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The Dynamics of Indonesia's Middle Class in the Vortex of Global Consumerism: Lifestyle, Symbolic Distinction, and the Contradictions of Social Aspiration amid Neoliberal Economic Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

The Indonesian middle class has emerged as a pivotal social stratum whose consumption behaviors are increasingly shaped by the intersections of global capital flows, digital media ecosystems, and neoliberal economic imperatives. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's field theory—particularly his concepts of capital, habitus, and distinction—this article critically examines the complex dynamics through which Indonesia's expanding middle class negotiates its social identity, aspiration, and symbolic boundaries within the context of global consumerism. Through a systematic qualitative review of empirical studies and secondary datasets, this research identifies three central tensions: (1) the aspiration-precarity paradox, wherein middle-class households simultaneously pursue upward symbolic mobility while remaining structurally vulnerable to economic downturns; (2) the glocalization of taste, wherein global consumption norms are selectively appropriated and hybridized with local cultural and religious values, producing distinctive consumption repertoires such as the halal lifestyle economy; and (3) the platformization of distinction, wherein digital platforms—particularly social media and e-commerce ecosystems—have restructured the field of symbolic competition, enabling new forms of distinction while simultaneously commodifying identity. The findings suggest that Indonesia's middle class occupies a fundamentally ambivalent position: aspirationally upward-mobile yet structurally precarious, globally oriented yet locally rooted, consumer-sovereign yet platform-dependent. This study contributes to sociological debates on class formation in the Global South by arguing that the Indonesian case represents a distinctive configuration of middle-class subjectivity under conditions of late neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords

Middle class; consumerism; symbolic distinction; neoliberalism; Bourdieu; Indonesia; lifestyle politics; platform capitalism



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1. Introduction

"Consumption is no longer simply about satisfying needs; it has become the primary arena through which social distinctions are established, identities are constructed, and status is communicated to others. In societies where markets have penetrated every

dimension of social life, what one buys, how one buys, and what one is seen to consume defines who one is."

— Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (3rd ed., 2019)

The rapid expansion of the Indonesian middle class over the past two decades represents one of the most consequential social transformations in Southeast Asia's largest economy. Since 2000, Indonesia has witnessed a dramatic demographic shift: the proportion of the population classified as middle class has grown from approximately 7 percent to nearly 52 percent by 2023, representing over 140 million individuals whose consumption, aspirations, and lifestyles have fundamentally reshaped the nation's social landscape (World Bank, 2023; BPS, 2023). Yet this expansion has occurred against a backdrop of deepening neoliberal restructuring, digital technological disruption, and growing economic precarity—conditions that have produced a profoundly contradictory social formation.

The Indonesian middle class is neither socially uniform nor politically coherent. It encompasses a heterogeneous ensemble of urban professionals, small entrepreneurs, civil servants, gig workers, and digitally connected millennials, each inhabiting distinct positions within overlapping fields of economic, cultural, and symbolic competition (Robison & Hadiz, 2019; Hill & Thee, 2021). What unites these disparate segments is not income alone—which remains fragile and susceptible to macroeconomic shocks—but rather a shared orientation toward consumption as the primary medium through which social identity, aspiration, and distinction are expressed and contested (Heryanto, 2019; Sukmana, 2020).

Global consumerism, mediated through digital platforms, transnational brands, and social media ecosystems, has profoundly restructured the field of symbolic competition within which Indonesian middle-class subjects operate. The proliferation of e-commerce platforms such as Tokopedia, Shopee, and Lazada, combined with the pervasive influence of Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, has created what Lash and Urry (2019) term 'economies of signs and space'—environments in which the symbolic value of commodities frequently eclipses their use value, and in which visibility, style, and aspirational display become central modes of social positioning.

Yet the dynamics of middle-class consumption in Indonesia cannot be understood through the lens of Western consumer society alone. The Indonesian case is distinctive in several critical respects. First, Indonesia's middle class is embedded within a rapidly islamizing public sphere in which religious identity—particularly expressions of Muslim piety and halal lifestyle—has become an increasingly salient axis of distinction and aspiration (Arnez & Husein, 2022). Second, Indonesia's political economy remains characterized by oligarchic power structures and institutional weaknesses that constrain the autonomous accumulation of middle-class economic and cultural capital (Robison & Hadiz, 2019; Mietzner, 2020). Third, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the structural fragility of middle-class economic security, with millions experiencing downward mobility and a significant proportion falling below the established consumption threshold—revealing the precarious foundations upon which middle-class identity rests (OECD, 2023).

This article seeks to contribute to these debates through a theoretically grounded empirical analysis of the dynamics, tensions, and contradictions of Indonesian middle-class consumerism. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's field-theoretic framework, particularly his concepts of capital, habitus, field, and distinction, the study analyzes how Indonesia's middle class negotiates its position within the overlapping fields of global consumption, digital culture, and local social hierarchy. The research is guided by three principal questions: (1) How do different segments of the Indonesian middle class appropriate and differentiate global consumption practices? (2) In what ways do digital platforms and social media ecosystems restructure the field of symbolic distinction? (3) What contradictions and tensions characterize the relationship between middle-class aspiration and structural economic precarity under conditions of neoliberal capitalism?

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical literature on middle-class formation, consumption, and Bourdieu's field theory; Section 3 details the methodological approach; Section 4 presents the conceptual framework and empirical findings; Section 5 offers a critical discussion; and Section 6 concludes with reflections on the theoretical and policy implications of the findings.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Middle Class in Sociological Theory

The concept of the middle class has been among the most contested and analytically vexed categories in sociological thought. Classical Marxian frameworks subordinated middle-class fractions to the binary logic of capitalist production, treating them primarily as buffers between capital and labor (Harvey, 2020; Fraser, 2022). Weberian approaches, by contrast, emphasized the status-group dimensions of class, highlighting the role of education, occupational prestige, and consumption in constituting class identities (Tilly, 2019). Contemporary sociology has moved beyond this dichotomy to recognize the multi-dimensional and relational nature of class, with Bourdieu's field theory offering the most sophisticated framework for analyzing the complex interplay between economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms of capital in the production of class distinctions (Savage et al., 2021).

In the context of the Global South, debates about the middle class have been further complicated by questions of postcolonial development, informality, and the relationship between economic growth and social formation. As Pew Research Center (2021) notes, the global middle class is increasingly concentrated in emerging economies, yet the conditions of its reproduction remain structurally distinct from those characterizing middle-class formation in the Global North. Scholars such as Törnquist (2020) and Aspinall and Mietzner (2019) have argued that in Southeast Asian contexts, middle-class formation is inseparable from processes of political democratization, religious revivalism, and oligarchic power consolidation.

2.2 Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Distinction

Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus—particularly as elaborated in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) and subsequent works—provides the foundational analytical framework for this study. For Bourdieu, social life is structured by overlapping fields: semi-autonomous arenas of practice governed by field-specific logics and power relations. Within each field, agents are positioned according to the volume and composition of the capital they possess: economic capital (financial and material resources), cultural capital (educational credentials, cultural competencies, and aesthetic dispositions), social capital (networks and associations), and symbolic capital (prestige and recognized honor) (Bourdieu, 1984).

Crucially, Bourdieu demonstrates that consumption practices serve as the primary medium through which class distinctions are produced and naturalized. Taste—the culturally shaped disposition to appreciate and consume particular objects, practices, and styles—functions as a form of classification: it classifies the classifier. Middle-class actors, positioned between the dominated and dominant classes, engage in particularly intense and anxious struggles for distinction, seeking to accumulate legitimate cultural capital and to distance themselves symbolically from lower-class practices (Featherstone, 2019). This dynamic of distinction is not merely mimetic—it is productive: it generates new forms of symbolic capital, new axes of differentiation, and new modes of social recognition.

Adapting Bourdieu's framework to the contemporary Indonesian context requires attention to the ways in which digital platforms and global commodity flows have restructured the rules of the game within the field of consumption. As Lim (2021) argues, social media platforms do not merely reflect pre-existing social distinctions—they actively constitute and restructure them, introducing new forms of visibility, new hierarchies of taste, and new mechanisms of symbolic accumulation and depreciation.

2.3 Neoliberalism and Consumer Identity in Indonesia

Indonesia's integration into the global neoliberal economic order accelerated dramatically following the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis and the subsequent IMF-imposed structural adjustment program, which dismantled protectionist trade barriers, liberalized capital flows, and initiated large-scale privatization of state enterprises (Caraway & Ford, 2020; Neilson, 2022). These transformations reconfigured the conditions of middle-class reproduction: while opening new consumption possibilities and aspirational horizons, they simultaneously eroded the institutional protections and labor market stability upon which previous generations of middle-class security had rested.

The neoliberalization of consumption in Indonesia has taken distinctive forms shaped by the nation's religious, cultural, and political particularities. The emergence of the halal economy—encompassing not only food and finance but fashion, tourism, cosmetics, and lifestyle—represents a

significant site in which global consumerism is domesticated and resignified through Islamic values, producing a distinctive mode of distinction that simultaneously aligns with and differentiates from Western consumption norms (Arnez & Husein, 2022; Sen & Hill, 2021). This phenomenon illustrates Giddens's (2018) observation that globalization does not produce cultural homogenization but rather complex processes of hybridization in which global forms are reappropriated through local cultural logics.

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic qualitative review methodology, integrating interpretive sociological analysis with secondary data triangulation. The research draws upon three primary sources of evidence: (1) a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2018 and 2025, sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, using search terms combining 'Indonesian middle class,' 'consumerism,' 'distinction,' 'Bourdieu,' 'neoliberalism,' and 'lifestyle'; (2) secondary analysis of quantitative datasets including BPS (Statistics Indonesia) Susenas surveys (2019-2023), the World Bank Indonesia Economic Prospects reports, LPEM UI consumer research, and McKinsey Indonesia consumer behavior reports; and (3) documentary analysis of media and policy texts including government reports, industry studies, and digital media content relating to Indonesian middle-class consumption.

The analytical approach follows an interpretive framework informed by Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, attending to the relational and positional dimensions of middle-class consumption practices. Data were analyzed thematically, with emerging themes cross-referenced against theoretical propositions drawn from the literature review. The research adopts an explicitly critical stance, attending to the ways in which consumerism functions as both a site of aspiration and a mechanism of social reproduction and inequality.

Ethical considerations were addressed through strict adherence to scholarly standards of proper attribution, transparent data sourcing, and critical reflexivity. Given the qualitative and secondary nature of the data, issues of informed consent and participant protection do not apply

directly; however, attention was paid to the representation of diverse middle-class experiences and to avoiding essentializing or homogenizing accounts of Indonesian social life.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual framework synthesizes the key theoretical constructs of the study, mapping the relationships between forms of capital, mechanisms of distinction, consumption manifestations, and outcomes within Indonesia's neoliberal field of consumption.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: Bourdieu's Field Theory & Indonesian Middle Class Consumption			
Capital Type	Mechanism	Manifestation	Outcome in Neoliberal Context
Economic Capital (Income, Wealth)	Consumption power & market access	Brand preference, luxury goods, digital subscriptions	Class boundary reinforcement; increased vulnerability to economic shocks
Cultural Capital (Education, Knowledge)	Distinction through cultural practices	International travel, foreign brands, lifestyle content	Symbolic differentiation; aspiration-reality gap widens
Social Capital (Networks, Associations)	Social recognition & group identity	Community membership, social media visibility, peer validation	Identity politics of consumption; digital social stratification
Symbolic Capital (Prestige, Honor, Recognition)	Legitimation of social position	Religious branding, nationalist consumption, halal lifestyle	Contradictory aspirations: global vs. local identity tensions
Field of Power: Neoliberal Global Economy → Shapes capital conversion rates and legitimizes particular consumption patterns as markers of middle-class status			

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Bourdieu's Field Theory Applied to Indonesian Middle-Class Consumption in the Neoliberal Context. Source: Authors' theoretical synthesis, adapted from Bourdieu (1984), Featherstone (2019), and Lim (2021).

4.2 Patterns of Middle-Class Consumption in Indonesia

The empirical data presented in Table 1 reveals a complex and differentiated landscape of middle-class consumption in Indonesia, characterized by both common aspirational orientations and significant intra-class stratification based on income, location, and cultural capital.

Consumption Category	Lower-Middle (IDR 4–6M/mo)	Middle (IDR 6–10M/mo)	Upper-Middle (IDR 10–20M/mo)	National Average Growth (%)
Digital Subscriptions (OTT, e-commerce)	34.2%	61.7%	84.3%	+18.4%
Branded/International Goods	21.6%	47.9%	72.1%	+12.7%
Food & Lifestyle (cafes, dining)	28.4%	52.3%	68.9%	+14.2%
Education (private/international schools)	18.1%	41.5%	69.7%	+9.8%
Health & Wellness (gym, supplements)	12.3%	33.8%	57.4%	+22.6%
Halal & Religious Lifestyle Products	56.7%	63.2%	58.4%	+7.3%
International Travel (annually)	8.9%	24.6%	54.2%	+16.9%

Source: Adapted from BPS (2023), LPEM UI (2024), and McKinsey Indonesia Consumer Report (2024). Percentages reflect proportion of income bracket engaging in respective category.

The data reveals several significant patterns. First, digital consumption—encompassing e-commerce platform engagement, streaming subscriptions, and social media participation—has emerged as the most rapidly growing consumption domain across all middle-class income brackets, with a national growth rate of 18.4% between 2022 and 2024. This confirms the central role of digital platforms in restructuring the field of consumption and distinction, as theorized by Lim (2021) and Prasetyo & Winanto (2022). Significantly, the upper-middle bracket (IDR 10-20M/month) exhibits digital subscription penetration of 84.3%, compared to 34.2% in the lower-middle bracket, suggesting that digital consumption is rapidly becoming a new axis of class distinction.

Second, expenditure on halal and religious lifestyle products demonstrates a distinctive inverse-U pattern across income brackets, peaking among middle-income households (63.2%) rather

than upper-middle households (58.4%). This counterintuitive finding suggests that religious consumption functions as a particularly salient marker of distinction for households seeking to establish symbolic distance from lower-class status while simultaneously differentiating themselves from perceived materialistic upper-class excess—a dynamic that resonates with Bourdieu's analysis of *petit-bourgeois* virtue ethics and the 'pretension' of upward-mobile fractions.

Third, health and wellness expenditure has registered the highest growth rate (22.6%) across all consumption categories, reflecting the penetration of global wellness culture into Indonesian middle-class consciousness and the increasing commodification of bodily capital as a marker of distinction. This trend aligns with Warouw's (2020) observations regarding the disciplining of middle-class bodies through consumption practices that simultaneously signal economic capacity, cultural sophistication, and moral virtue.

4.3 The Aspiration-Precarity Paradox

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding of this study concerns what we term the 'aspiration-precarity paradox': the simultaneous intensification of upward aspirational consumption and the structural fragility of the economic foundation upon which such consumption rests. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a dramatic natural experiment in this regard, with OECD (2023) data indicating that between 2020 and 2022, approximately 8.5 million Indonesians fell below the established middle-class consumption threshold, temporarily returning to 'aspirant' or 'vulnerable' status. Yet surveys conducted during this period indicate that consumption aspirations among affected households remained remarkably stable, with many households maintaining discretionary expenditure on digital subscriptions and branded goods while reducing expenditure on food quality (Irawan & Nugroho, 2022).

This paradox reflects what Bauman (2007) describes as the structural imperative of consumer society: the compulsion to consume is not merely a preference but a social duty, integral to the maintenance of identity and social recognition. For Indonesian middle-class households, the cessation or reduction of aspirational consumption carries a particularly acute social cost—the risk of symbolic downgrading and the loss of the distinction that separates them from non-middle-class others. This

dynamic produces a distinctive form of what we term 'precarious distinction': the anxious maintenance of consumption-based status markers under conditions of economic insecurity.

4.4 The Glocalization of Taste

The Indonesian middle class does not simply adopt global consumption norms wholesale; rather, it selectively appropriates, hybridizes, and resignifies global commodities and practices through local cultural, religious, and nationalist frameworks. This process of 'glocalization of taste' produces distinctive consumption repertoires that are neither purely global nor purely local, but rather hybrid formations that reflect the particular articulations of global capital and local culture in the Indonesian field.

The halal lifestyle economy provides the most significant illustration of this dynamic. What began as a primarily religious regulatory framework has been transformed, under the influence of both Islamic revivalism and commercial entrepreneurship, into a comprehensive lifestyle market encompassing fashion (hijab fashion, modest wear), food, travel, finance, and digital media (Arnez & Husein, 2022). This market is simultaneously positioned as an alternative to perceived Western secular excess and as a globally sophisticated lifestyle choice—enabling middle-class Muslim consumers to achieve distinction through a consumption repertoire that is simultaneously locally authentic and globally aspirational.

Similarly, Indonesian middle-class consumers demonstrate complex and selective appropriations of global brand culture. Heryanto (2019) documents the ways in which international brands are incorporated into distinctively Indonesian consumption aesthetics, with global signifiers of status being recontextualized through local frameworks of meaning. This glocalization of taste represents not simply imitation but creative cultural production—the elaboration of new forms of Indonesian middle-class distinction that are embedded in both global commodity flows and local cultural fields.

4.5 The Platformization of Distinction

The most structurally novel dimension of Indonesian middle-class consumption is its increasing mediation through digital platforms. Social media platforms—particularly Instagram,

TikTok, and YouTube—have become the primary arenas of symbolic competition, enabling new modes of aspirational display, lifestyle broadcasting, and status performance. The platform economy has not merely provided new channels for the expression of pre-existing forms of distinction; it has restructured the very logics of distinction, introducing new hierarchies (follower counts, engagement rates, brand collaborations), new temporalities (the relentless pressure of the content cycle), and new forms of capital (influencer status, viral visibility) (Lim, 2021).

Yet the platformization of distinction is not straightforwardly democratizing. Platform architectures embody and reproduce particular forms of cultural capital—particularly those associated with digital literacy, aspirational aesthetics, and the capacity for self-commodification—while simultaneously obscuring the economic infrastructures and algorithmic logics that structure visibility and reach. As Prasetyo & Winanto (2022) document, Indonesian social media consumption is deeply stratified by class, with upper-middle-class users disproportionately occupying the content producer positions that confer the greatest symbolic capital, while lower-middle-class users predominantly occupy the consumer positions that contribute to the aspirational economies of distinction.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined the dynamics of Indonesian middle-class consumerism through the analytical lens of Bourdieu's field theory, attending to the ways in which global consumerism, digital platformization, and neoliberal economic restructuring have shaped the practices, aspirations, and contradictions of Indonesia's expanding middle class. The analysis has identified three central dynamics—the aspiration-precarity paradox, the glocalization of taste, and the platformization of distinction—that together constitute a distinctive configuration of middle-class subjectivity under conditions of late neoliberal capitalism.

The Indonesian middle class, this study argues, occupies a fundamentally ambivalent structural position: aspirationally upward-mobile yet economically precarious; globally oriented in its consumption aspirations yet distinctively local in its cultural appropriations; consumer-sovereign in its self-presentation yet algorithmically governed in its consumption practices. This ambivalence is not a transitional condition that will be resolved through continued economic growth; it is a constitutive

feature of middle-class formation under neoliberal conditions, reflecting the structural contradictions of a social stratum that is simultaneously the primary beneficiary and the primary ideological carrier of consumer capitalism.

The theoretical implications of these findings extend beyond the Indonesian case. The analysis suggests that Bourdieu's field theory, appropriately adapted to address the specificities of digital platform economies and postcolonial cultural formations, remains a powerful and productive framework for analyzing the dynamics of class distinction in the Global South. Future research should attend more carefully to the intersections of class, gender, religion, and ethnicity in shaping middle-class consumption practices; to the longitudinal dynamics of middle-class formation and dissolution in the context of economic crisis and pandemic disruption; and to the political consequences of middle-class consumerism for Indonesian democratization and social solidarity.

In terms of policy implications, the findings suggest the need for social protection frameworks capable of addressing the structural precarity underlying the apparent prosperity of middle-class consumer lifestyles; for digital governance approaches that attend to the class-stratifying effects of platform algorithms and business models; and for cultural policy frameworks that engage critically with the role of consumerism in shaping social aspiration, civic values, and collective identity in contemporary Indonesia.

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