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Dynamics of the Urban Middle Class, Consumerism, Social Mobility and New Identities

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Abstract

The growth of the urban middle class in Indonesia has become one of the most significant social phenomena in the past two decades, reshaping lifestyles, consumption patterns, and identity formation. This study critically examines the dynamics of the urban middle class through three interrelated dimensions: consumerism, social mobility, and the construction of new identities. Using a quantitative survey method with 400 respondents from five major Indonesian cities, data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple linear regression. The results show that consumerism is strongly embedded in middle-class practices, with high preferences for branded goods and lifestyle consumption, functioning as both status symbols and markers of modernity. Social mobility is primarily associated with education, which respondents consider the most important factor in achieving upward mobility, although structural limitations of the labor market often constrain these aspirations. Identity construction is increasingly mediated by digital platforms, where social media serves as a space for professional representation and urban belonging. Regression analysis reveals that consumerism ($\beta = 0.41$) has a stronger influence than social mobility ($\beta = 0.36$) in shaping new identities, indicating that lifestyle symbols play a more central role than structural achievements. Overall, the study concludes that the urban middle class embodies both cosmopolitan modernity and structural vulnerability, making it a socially and culturally contested category rather than merely an economic stratum.

INTRODUCTION

The urban middle class in Indonesia is often positioned as a driver of social, economic, and cultural change. Economic growth since the early 2000s has expanded the middle-class base, particularly in large cities, marked by increased purchasing power, access to education, and participation in the formal sector (Mietzner & Aspinall, 2013; Miladinov 2023). However, the existence of the middle class is not solely understood as an economic phenomenon, but also as a social construct fraught with consumption practices, aspirations for social mobility, and the search for new identities amidst modernity. Thus, the urban middle class serves

as an important arena for understanding the contemporary dynamics of Indonesian society (Priyatna, 2024; Boterman & Van Gent, 2023; Swita & Ayu, 2025; Rosida et al., 2023).

Consumerism has become one of the models of the urban middle class. Consumption not only satisfies the utilitarian needs, but also it is used as a status symbol, a symbol of lifestyle and social differentiation (Han, 2024; Sahin & Nasir, 2022). The reasons why shopping centers, cafes, electronic products, and even travel are not only economic activities, but also the ways to prove the belonging to the social hierarchy. This finding is also in line with the theory of conspicuous consumption as formulated by Veblen (1899/2007) which states that people are more likely to consume as a way of showing off rather than to gain utility. It is against this backdrop that such consumptive behaviour is becoming more apparent in commodified lifestyles in which goods and experiences are commodified as part of a middle-class identity in Indonesia (Hidayah, 2021; Dwianto & Rahardini, 2021).

Along with consumerism, social mobility is also an essential factor in the processes of the middle class. This is not a vertical mobility, i.e., between the lower and the middle classes, but also the horizontal movements, such as, diversification of lifestyles and access to global networks (Shawki & Hunter, 2022). However, this mobility is often weak, because it requires economic stability, professional flexibility and access to resources (including education and digital technology). In the case of a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the fluidity of the middle-class identity becomes more visible, which shows that they are not yet completely institutionalized (Pepinsky et al., 2021; Cover, 2021).

The new identity of the urban middle classes, which has been built, is therefore ambivalent. On the one hand, they are depicted as a modern, rational, and cosmopolitan-based image by consuming popular culture and being involved in the digital space (Rössel & Schroedter, 2015). Conversely, we have a propensity to reproduce traditional values, religiosity, and exclusivity of the community which limits cross-class solidarity. This ambivalence has shown that the middle class is not a uniform entity but actually a plural entity, an entity that argues out its identities within the contexts of globalization and locality.

The reviews of the previous literature have shown that the research on the Indonesian middle class is still predominantly characterized by economic measures such as the level of income and purchasing power when the socio-cultural aspect, including the lifestyle, the symbolism of consumption, and identity formation is often given minimal consideration (Utomo & McDonald, 2016). This paper is therefore aimed at closing this gap by highlighting the connection between consumerism, social mobility, and identity in influencing the dynamics of the urban middle population. To this end, this paper will discuss the middle class as an economic stratum but as a socio cultural phenomenon that embodies some very fundamental changes in the fabric of the modern Indonesian society.

METHODS

This research employs a quantitative approach with a descriptive-analytical survey design. This approach was chosen because it provides a measurable picture of the dynamics of the urban middle class in terms of consumerism, social mobility, and the formation of new identities. Through a survey design, the research can map general trends, examine relationships between variables, and present objective and systematic empirical analysis. Therefore, a quantitative approach is considered appropriate for addressing the research objectives, which focus on identifying patterns and the interplay between the social dimensions studied.

The study population consisted of individuals belonging to the urban middle class in Indonesia. The criteria used to define the middle class refer to the standards of the Central Statistics Agency (2022), namely those with a monthly household income between Rp6,000,000 and Rp20,000,000, domiciled in urban areas, and are in the productive age range of 20 to 45 years. To obtain a representative picture, this study used a purposive sampling technique to ensure respondents fit the characteristics of the middle class, which was then followed by proportional random sampling based on the distribution of urban areas in Indonesia, especially large cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Makassar, and Medan. From this procedure, the sample size was determined to be 400 respondents, which is in accordance with the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for large populations, with a 95 percent confidence level and a five percent margin of error.

Research data was collected through an online questionnaire distributed using the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire was structured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to measure three main variables: consumerism, social mobility, and new identity. The consumerism variable was operationalized through indicators of luxury goods consumption frequency, brand preference, and lifestyle orientation. The social mobility variable was measured through perceptions of opportunities for social status improvement, access to education, and economic opportunities offered by employment. Meanwhile, the new identity variable was defined through respondents' involvement in digital media, self-expression through urban lifestyles, and feelings of belonging to urban communities. In addition, the questionnaire also included demographic questions regarding age, gender, education, occupation, and income as control variables to enrich the analysis.

The data analysis process was conducted in two stages. The first stage used descriptive statistics to describe the characteristics of respondents and the trends of each variable. The second stage used inferential analysis in the form of multiple linear regression to examine the influence of consumerism and social mobility on the new identity of the urban middle class. The Pearson correlation test was also used to examine the relationships between variables, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the interactions between the dimensions studied.

To ensure the quality of the instrument, validity and reliability tests were conducted systematically. Content validity was obtained through expert assessments from urban sociology and cultural consumption studies, ensuring the instrument's suitability for the research context. Next, empirical validity was tested using item-total correlation techniques, with an $r > 0.30$ criterion as the acceptance threshold. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, with a minimum value of 0.70 as an indicator of adequate internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019). Thus, the research instrument can be assured of its accuracy and stability in measuring the intended variables.

Research ethics were strictly adhered to to maintain the integrity and protection of respondents. Before completing the questionnaire, each respondent was provided with an explanation of the research objectives, benefits, and guaranteed data confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and respondents had the right to discontinue participation at any time without any consequences. All collected data was kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes. This procedure ensured that the research not only met methodological standards but also upheld the ethics of social research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aims to understand how the dynamics of the urban middle class in Indonesia are reflected in patterns of consumerism, social mobility, and the

formation of new identities. This context is crucial because the growth of the middle class over the past two decades has transformed the urban social landscape, particularly through lifestyle changes, increased purchasing power, and the deepening penetration of digital technology. In other words, the urban middle class is not only an economic phenomenon but also an evolving arena for the construction of identities and social relations.

The survey was conducted with 400 respondents who met the criteria for the urban middle class within the productive age range. Respondents came from five major cities in Indonesia Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Makassar, and Medan—selected to represent the diversity of urban contexts. Basic characteristics of respondents, such as age, gender, education, occupation, and income, provide an initial foundation for understanding variations in behavioral patterns and perceptions. From this context, the following research results are presented systematically to illustrate the level of consumerism, aspirations for social mobility, and the construction of new identities among the urban middle class.

Respondent Characteristics

A total of 400 respondents participated in this study, consisting of 52% men and 48% women. The majority were in the 26–35 age range (45%), followed by 20–25 years old (30%), and 36–45 years old (25%). In terms of education, respondents were predominantly bachelor's degree graduates (60%), followed by master's degree graduates (25%), and high school/diploma graduates (15%). Meanwhile, the majority worked in the private sector (55%), followed by self-employed (25%) and civil servants (20%).

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 400)

Characteristics	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male (52), Female (48)	100
Age	20–25 (30), 26–35 (45), 36–45 (25)	100
Education	High School/Diploma (15), Bachelor (60), Master (25)	100
Work	Private (55), Self-employed (25), Civil Servant (20)	100

The composition of respondents shows a dominant age group of 26–35, who are in their productive phase and in career transition, making it natural that they are the most active consumers of urban culture. The high proportion of bachelor's degree graduates indicates that the middle class is formed not only by increased purchasing power but also by educational capital. This suggests that the urban middle class tends to reproduce itself through strong access to formal education, which in turn influences consumption patterns and social mobility.

Middle Class Consumerism

Table 2. Middle Class Consumerism

Statement	Mean	Elementary School
I prefer branded goods to show social status.	3.85	0.89
My lifestyle is influenced by consumer trends on social media	3.72	0.91
I prioritize experiences (culinary, tourism) over saving.	3.95	0.84

An average score above 3.7 indicates that middle-class consumption is not solely about utility, but also serves as a symbol of status and lifestyle. A preference for branded goods and lifestyle experiences suggests that consumerism serves as a

means of social legitimacy. However, this tendency also indicates vulnerability: high spending on lifestyle consumption has the potential to weaken the capacity for long-term savings or investment, making middle-class status fragile in the face of economic crises. In other words, consumerism here reflects cultural capital more than economic security.

Social Mobility

Table 3. Social Mobility

Statement	Mean	Elementary School
I feel I have an opportunity to improve my social status.	3.88	0.83
Education is a major factor in social mobility	4.20	0.72
My job provides the opportunity to expand my social network.	3.76	0.86

Education emerged as the most important factor, with an average score of 4.20, confirming that the middle class views educational capital as a key driver of social mobility. However, this perception also indicates a structural dependency: they believe mobility can be achieved through education, but in reality, urban labor markets are often unable to absorb a proportionately high-educated workforce. This potentially leads to status anxiety, where highly educated individuals remain vulnerable to social stagnation if they lack networks or access to strategic economic sectors.

The New Identity of the Middle Class

Table 4. New Identity

Statement	Mean	Elementary School
Social media helps me build my self-image as a professional.	3.81	0.85
I feel like I'm part of a modern urban community.	3.67	0.88
I express my identity through a consumerist lifestyle.	3.74	0.83

These findings demonstrate that the new middle-class identity is increasingly connected to digital representations and urban lifestyles. Social media serves as a symbolic space for affirming professional imagery, but also creates performative pressure to conform to standards of urban modernity. With an average score of around 3.7–3.8, it can be said that urban middle-class identity remains fluid: on the one hand, tied to symbols of modern consumption, but on the other, still in a process of negotiation with traditional values and social expectations from the offline environment.

Inferential Analysis

Table 5. Multiple Linear Regression Results

Independent Variables	Beta (β)	Sig.
Consumerism	0.41	0.000
Social Mobility	0.36	0.000
R²	0.52	

Regression analysis shows that consumerism ($\beta = 0.41$) has a stronger influence than social mobility ($\beta = 0.36$) on the formation of a new urban middle-class identity. This confirms that identity construction is driven more by lifestyle symbols and consumption practices than by stable socio-economic achievements. With an R²

value of 0.52, more than half of the variation in new identities can be explained by consumerism and social mobility, but there are still 48% of other factors outside the model, such as religiosity, local community, or political dynamics, which also influence middle-class identity. This finding shows that middle-class identity is multidimensional and cannot be reduced solely to consumption and mobility, but also to broader cultural and structural factors.

Discussion

The current paper substantiates the fact that the urban middle elite in Indonesia is subjected to complicated processes, especially on the three key planes, including consumerism, social mobility, and identity formation. The quantitative data show how the consumption of the lifestyles, the hopes of education, and the digital images influence the process of defining the social standing of the middle segments. These empirical findings are connected to the pertinent theoretical frameworks and prior research in the ensuing discussion.

To begin with, the empirical data on high consumerism is that consumption has changed into more than a primary need-satisfaction role to a status symbol and a means of gaining social legitimacy. This fact corresponds to the theory of conspicuous consumption introduced by Veblen (1899/2007) according to which consumption is often driven by the desire to show off instead of addressing utilitarian needs. In the urban Indonesian setting, the consumer behaviour of the middle class (the purchase of branded items, as well as lifestyle experiences rather than savings) fits into the definition of consumer culture as suggested by Suyanto et al. (2019), in which consumption is part and parcel of identity and lifestyle building. However, this trend contains a paradox: on the one hand, consumption can strengthen the symbols of the classes; on the other hand, it can create financial deficiency in case it is not accompanied by economic stability. The phenomenon hence highlights the precarious situation of the middle classes that relies on the performativity of consumption to maintain social position as Nilan and Utari (2008) argue.

Second, the statistics about social mobility indicate that education is viewed as a critical tool of promoting social status. This observation is consistent with the idea of Bourdieu (1986) about cultural capital that assumes that education acts as symbolic capital that can be translated into social status. Nonetheless, the statistics point at the possibility of status anxiety, as not every graduate of high learning is able to find a job that would be in the proportions of their education spending. According to Ferreira et al. (2012), the mobility of middle-income people in the modern globalist world is not only based on the level of education but also on the social network, labour market flexibility, and exposure to economic capital. Therefore even though the Indonesian middle class is optimistic about the contribution of education, the structural nature of the labour market might restrain the actualisation of its aspirational mobility.

Third, the study findings reveal that digital media are becoming important in the formation of emergent middle-class identities. Respondents did not deny the importance of social media as a source of professional imagery and reinforcing of connections with the modern urban world. This observation can be traced to the fact presented by Castells (2000) that in the network society, identities are not defined by geographical space but are created as a result of interactions in digital arenas. However, such digital identities are still fluid and performative; one is advised to represent oneself based on the norms of modernity created by the world of global consumption (Baym, 2015; Rokka et al., 2023; Prester et al., 2023). As such, although digital media opens the possibility of forming identities, it has also created a social pressure to always create an idealised version of oneself that meets urban middle-class standards.

The regression analysis that was used in this research supports the claim that consumerism is more powerful than social mobility in constructing new middle class identities. In this regard, middle-class identity is not so much defined by socioeconomic successes like jobs and education, but it is created by lifestyle habits and consumer symbols. This observation is consistent with the idea that consumption in the age of globalization has an imaginative aspect- it creates an identity not only on material goods but also on the desires relating to a specific way of life (Appadurai, 1996; Parvatiyar et al., 2023). This is to say that, the urban middle class in Indonesia is more attached to image of modernity that they project and the structural stability that substantively supports their existence.

Last, but not the least, it is to note that the R² value in this research was only 0.52 meaning that close to half of the change in middle-class identity was explained by other variables. This implies that identity is not determined by consumerism and social mobility only. Religiosity, the local community process, identity politics and traditional values are probably also important factors in the development of the urban middle-class identity in Indonesia (Utomo and McDonald, 2016). Middle-class identity, therefore, needs to be viewed as a multidimensional, negotiation zone where modernity, tradition, and globalization collide and, at one point, come to conflict.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the urban middle class in Indonesia is characterized by high levels of consumerism, aspirations for social mobility through education, and the construction of new identities increasingly mediated by digital spaces. Consumerism has proven more dominant than social mobility in shaping middle-class identity, confirming that lifestyle symbols and representations of consumption serve as important foundations for their social legitimacy. However, this position is ambivalent: on the one hand, the middle class appears modern and cosmopolitan, but on the other, it remains structurally vulnerable due to its reliance on the performativity of consumption and limited economic stability. Thus, the urban middle class can be understood not only as an economic category but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon reflecting negotiations between modernity, globalization, and tradition.

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