand a degree of certainty in morality, the kind of certainty we can demand from the exact sciences. If we accept this view, then moral nihilism and moral relativism, which have come to guide principles for action in most contemporary societies, must be immediately abandoned and rejected.

The authors believe that the ethical theory with the significant potential for addressing the contemporary demand to restore the role and relevance of morality in human life is Muhammad Iqbal's philosophy of morals. Iqbal's framework is uniquely capable of offering viable solutions to modern ethical dilemmas. This potential stems from the fact that Iqbal's ethical theory is both rational and emotional; it focuses on the individual's character as a moral agent while simultaneously incorporating the communal aspect. Furthermore, Iqbal's ethics are not reductive in nature, as his ethical theory is not limited to a person's outward actions alone but is also connected to character, spiritual values, and the fundamental nature of humanity as perfect servants of God (Iqbal 1934; Yasrif and Arroisi 2025, 116). Consequently, the various complexities inherent in the life of a moral agent constitute a vital component of Iqbal's ethical theory. This ensures that his framework avoids the trap of reductionism in its examination of reality and the problems of human existence.

Towards Moral Autonomy through Sir Muhammad Iqbal's Philosophy of Morals

Given these circumstances, it is necessary to restore the role and function of morality in digital society. We need to reaffirm the importance of having a *telos*, a fundamental goal in life for human beings, as understood in the classical philosophical tradition, to rectify the condition of liberal individuals whom MacIntyre describes as empty and ghost-like selves (MacIntyre 2007). MacIntyre describes emotivist individuals as hollow and ghost-like selves because they no longer possess a definitive purpose in life (*telos*) or lack the meaningful social identities, such as those found in traditional societies of the past. Furthermore, they no longer act according to a coherent moral framework, and their fundamental moral standpoint remains indeterminate, even as they retain the capacity to critique any event or action (MacIntyre 2007, 23).

The idea that human beings are autonomous, rational beings is largely uncontested among moral philosophers. The core debate, instead, revolves around the origin of moral rules and principles and the rationale for being moral. This means that the innate human being's capacity for thought must be cultivated through its inherent faculty of reason. Such cultivation enables an individual to progress from one level of consciousness to another, better or higher. Human beings, with all their knowledge and understanding, must ultimately be able to assign value to what is good and bad. Human beings were not created to remain static or to exist in only one state, such as perpetual infancy or childhood. Likewise, immense wealth holds little value for humanity if it does not facilitate the attainment of a higher state of consciousness.

If humans were created to exist in a single, fixed state, rationality would be superfluous, and our existence would resemble that of animals. If morality fails to guide humanity toward an authentic and autonomous life, that is, a more perfect mode of existence, then it holds no utility for humankind. This describes the prevailing situation in the contemporary Western world. If this is indeed the case, then, as proposed by abolitionist moral thinkers, morality should arguably be abolished altogether (Joyce and Garner 2018). However, even among anti-realist moral philosophers themselves, there is no consensus regarding the importance of morality's role.

On one hand, abolitionist moral thinkers advocate for the complete dismissal of morality. On the other hand, fictionalist thinkers reject the discourse of its total abolition, as they acknowledge its functional utility in human life (Joyce and Garner 2018). The fictionalist moral position reveals an inherent contradiction and a semblance of hypocrisy, as alleged by abolitionist groups, because its adherents ultimately do not believe in the truth-value of moral statements. The fact that the status of morality is a branch of philosophy suggests its enduring relevance. However, the erosion of faith in the role of morality's capacity to guide humanity and its life toward a better mode of existence ultimately demonstrates its functional obsolescence. This is because morality, by its very nature, cannot be conceived as

aiming to lead humanity toward a worse condition or to merely perpetuate the status quo (Herbert 2024, 43–44; Krellenstein 2022, 52–98).

To address the hollowness of the modern self, two simultaneous solutions are required. First, it is necessary to rectify the manipulative logic that has emerged because of the Western systems of consumption and globalization. This step is essential to curb the expansion of a simulated reality characterized by manipulation, thereby making the conditions for the growth of an ideal society. Second, we need an integral, impartial, and holistic moral foundation that emphasizes human beings' character. This step is necessary to restore human beings' critical-reflective capacity as rational and autonomous beings, thereby preserving individual authenticity and self-autonomy within a digital society already manipulated by simulation.

To realize these two steps, the philosophy of morals proposed by Muhammad Iqbal possesses significant merit, as it positions human beings as autonomous moral agents and, at the same time, as God's vicegerents (*khalifah*) on earth. The primary duty as God's vicegerents can only be fulfilled if he cultivates self-consciousness (*kbudī*) (Iqbal 1934; S and Syihabuddin 2025, 651). Iqbal uses the term *kbudī* to denote the center of consciousness and active cognitive life, which he posits as the foundation of an individual's essential being.

This *kbudī* is necessary to confront the challenges of manipulative logic arising from a consumption system and globalization saturated with negative desires exploited by the consumption system. Although human beings inherently exist and originate from the same internal source, namely, from within the human being's self or soul, the consumption system built by capitalism in the digital age is further exacerbating the current state of the world. Therefore, regulations are needed to channel these desires toward positive ends, and these regulations must originate from an external source: God as the source of moral teachings. By following God's moral teachings, human beings can attain the heights of their character and develop their self-consciousness and autonomy (Iqbal 1934; Wibawa 2021, 142–55).

The essential nature of humanity is a comprehensive unity encompassing both spiritual and physical aspects, which are inseparable and exist together as an integrated whole. It is the relationship between soul and body, mind and action, that forms the unified consciousness at the core of human personality (Iqbal 1934; Maitre 1981). The ideal human being in Iqbal's view is one who possesses spiritual purity, enabling the absorption of divine attributes into the individual self and, through this process of assimilation, the individual is ultimately guided toward the quality of the Perfect Man (*insān kāmil*) (Frager 2014; Yilmaz 2023, 20220230).

In Iqbal's view, an individual who has attained the station of God's vicegerent can be considered to have reached the highest state of perfection. At this stage, the individual must demonstrate diligence and earnest effort in working to improve world conditions. For instance, within a nation, any person who has reached this level of vicegerency must be capable of leadership, guiding their country toward betterment and, ultimately, a state that enjoys divine favor (*ridwān*) from Allah (Iqbal 1934; Rahmawati et al. 2024, 149–56).

An individual who is devoutly obedient to God and, through this obedience,

achieves self-mastery, attains the stage of the *insān kāmil*. As previously established, the *insān kāmil* is God's vicegerent (*khalīfab*) on Earth, representing the ideal of a true believer. A true believer is sincerely devoted to God and possesses the capacity for self-regulation. An individual worthy of this divine vicegerency is one who not only adheres to God's commandments but also manifests them in their conduct. A person who has realized this divine station becomes a leader, both of their own self and for their wider community (Iqbal 1934; Rahmawati et al. 2024, 149–56).

Self-realization and genuine freedom are achieved when an individual fully devotes themselves to God by adhering to divine laws. To elevate one's inherent spirituality, proximity to the Divine is essential. It is through this closeness to God that the self attains true autonomy in its capacity for will and choice (Arsyul 2024, 28; Zholmukhan and Kairbekov 2024, 161). Iqbal stated that the perfect human being is free, and it is for this reason that God has entrusted humanity with the role of vicegerent on earth. It is the self that has attained the stage of divine vicegerency that serves as the symbol of human being perfection; Such an individual is an autonomous self, capable of determining its life's purpose with the greatest possible freedom, yet always in accordance with divine principles (Iqbal 1934).

***Khudī* in Iqbal's Philosophy of Morals as a Pathway for Resisting the Logic of Simulation**

To counter the logic of simulation, Muhammad Iqbal emphasizes the resilience of human beings' character in *khudī*. It is important to clarify here that *khudī* does not used to mean arrogance or pride as in the common usage of the word in Urdu, but is related to the building of the powerful ego—which is lacking, especially among Generation Z (Hussain 2025, 129–51) in this article, *khudī* is defined as self-consciousness and some scholars define *khudī* in several meanings, such as self-reliance, self-respect, self-confidence, self-preservation, even self-assertion when such a thing is necessary, in the interests of life and the power to stick to the cause of truth, justice, duty (Schimmel 1975, 42).

Khudī is the foundation for all his ideas, in which the human being is understood as a unity of energy and power, with the ego as one of its key components (Inayati 2021, 38–50). Other components of strengthening *khudī* are: 1) Love (*Ishq*): This is the primary driving force that connects the individual to God, awakens the desire for self-discovery, and provides the strength to confront challenges. Love transforms weakness into strength. 2) Will act (*irāda*): The strength to persevere in the face of adversity, not to give up easily, and to remain steadfast in one's principles, like an eagle rising to defy the storm. 3) Obedience to the Law (*itā'at*): The soul grows strong through discipline, particularly obedience to God's law (sharia). This obedience disciplines the ego, not by suppressing it, but by channeling one's potential. 5) Self-Control (*dabt-e-nafs*): The ability to master one's desires and oneself. This is the moral foundation that makes the ego noble and steadfast. 6) Divine Power (*Khalīfab*): The awareness that humanity is God's vicegerent on earth. This understanding grants humanity the confidence

and creativity to cultivate the universe. 7) Faith (*īmān*): Unwavering belief in God, which grants humanity peace and courage to act. 8) Action/Creativity (*‘amal*): The ego is strengthened through concrete action, not merely contemplation. Iqbal emphasizes dynamic movement and creativity in social Interaction. 9) Community (*the ummah*): The ego does not grow in isolation. The individual ego is strengthened when interacting with other egos within a dynamic community, which provides space for free self-development.

Khudī provides a broader perspective on understanding the connections between various aspects of life. This concept encourages individuals to view themselves holistically, integrating their emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions into a unified whole. This enables individuals to more easily identify their priorities and set life goals that align with universal values (Firman et al. 2021, 76–88). *Khudī* is a spiritual consciousness that affirms humanity’s moral responsibility toward oneself, society, and God. *Khudī* plays a vital role in achieving the goal of human life, namely, realizing one’s full potential through moral, intellectual, and spiritual empowerment. *Khudī* fosters true independence and freedom, protecting individuals from physical temptations and spiritual decline.

Khudī plays a vital role in achieving the goal of human life, namely, realizing one’s full potential through moral, intellectual, and spiritual empowerment. *Khudī* fosters true independence and freedom, protecting individuals from both physical temptation and spiritual decline. Facing a global world filled with simulated logic, *khudī* helps Muslims maintain their religious identity while critically engaging with global values. Al-Qur’an notes that when Allah created the first human being, He breathed His own spirit into this new creation (Q.S. Al-Hijr [15]: 29 and Q.S. As-Sajdah [32]: 9). Consequently, human nature is not human, but humanity, which contains the divine element within it. Furthermore, *khudī* fosters social awareness and responsibility toward society and serves as a path to achieving closeness to God through ego control and union with the Divine Will.

Confronting simulated logic in the global world, *khudī* preserves human beings’ identity while critically engaging with global values. Furthermore, *khudī* fosters social awareness and responsibility toward society and serves as a path to achieving closeness to God through the control of the ego and union with the Divine Will. Consequently, *khudī* can be applied as a guide, as he emphasizes that human beings must strengthen their personalities through tangible effort and creativity, rather than merely seeking external recognition (Lidinillah, 244–57).

In the context of the flexing culture on social media, Iqbal views it as a sign of a weak ego, where individuals focus more on a superficial self-image (appearance) than on their authentic inner self. The flexing culture can weaken the *khudī*, as it makes one dependent on external perceptions rather than on inner strength derived from a relationship with God. For this end, *khudī* offers constructive ethical solutions through three main dimensions. First, on a personal level, *khudī* encourages individuals to build their identity based on intrinsic values, such as integrity, creativity, and responsibility, rather than on external validation. This means shifting the focus from flexing culture to humble culture. Second, at the

practical digital level, *khudī* can be manifested through self-discipline, such as avoiding show-off content, limiting attachment to social metrics, and creating educational and reflective content. Third, on a social level, *khudī* encourages the formation of a more ethical collective culture, where authenticity and contribution are valued more than status symbols.

Khudī positions human beings as autonomous moral agents and, at the same time, as God's vicegerents on earth. The primary duty of human beings as God's vicegerents is to cultivate self-consciousness and an active cognitive life. *Khudī* establishes human beings as autonomous moral subjects who are simultaneously God's vicegerents on earth. The primary duty of this divine vicegerency is to develop self-consciousness and an active cognitive life. Such self-consciousness is essential for confronting the manipulative challenges of simulacra logic, which is saturated with the negative desires systematically exploited by consumerist systems. Iqbal's emphasis on steadfast character through *khudī* enables the individual to resist the logic of the simulated world. This is because simulacra logic operates by first weakening beings' character, subsequently rendering this weakness a permanent condition. If an individual's character can be rebuilt through *khudī*, achieved by diligently adhering to divine commandments through *riyāḍah* (rigorous spiritual practice), they become significantly less susceptible to manipulation and deception. Consequently, the grip of simulacra logic on the individual is substantially weakened (Azad 2014, 14–15).

Khudī asserts that the self is dynamic, a reflection of divine will. It is not a passive product of cosmic forces, but an active participant in creation, striving to realize its potential amidst the turbulence of the universe. It must not dissolve into anonymity but must rise through effort, confrontation, and self-realization. Iqbal recognized that the burden of morality would be a significant weight for humanity, which is why he asserted from the outset that human beings' lives are fundamentally a struggle. Consequently, although it is admittedly difficult, this moral ideal can be achieved through continuous learning, training, and practice that begins early in life and continues throughout one's lifelong journey (Iqbal 1934; S and Syihabuddin 2025, 656).

Another strength of the ethical theory proposed by Iqbal is its recognition of the connection between facts and values. This approach is a rational one because values are derived from facts rather than randomly or based on one's feelings or personal preferences. Following MacIntyre, the author contends that judgments or decisions made based on feelings or subjective preferences are indicative of a more primitive method compared to judgments formulated based on objective criteria such as facts. By grounding judgments on empirical facts, one opens their statements, ideas, or theories to evaluation, thereby enabling critical evaluation of the proposed theories or ideas (Mela 2024, 78–102).

Iqbal's ethical perspective, for instance, is reflected in several verses of his poetry that extol self-consciousness and human freedom as the attributes of an ideal self:

How bitter the free soul's fate, to dwell in a world wrought by another's hand (Iqbal 1983, 193).

The verse by Iqbal expresses his profound dismay at witnessing humanity's loss of freedom to be oneself, resulting in its absorption into a world constructed by others. In a contemporary context, social media has constrained and entrapped human self-consciousness and autonomy. This verse must be interpreted philosophically: Iqbal is articulating a universal message about the proper mode of being for both the individual and the community. As an existentialist philosopher, he aspired to cultivate a dignified and noble personality and character.

Awaken, and create a new world's frame. Wrap your soul in flame and be an Abraham. Yield to no power save Truth alone. It shall transform you to a lion (Iqbal 1983).

The call for human awakening voiced by Muhammad Iqbal in his poetry represents his endeavor to rouse human consciousness toward possessing a distinct identity, thereby allowing the potential for autonomy and self-liberation to flourish. Iqbal's poetry is a manifestation of his philosophical thought, urging everyone to reconstruct themselves to align with an ideal moral path characterized by religious, democratic, and non-reductive principles. Through this poem, Iqbal emphasizes the importance of self-consciousness as an autonomous human being; however, the concept of the 'self' that Iqbal addresses is not limited to the individual level but also encompasses the collective self, for a community like an individual possesses a spirit and personality (Azad 2014, 25). According to Iqbal, one is forbidden from being a mere follower, an uncreative imitator who is weak and powerless in the face of foreign value systems that erode ideal moral principles. As he states in another verse (Iqbal 1934; Wibawa 2021, 145):

Do not debase yourself with imitation. Arise, O you who are a stranger to life's mystery! Ignite the fire hidden within your own dust. Manifest within yourself the attributes of Divine. Shatter the world to pieces if it does not conform to your truth, and from the depths of your being, create a world anew. How tormented is the free human, who must live in a world another has made (Iqbal 1983).

In the *asrār-i khudī* (Secrets of the Self), Iqbal posits that a personality becomes truly animate only when it possesses a purpose, for a purpose generates the movement and effort necessary to attain it. A state devoid of internal movement and change cannot truly be called life. Therefore, to animate the personal life, a purpose is essential. For Iqbal, the quality of an individual is measured by the capacity to realize their objectives; the magnitude of the difficulties encountered is directly proportional to the strength of character developed (Iqbal 1983; Yasrif and Arroisi 2025, 129–30). If the self lacks a sense of purpose, it becomes hollow and incapable of confronting the challenges posed by advances in communication and information technology. This incapability arises because such challenges can only be met by those who possess a profound understanding of themselves and the world around them and a conception of life's purpose, including an understanding of what is good and bad, and what is right and wrong, amidst the development of information and communication technology that skillfully manipulates reality.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of the flexing society in the digital age confirms that moral degradation and the loss of self-autonomy are not merely cultural deviations, but rather the logical and structural consequences of the interconnectedness of contemporary capitalism, social media, and consumerism. Within Jean Baudrillard's simulacra theory, individuals no longer live in authentic reality, but rather in illusions and the reproduction of images that blur the boundaries between reality and the imaginary. The transformation of life values from being to having and appearing indicates an ontological and ethical crisis in individuals and society, where individual identity is no longer rooted in self-autonomy, but in images constructed and exchanged within the digital space. As a result, self-autonomy is eroded because the subject is constructed by the logic of simulation that leads to moral blindness. This decline occurs because prevailing moral and value systems have been radically reduced to mere commodities, valued solely through the ownership of goods as dictated by the mechanisms of production. Consequently, the individual self is rendered hollow.

In this context, Muhammad Iqbal's philosophy of morals regarding *kbudī* becomes relevant as a framework for a transformative ethical reconstruction. *Khudī* asserts that human beings are autonomous moral agents who are also God's vicegerents on Earth. The main task of God's vicegerents can only be fulfilled through the development of self-consciousness. *Khudī* not only emphasizes individual self-consciousness but also demands the courage to critically challenge social structures that suppress human autonomy. Thus, the strengthening of self-consciousness must be directed toward the reflective capacity to counter the illusions of hyper-reality, as well as the formation of an authentic identity grounded in religious values as God's vicegerents on earth. The concept of *kbudī* proposed by Muhammad Iqbal offers a new perspective in contemporary ethical discourse in responding to the crisis of individual autonomy in the digital age.

This study contributes to the development of moral philosophy in the digital age by demonstrating that moral degradation and the loss of authenticity in digital society cannot be understood in isolation but must be viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon involving the interplay between capitalism, social media, and consumerism. Furthermore, this study enriches the discourse on hyperreality by asserting that the simulated reality constructed by social media impacts not only perception but also the formation of individual identity and moral orientation. This opens the way to the development of a more integrative theory of digital ethics, one that examines not only technological aspects but also the ontological and existential dimensions of humanity.

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