



## Indonesian middle class as cultural intermediaries, ‘running’ for trendy urban lifestyle

Raphaella Dewantari Dwianto\*, Armita Rahardini

*Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta 16424, Indonesia*

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### Abstract

Running in Indonesia has been considered as an easy, cheap and inclusive sport. Focusing on running among Indonesian urban middle class, this research found that before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, there were hundreds of urban runner communities and more than one hundred running competitions held during the last decade. While previous studies on sport focused more on socio-demographic factors as the cause of sport participation, this article argues on the significance of urban middle-class as the cultural intermediaries who popularize running into lifestyle, based on the analysis of three dimensions: framing, expertise, and impact. Running has become urban lifestyle through redefinition and commodification by the middle class themselves with the help of social media, thus creating urban middle-class characteristics. Not only does the urban middle class accumulate cultural capital resulting from the legitimacy as the expert of recreational sport, but it also gains social identity as member of modern urban society.

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### Introduction

Since the last decade, running has become a very popular sport in urban Indonesia. Before COVID-19 pandemic, joggers would flock to cities' main streets on car free days. In most cases it is popular as a recreational sport, in other cases it is the endurance running that has become a widespread sport practice in Indonesia. Always considered as an easy and inexpensive sport, it is not surprising that running is a choice for many Indonesians to maintain good health. It is not complicated to practice running as the movement is one of the basic movements

of the human body. Sportswear plus a pair of running shoes are the only equipment required. Places to run are easy to find, people can run on the streets of their housing complex, on public road, parks, or public jogging tracks, so there is no need to pay membership fees or entry fees for sports venues.

One indication of running popularity in Indonesia is the number of running events held in the country. Throughout 2017 alone there were at least 160 running events and in 2018 there were at least 150 running events in various regions in Indonesia (Dunialari, 2018). Aside from the frequent running races, various running communities have emerged since 2009. Running communities have been formed in various cities, including communities that are open to anyone who likes running, a community of running enthusiasts who work in the same company, community of women runners, runner

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [raphaella.dwianto@ui.ac.id](mailto:raphaella.dwianto@ui.ac.id) (R.D. Dwianto).

community based on professions or based on area of residence and so on. Some communities managed to build big names with thousands of members throughout the country. In general, there are no fees to join those running communities, people can just come to the locations where the groups meet and join the running. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the government eased restriction on people's mobility in June 2020, sport arenas were immediately packed with enthusiast recreational runners.

One of the largest running community in Indonesia, which is also the earliest formed, is the IndoRunners. When established at the end of 2009, this community consisted of only around 30 running enthusiasts, but currently, according to their social networking media Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, there are approximately 40,000 followers (Utami, 2016). On the IndoRunners website itself, this community is referred to as the largest running community in Indonesia, which is open to anyone to provide opportunities for members to carry out joint running activities on a regular basis or at certain events.

There have been several researches regarding the role of IndoRunners, as the largest running community in Indonesia and the pioneer in running as a lifestyle, in popularizing the sport. Research conducted by Halim (2018) found that from various kinds of motivations of individuals to join the IndoRunners Surabaya, one similarity was a social factor. Through the community, they want to get new acquaintances and new friends who are expected to benefit them. Although they claim to be open for everyone, people who have joined Indo Runners are mostly young executives aged 25–40 (Bintari, 2013). Looking at those phenomena, although running was said to be a sport that is affordable, easy, and can be done by anyone, in fact running has shifted into a lifestyle trend for the urban middle class. According to Syahidah (2015), joining a running race is a choice of lifestyle for the middle to upper class in the cities based on the expensive registration fee and consumption pattern of participants of sports-related competitions.

Related to the consumer culture, Mukharrik (2017) found that women runners who joined the IndoRunners engaged in consumptive behavior through socialization from other members of the community. New members usually asked senior members for advice on running equipment and regarded senior members as a reference in the consumption of sports products. The most visible consumptive behaviors are the purchasing of branded running gear and the participation in running events. Branded running gear is considered to have more added value and is fashionable, while participating in various

running events enables showcasing photos on social media showing that they follow the lifestyle trend. According to Rahmanty's research (2016), the members of the IndoRunners Surabaya did represent a certain class based on their consumption patterns, product consumption, consumption experience and information consumption. The study looked at the character of the petite bourgeois group in the consumption patterns of members of the Surabaya IndoRunners because their consumption was intended to improve status, not only economic and social status, but also symbolic status in the running community itself.

It is undeniable that social media is very influential in popularizing running sports. In addition to personal uploads of running enthusiasts, the running communities also rely on social media to disseminate their activities and attract followers. Gumilar, Kusmayadi and Zulfan (2018) in Bandung concluded that sports communities such as IndoRunners Bandung were indeed formed on social media while making social media the main tool for distributing #marilari information and campaigns. The #marilari campaign was the object of study of Anggraningrum, Pradekso, Setyabudi and Lailiyah (2014) to look at communication strategies carried out by the IndoRunners from a communication science perspective. Their conclusion, even though it was successful in attracting tens of thousands of followers and popularizing running as a lifestyle sport, was that, basically, the community did not make specific campaign communication strategies. They immediately applied campaign tactics without specific targets and without specific time duration. However, the IndoRunners has good communication management and division of labor.

Based on previous studies (Anggraningrum et al., 2014; Gumilar, et al., 2018; Halim, 2018; Mukharrik, 2017; Rahmanty, 2016) the authors argue that middle class runners play a role as cultural intermediaries that give rise to this trend of running as a lifestyle. According to Smith-Maguire and Matthews (2012), cultural intermediaries are groups from the middle class who construct values by framing how people are involved with a particular product, idea or behavior. They influence other people's orientations towards a cultural practice to be regarded as legitimate. Thus, these cultural practices are considered to be of high value and pursued by many people. Running becomes urban middle-class lifestyle because framing is carried out by a group of runners from the middle class, who act as cultural intermediaries. The widespread use of social media among middle-class is a means of forming and spreading the framing of running as a lifestyle.

Focusing on the IndoRunners as the oldest running community in Indonesia, this article explains how middle-class running communities act as cultural intermediaries in popularizing running as urban lifestyle based on the analysis of three dimensions: framing, expertise and impact. Through analysis of dimensions of cultural intermediaries, this article aims at contributing to sociological study of sport in Indonesia, by adding perspective of cultural sociology on lifestyle, commodification, and social class

## Literature Review

Among sociological studies related to running, several discussions put emphasis on the commodification of sport, the relation between sports and social class, and the relation between social media and the formation of sport lifestyle trend. A study on a case in Spain (Llopis-Goig, 2014) found that most running participants came from groups with higher education level and proved that the running trend spread in the middle to the upper class in Spain because a cultural change that was happening in the class, allowed running as a trend to occur, which is the process of individualization. Another study was done by Abbas (2004) on the manifestation of class, age and gender through leisure activities such as long-distance running. In her opinion, running is claimed as a leisure activity that can be done and be profitable for all people, both men and women and age groups, but in fact the practice of running became a trend, and instead of raising equality, it contributed to the hierarchal social structure construction. The study by Shipway, Holloway and Jones (2012) explored the four components of the social world -organization, practice, actor, event - to give a picture of the forming of identity as a runner through long-distance running.

Regarding the relation between sports and social class, a study by Scheerder and Vos (2011) confirmed that in the last forty years, active participation in sports is still socially stratified, especially the one based on education level. Wilson's (2002) research sees the role of cultural and economic capital in sports participation. According to him, people who have the most cultural capital and the most economic capital have higher tendency to participate in sports, but the tendency based on cultural capital and economic capital were independent of each other.

The consumerism culture and commodification in sports are also studied in several researches. The commodification of sport as a practice can be clearly seen in the health industry which managed to determine and sell concepts of healthy lifestyle, healthy ideas,

standardisation of movement, diet, and body shape (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Parviainen, 2011). For studies on social media and sports trend, Woermann (2012) did a study on how more interactive social media, compared to offline media, changed the formation of extreme sports subculture through visual consumption and production, while Witkemper, Blaszkka, and Chung (2014) developed a typology of social media usage in the sports industry based on the level of activity and interactivity.

In this study the authors use the definition of lifestyle according to Jensen (2007) by combining definitions at subcultural and individual levels. The lifestyle referred to in this study is a manifestation of a subculture, in this case the long-distance running subculture, which is regulated and influenced by social classes, friends, status groups and social networks. The lifestyle aims to distinguish these subcultures from other subcultures as expressions of group attachment and self-identity. To see sport as a lifestyle, the authors use Wheaton's (2004) theory which views lifestyle sport as participation, not just watching. The participants, who can also be called consumers of sport activities, make certain lifestyle patterns that are important for the meaning-making and experience in the related sports, that lifestyle also gives them exclusive social identity. Lifestyle sports, and the lifestyle that accompanies them, are important locations for the construction of modern society's identity. The identity of the lifestyle group participants is characterized by various symbolic markers, such as special equipment used and clothing. There are also less visible aspects that contribute to social construction, for example terms, attitudes, forms of physical competence and ways of using space (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2016). Wheaton also stated that one of the characteristics of lifestyle sports is the practice of producing and consuming visual media. In today's digital era, social media contents are produced to emphasize distinction or express identity.

Regarding the use of social media, this article is based on three typologies from Woermann (2012), namely, as a hedonistic practice because producing and consuming social media are considered fun; as a reflexive practice that allows self-observation and reflection of identity; and as a knowledge practice where social media is used to disseminate knowledge - social media is used as a means to obtain and disseminate news, exchange suggestions, and exchange opinions about certain products, activities and experiences.

Based on various studies, the definition of the Indonesian middle class is still debatable. According to Gerke (2000), the forming process and the structure of the

middle class in Indonesia are different from those in Western countries because the socio-economic background of middle class is very diverse. It becomes difficult to determine who belongs to the middle class if it only uses the parameters of employment, income, and education as commonly used in developed countries. Gerke chose the categorization of the middle class through an emic approach, those belonging to the middle class in Indonesia were groups of people who characterized themselves as modern and tried to show these traits through lifestyles that they considered modern so that the membership of the middle class was more determined by social behavior and lifestyle. Thus, in this study, the authors chose to use the middle class category according to Gerke (2000), which is clarified by middle class categories according to Krisna (2017) that is, the middle class is a community group that characterizes themselves as modern and shows these traits through behavior and a lifestyle that they think is modern, they have a formal job or work in the industrial sector, trade and services, access the mass media, access the internet and consume leisure and entertainment.

According to Featherstone (2007), the new middle class or the new working-class professional is the most relevant group in the cultivating of lifestyle and consumption reproduction. The majority of them are not part of the traditional upper middle class. Bourdieu in (Featherstone 2007) saw them as new cultural intermediaries that seek to shape tastes, to influence and to be influenced by the mass media which contains messages of self-transformation through symbolic consumption. Therefore, this working professional class has a very important position as an intermediary for new cultures (Featherstone, 2007). According to Smith-Maguire and Matthews (2012) cultural intermediaries can be seen as intermediaries who work to shape others' perception on a product. The cultural intermediaries' work is usually symbolic and non-material because they frame a product, service, or certain behavior as something that is considered good and is of high social value. There are three dimensions of cultural intermediaries that can be studied, namely: (1) framing, which is related to activities of constructing the meaning and values of a product, an idea or a certain behavior; (2) expertise, which is related to the cultural intermediaries' authority to construct new meanings and values, whereby such authority is usually based on profession or cultural capital; and (3) impacts, which is related to how the construction of meaning and value affects the attachment of people to a particular item, idea or behavior (Smith-Maguire & Matthews, 2012).

This research used the concept of cultural intermediaries to analyze a middle class group as a running community who popularized their redefinition of sport practices, how they redefine an existing sport practice and gain the capacity to establish the legitimate definitions of a sport practice and the legitimate functions of the sport activities. The role of cultural intermediaries is based on the framing ability, the expertise possessed and the impact produced, where the three dimensions are influenced by habitus and capital. The concept of lifestyle sport was used to see the cultural intermediaries' redefinition for running and the concept of middle class lifestyle was used to see how that redefinition becomes a trend in the urban middle class. In addition, this study also sees social media as a context in the transformation process of running to become an urban middle class lifestyle, because the role as cultural intermediaries and the redefinition of running as middle class lifestyle are very much supported by the development of social media and digital technologies.

## Methodology

Using a qualitative approach and case study type, this research gathered data through in-depth interviews with carefully chosen informants among IndoRunners members using snowball sampling, conducted between September 2017 to November 2018. The authors defined the middle class informants as those who followed the trend of running as lifestyle, lived in urban areas, had at least a high school diploma or equivalent, held formal jobs or worked in the industrial, trade and services sectors, owned motorized vehicles, had access to the mass media and the internet, and consumed entertainment for leisure. The informants then were divided into two categories. The first was the running enthusiasts. These were the people who practice running as their main sport but not for competing and not as a way to earn a living. In this category, those who had participated in at least three running events were the main informants. The next category was founders of running communities and actively organized running practices with members of their running communities. All informants lived and worked in the city of Jakarta. Informants' jobs ranged from employee at retail company, IT company or lifestyle media, work as journalist or photographer, or entrepreneur. One informant was a full time housewife.

Analysis process of qualitative data followed the methods of open coding – axial coding, to identify patterns in the data and search for information that is relevant to a predetermined theme.

The authors also conducted observation during running practice session they held and did an audio-visual material analysis in the form of articles in online media about running, the contents of the running website, and social media contents that were posted by the runners and the running communities to get data source triangulation. For data mining from social media, the authors used #marilari on Twitter, and analysed the data using the Gephi application to see which hashtags were most connected with the #marilari hashtag. The authors also gathered data from mass media coverage on IndoRunners activities.

## Results and Discussion

### *Framing: Middle Class Habitus in The Framing Process of Running as a Lifestyle*

Smith-Maguire and Matthews (2012) argue that cultural intermediaries establish a frame of reference that legitimizes the value of goods, services or cultural practices so that these things are considered high value and pursued by society. They can set values because they have the expertise and knowledge or at least have access to aesthetic skills and knowledge. To be regarded as cultural intermediaries, a person or group of people must establish themselves in the lifestyle arena through the acquisition of status, authority and expertise. The more status, authority and expertise accumulated means the more trustworthy and the better the individual or group as cultural intermediaries. Cultural capital derived from personal backgrounds and professional backgrounds is useful to legitimize their position as a pioneer of trends and determinants of market tastes. According to Smith-Maguire and Matthews (2012), to examine the role of cultural intermediaries, researchers need to look at personal habitus and professional habitus. That is because the position of cultural intermediaries in a cultural arena or professional arena can provide opportunities for them to legitimize a cultural practice.

In various interviews with the mass media, the informants from the IndoRunners repeatedly mentioned they wanted to change people's perceptions of running, which in Indonesia is identified as a form of school punishment, into a form of exercise for anyone and to become the lifestyle of the Indonesian people. In other words, running is offered as an inclusive sport. However, is only relevant among the middle class, because the need to do regular exercise is a necessity that comes from a middle class habitus already aware of the importance of maintaining health and fitness and with the opportunity and free time to do sports.

All of the informants acknowledged that even though running communities training is open to the public and is carried out in public places accessible to all the people, those who show up to participate in training are those from the middle class. The authors noted a number of things that have caused 'invitations' from the running communities to only be responded to by the middle class. First, the training schedule, which is usually after office hours, and the training location, which is mostly in the area close to business center and offices, will indeed be more accessible to middle class office workers. To take part in running with the community, one must expend time according to a community-determined schedule, energy and costs to reach the training meeting point, and these things are certainly easier for the middle class who already have enough personal and financial resources to do so.

Secondly, the running community tries a framing of 'exercise with friends'. The framing made running relevant to the urban and professional middle class because the running communities were considered capable of facilitating the formation of social relations related to business and work like a golf club, tennis club and country club, which have long carried out this function in the upper middle class. One informant said that joining a running community was also considered beneficial for expanding networking.

Third, many running communities are formed based on profession, workplace, alma mater, fans of certain brands and locations of residence. Although they do not clearly state themselves as exclusive, the basis for their formation certainly makes the membership of those running communities classified as exclusive.

Fourth, they framed running as fashion and fashion is certainly inseparable from taste which indicates social status and cultural capital. Fashion is not only a matter of what someone is wearing but also what is worn is a symbol of social class differences. The founders of Indorunners stated that their community was also concerned with style. Informants stated that they were more confident and motivated to exercise by wearing branded or well-known running clothes, and when they just started running, the informants also imitated the style of runners from running communities. From Mukharrik's (2017) research, it can be seen that senior community members act as cultural intermediaries for new members, educating new members about runners' culture, ranging from running techniques to running shoes. There is even a running community whose members are known as fans of certain brands of sports apparel. Framing is done through education between community members, through

a ‘fashion show’ on the ‘street catwalk’ during running exercises and through social media in the form of uploaded photos of runners who are considered to be cool in terms of style. In this case, cultural intermediaries are also intermediaries between producers and consumers because running communities with followers on social media are active in offline activities and can be regarded as entry point for industries to directly approach their market segments. As such, the framing of running as a fashion venue serves to unite certain social groups while at the same time excluding other social groups.

#### *Expertise: Legitimacy Construction through Cultural Capital Accumulation*

According to Smith-Maguire and Matthews (2012) expertise refers to the authority of cultural intermediaries to construct meaning and value. Differences in cultural intermediaries’ skill levels will result in differences in the level of influence. Legitimacy as cultural intermediaries is derived from personal tastes, the accumulation of cultural capital and the lifestyle shown. The trend of running as an urban lifestyle in Jakarta is not popularized by professional athletes or elite runners, but by middle-class people who routinely run for health reasons, who use the running application on a smartphone or smart watch to record their exercises and then upload the results on social media. The informants socio-economic background as the urban middle class and the professional background in the field of media publishing, marketing and advertising mean that those people have personal tastes and knowledge about the latest fashion and lifestyle and technology developments. The running that they are displaying is running as a fashionable sport supported by wearable technologies. The expertise possessed by those pioneers is the expertise to market lifestyle ideas and products so that they have more legitimacy to initiate running as a lifestyle, namely running which is associated with gathering activities, consumption of experience, fashion and self-transformation rather than running as a serious competitive sport. With that professional expertise, they are able to use the latest technology in the digital world as a medium of marketing and framing the idea of a lifestyle sport to produce a considerable influence on the middle class.

From our data, the process experienced by urban middle-class running enthusiasts reveals how they succeed in displaying runners’ habitus in the form of embodied cultural capital and objectified cultural capital, namely having the training to achieve specific personal target, running with the techniques in accordance to

running science, using running equipment such as shoes, clothing and wearable technologies that are considered to support running performance, selectively choosing running events that are suitable for personal training targets, uploading training results and achievements to social media, and willing to share knowledge and experience with the beginners in the recreational running world.

#### *Impacts: Running Becomes The Embodiment of Distinctions and Middle Class Identity*

The impact that was analyzed was how the construction of running as a lifestyle influences the attachment of the urban middle class to the sport so that it becomes a long-lasting trend. Previously, running was practiced in order to maintain health, and more especially, long-distance running was generally practiced by athletes and by members of the armed forces. Running events were also held several times each year by national athletic association (PASI), but the participants were mostly athletes and aspiring athletes. Now with a new meaning, people practice running not only for health reasons but also as recreational activities with friends or family, as a way to get acquainted with new people and professional network, as a way to follow fashion and as a way of constructing identity. Resulting from their framing efforts and expertise, these cultural intermediaries have succeeded in popularizing the new definition of running practice and gaining legitimacy to make the new definition a dominant practice in the urban middle class.

Another factor that strengthens the middle class’ attachment to running as a lifestyle is that runners make it as social identity. From the interviews, the informants acknowledged that running had become part of their identity which they indeed displayed. When the identity has been formed, people are willing to do many things to maintain that identity, they are no longer reluctant to increase personal expenses when it comes to running. The business sector considers this as an opportunity. These cultural intermediaries are able to develop their lifestyles and contribute to profitable businesses because they are supported by their cultural capital in the form of education, personal background, professional background, deep knowledge of the world of recreational running and experience as runners; supported by economic capital and by social capital in the form of networks of friendship and business.

Based on the analysis of framing, expertise and impact, the founders of the Indorunners community did act as cultural intermediaries who pioneered the framing

of running as a lifestyle, then, in its development, other running communities and runners could also be considered as cultural intermediaries based on their actions in constructing the meaning and value of running practice and constantly communicating it to the public. The IndoRunners as the pioneer of running communities who campaigned for running as a lifestyle succeeded in doing the framing that redefines running from merely maintaining health to a sport that has more added value, namely, (1) cheap, because it does not require expensive membership fees like fitness center; (2) running can be a way of meeting new friends and business networking; (3) running is a fashion arena and (4) running can be a way to self-transformation.

## Conclusion

The framing and the expertise produced an impact in the form of attachment of the Jakarta urban middle class to running as a lifestyle. That is because running as a lifestyle is able to display the characters of modern urban society that affirm middle class membership. Running also serves as a distinction among the middle class itself because it is used as a social identity by runners, and when it becomes an identity, their attachment to running will be stronger.

The framings done by cultural intermediaries are relevant to the needs of Indonesian urban middle class. The framing as a cheap sport is very relevant to the middle class who have the need to maintain health, fitness and body performance but are reluctant to pay expensive fees for membership in a fitness center. The framing on adding friends and business networking is also relevant to the needs of the middle-class professionals who are trying to develop their careers or business. The framing of running apparel as fashion is relevant to the needs of the middle class to show their social class tastes and emphasize their distinction. The framing of self-transformation is relevant to the needs of modern humans who constantly construct their identities. Participating in running as a lifestyle sport becomes a practical way to meet all of the above requirements. These cultural intermediaries are ‘running’ for trendy urban lifestyle.

As concluding remarks, this research can be a basis for further research on the changing lifestyle of urban middle class after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the role of middle class in spreading urban lifestyle through running, which is actually also a healthy lifestyle, can be of reference for decision makers to encourage a healthy and trendy lifestyle in everyday life as well as in time of health crisis

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest

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