



Flex Mami wears a Song For the Mute jacket, \$2,195. Asos Design dress, \$100. Christian Dior earrings, \$1,000, rings, \$570 each, and bag, \$7,700. The Daily Edited bag tag, \$50. All prices approximate; details at [Vogue.com.au/WTB](http://Vogue.com.au/WTB).

# LET'S TALK ABOUT FLEX

She's the ultimate multi-hyphenate: DJ, podcaster, social media star, TV host – and now Flex Mami has added author to her resume. In her new book about success, she helps readers tap into what matters most. By Annie Brown. Styled by Harriet Crawford. Photographed by Duncan Killick.

MAGIS PROUST CHAIR. FROM DEDECE



Ramp Tramp Tramp Stamp dress, \$360. All is a Gentle Spring bodysuit, \$295. Bulgari earrings, \$20,300, bracelet, \$94,400, and rings, \$2,400, \$14,600, and \$2,540. Coach bag, \$550. Tony Bianco shoes, \$220.

A few years ago, if you'd asked Lillian Ahenkan, aka Flex Mami, when she felt her most successful, her answer would be unequivocal: getting her first job at a local pizza shop as a teenager. "I was like: 'This is it, this is big dollars, this is one per cent vibes ... I'm 17, got more money than your parents.' That's how I felt, because we were probably making like 500 bucks a week. At that point I was money-motivated. I was like, what else can we do? So when I was studying, I had three to four different retail jobs."

Now a podcaster, TV host, purveyor of unconventional parlour games via her merchandise company Flex Factory, social media influencer, *Big Brother* contestant and soon-to-be published author, Ahenkan, has a different view on success. In fact, she's written a whole book about it titled, *The Success Experiment*, out this month.

"Now I can't be motivated by money because it's not enough. It's more than enough objectively, but for how much you have to give

and take, it is not enough ... this idea of being open on the internet and commodifying myself – my life, my values, my wants, my needs, or whatever – everyone's like, 'it's super easy', but I'm like, 'you try it – you try sharing yourself as you are and having it critiqued and having it up for discussion,'" says Ahenkan, who in real life – wearing bike shorts, a killer blazer and a riot of pearl jewellery – is warm and magnetic. "I used to define success by these really basic metrics, like how much money I had, the job I had, the life I had," she continues, "but now it's just not even this feeling of contentment but this sense of agency [that] feels successful to me."

In any case, Ahenkan, 27, is undoubtedly successful. She has been dubbed Australia's most charismatic person on the internet and the Australian Chrissy Teigen. On Instagram (where she has 142k followers) she's the person most likely to make you want to DIY a pastel clay vase and also interrogate your most stubbornly held thoughts around race, identity and pleasure. You can imagine a lot of people might claim her ideas as dinner party ammunition and also think that if that if they met her in real life, they'd probably be best friends.

Her book, in fact, feels a bit like advice from a friend. Two-and-a-half years in the making, it includes personality quizzes and psychological and philosophical exercises to help readers achieve success by drilling down into who they really are, and encourages them to develop an abundant mindset (i.e. there's enough success for everyone) and build resilience.

"Who you are impacts everything," Ahenkan says, explaining her philosophy. "How you see the world, what you want, your mindset and perspective, your habits, your behaviours, your strengths, your weaknesses. You need to know that. And probably when you do know that, that's going to impact what you want anyway."

But that's not to say Ahenkan, who dropped out of university twice and quit a "soul-sucking" job in public relations to become a DJ, hasn't experienced setbacks, too.

"Of course I've experienced failure," she admits, "but in my head, it has to happen to get to the good stuff. You just can't dodge it. And I also think, because I have convinced myself that things like karma are a real thing, perhaps it's a method I use to keep myself on track and be as open and honest as possible with myself. But also I have this theory that if you don't do it now, it's going to happen later, and it's going to be worse."

By way of explanation, she recalls a time when she failed to do her taxes properly. "I had to pay back 10 grand to the government. I was like, 10 grand! But I'm also glad I did that at this part of my career so it wasn't 50 grand, or 100 grand, or 300 grand. That is the perspective that keeps me going. And I understand for a lot of people who haven't brushed hands with failure, the first time you do something is always going to feel terrible." →

Hanifa pants set, \$370. Tiffany & Co. necklaces, \$4,100, \$4,100, and \$4,950, and rings, \$4,450, \$4,450, and \$8,200.



**"I USED TO DEFINE SUCCESS BY THESE REALLY BASIC METRICS, LIKE HOW MUCH MONEY I HAD, THE JOB I HAD, THE LIFE I HAD, BUT NOW IT'S JUST NOT EVEN THIS FEELING OF CONTENTMENT, BUT THIS SENSE OF AGENCY [THAT] FEELS SUCCESSFUL TO ME"**



Emma Brewin cape, P.O.A. Hanifa knit, \$130. Alix Higgings bike shorts, \$200. Bottega Veneta ring, \$1,290. Sinèad O'Dwyer shoes, 2,420.

DUNCAN KILICK  
MAGIS VELA CHAIR. FROM DEDECE



H&M coat, \$80. All is a Gentle Spring top, \$215. Holiday the Label pants, \$245. On right hand: Hardy Brothers ring, \$68,000. On left hand: Hardy Brothers rings, P.O.A., and \$35,500. Hermès bag, \$7,420. Crocs shoes, \$90, and Jibbitz, from \$6.



Prada bomber, \$5,500. Asos corset, \$50, and jumpsuit, \$45. Poppy Lissiman sunglasses, \$145. On right hand: Bulgari rings, \$2,400, \$11,600, and \$4,320. On left hand: Bulgari rings, \$2,540, \$6,950, and \$3,900.

DUNCAN KILICK



**“OF COURSE I’VE EXPERIENCED FAILURE. BUT IN MY HEAD, IT HAS TO HAPPEN TO GET TO THE GOOD STUFF. YOU JUST CAN’T DODGE IT”**

Marina Rinaldi coat, \$2,525. Asos top, \$30, and pants, \$45. Cartier necklace, P.O.A. Prada gloves, \$1,510. Steve Madden shoes, \$130.

DUNCAN KILICK  
MAGIS VELA CHAIR, FROM DEDECE

Ahenkan sees the ability to articulate her thoughts as another kind of success, and now, six years after her first ‘proper’ DJ gig, a lot of people pay attention to what she has to say. “I wasn’t a very articulate person when I was younger. And so now, being in a space where I know I’m feeling these things [and] I have the vocab to express them, feels really good,” she says.

But articulating her thoughts, be it on an air fryer, enthusiastic consent or the black squares people posted on Instagram during last June’s Black Lives Matter protests, has meant Ahenkan, who is Ghanaian-Australian, has experienced a shift in what people expect from her.

“When I started building a lot of followers last year everyone’s like: ‘Go to her, she speaks about race in a palatable way.’ I guess they just stuck around and assumed because I speak about race, ‘she must be an anti-capitalist, socialist, environmentally friendly humanitarian,’” she says.

How she is perceived is something she’s aware of. She talks to her therapist about visualising herself on a pedestal with a spotlight. She wants to get down but everybody keeps saying she’s doing great, and by the way, she’s sweating profusely.

“My ultimate ick is not being understood. I hate it. It’s so frustrating to me, especially when I’m trying to communicate openly and expanding my vocabulary so I’m being well-understood, I’m being emotive, I’m using anecdotes. And if you still don’t get it, I can’t deal,” she says.

Part of acknowledging that discomfort is realising what she can let go of. “I think with the internet, I’ve had to kind of remind myself that it’s a little bit naïve of me to assume I’m able to set the tone and the standard for a ton of people who don’t know me,” she says. “In instances [where] people have tried to ... tell me I haven’t lived up to their perceptions of me, I’m like, that’s a ‘you’ problem, because you’re not considering me as I am.”

The work of a social media influencer, that is, becoming a personal brand, means Ahenkan has had to grapple with Sartre’s philosophy of ‘bad faith’ work, too. In influencing, this kind of means shilling something you don’t really care about.

“[If] I feel like the process of trying to sell lipstick to a random is disingenuous at the best of times, then what do I owe this audience? Which for the most part is like: ‘Hey, I’ve had this thought, I had a dream that was really interesting. This is on my mind.’ And then how they respond to it is just not my business. You know?” she says.

“I guess the solution to that for me has been trying to detach a little bit from this online process. I used to feel like it was my responsibility to be as open, as authentic, as emotive, as willing to express, willing to educate, willing to empathise. I thought I had to do it. And if I didn’t do it, it wouldn’t be done. Not true,” she says. “But I’m not naïve enough not to capitalise on it. It’s a very fortunate position.”

Ultimately though, just as you can’t control what people think of you or the context in which you are received, as Ahenkan notes, the same can be said of success.



Strateas Carlucci coat, \$320.  
Hanifa dress, \$250. Louis  
Vuitton earrings, \$960.

Hair: Rumbie Mutsiwa  
Make-up: Filomena Natoli  
Manicure: Victoria Houllis

“So much of what success is is a perception anyway. Because some random guy busking on the street making five grand might think he’s successful because he’s making five grand. But then we’re walking by being like: ‘So embarrassing, still busking.’ Either way, there’s going to be a disconnect between how you feel and how you’re perceived.”

Happiness then, the real kind that doesn’t come with social cache or expectations, is when Ahenkan is with her closest friends and “making stuff”. How she defines success is also not so much about the destination, because that will always change, but what you did to get there. “In the journey it takes you to figure out ... who you are, who you want to be, what you want, why you want it, how are you going to get it, what happens when you do. That could be five years, that could be three months. You’re probably going to be a different person. The skills or the steps you take to reach this kind of bespoke success is now going to differ because you’re different and the things you want are different. It’s like, back to square one,” she says.

And at square one, as Ahenkan can attest, the possibilities of who you can be are endless.

The Success Experiment: Flex Mami’s formula to knowing what you really want and how to get it (*Bloomsbury*, \$32.99) by Lillian Ahenkan, is out June 1.